Of Life and Death

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IT HAD been the rain, and he had gone walking in it without a coat. Always he had liked to be out in the rain, and now he laughed to feel it beating in his face and on his shoulders.

Then there was the hospital. The young surgeon had a tense, intent look on his face. He could tell the doctor that he wasn't going to die. He turned to smile and say something. Rain wouldn't kill him. Rain made things green. Haven't you ever seen a cornfield, doc? But the white-tile room had gone spinning back into space.

He was inside the church. The minister was standing there patiently with that look in his eyes. What was the look? It was a sort of splendid understanding. That was because he knew the secret. He had begun to speak. I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord. He was asking them to come forward. He would go forward. He was walking. The lilies were white and beautiful and he was in front of them. The minister was bending down to him. What is your name? . . . Do you believe in the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost . . . Yes, he believed.

It was hot at noon. As far as he could see from the window nothing was green. The whole world was a dry husk. Aren't you going to eat anything? No, he wasn't going to eat. The food was dust in his mouth. Dust was blowing everywhere. He could see the cattle down by the barn with their ribs punched through. Grasshoppers clung thick to the screen door. God, why doesn't it rain. Yes, God, please let it rain. Rain was everything. Nothing could live in the blistering sun. Yet he would go on living.

They were cutting wood. Now and then he would stop sawing to watch his dad swing the axe. Little chips would fly out at every stroke and fall on the snow. It was quiet in the timber, and the blows of the axe rang out sharp and clear. Getting tired? No, he wasn't getting tired. He began to saw. He got warm. It was beginning to get dark under the trees. Snow sifted from the branches down to his face as he looked up at the grey sky. Now they were stacking split wood. Just about time to quit. Yes, it was about time to quit. His father was coming toward him with his arms full of wood. Then he was sinking down on his knees.
His face was grave. The wood slipped from his arms and rolled down to the snow. Then he was falling forward on the chips and the broken pieces of bark. *I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord.*

**HE** had stood on the road until he got a ride. The truck driver had asked him if he was going to the city. *You're not very old. What do you want to leave home for?* He couldn't tell him what he wanted. Surely he hadn't wanted what came. He hadn't wanted the canning factory. The wagons of corn winding up to the gate and the coarse jokes of the drivers. *Any experience, kid? Let's see if you can stack.* He had stacked. All night the brown boxes of corn came running out to him and he piled them until it seemed that he would drop. He had dropped. *You better take a rest, kid.* He had taken a rest on the grass back of the factory. He had looked up at the stars, and the smell of the wet cobs seemed to be over the whole town.

On Sundays he was always in libraries. He would never be able to read enough. And he would feel baffled and angry to know that there was not enough time to read all the books that were in the libraries. *And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make ye free.* What was the truth? He was filled with a fierce desire to find the truth and write it down so the men in the factories with their blank faces and their dull eyes would know it, and realize that this time which was speeding past them was their life. And always in his seeking for the truth he had come to a stone wall, and he was uneasy and restless.

He had run an elevator in a hotel. There was no sweating or straining, but he hadn't liked it. Bell boys with uniforms and brass buttons. Three hundred rooms, two-fifty and up per room... Clerks with suave faces and nothing in their eyes. Dancing on the roof, mister. What floor, please... At night he would leave the hotel and walk in the park. He saw the men sleeping on benches with newspapers over them. They were called forgotten men. He wondered who forgot men—unless men. He used to walk the streets and look into the faces of people and wonder about their lives. All the time the city and its teeming life seemed empty and surfaceless.

There had been other jobs. Always he was looking at people and into their eyes. Listening to them talk. Meeting girls. *Want to come up?* Yes. No. Spring, summer, fall, winter...
Once he had gone down to the island where the immigrants were. They were huddled on benches waiting to be examined. He thought of the dreary years they had planned, and saved, and dreamed against the time that they would come. This was to be freedom where no one ever forgot good will and the poor were not scorned and the helpless were never crushed. He would go back to the streets and the police stations and the vagrants and the beggars and the prostitutes. He would sit in restaurants, and the food would be dust in his mouth, because he would be thinking about the meaninglessness of their lives.

He would stand on the waterfront. The sea was the same, and yet there were dirty little ships and great liners on it. He thought of barges on the Danube and English eglantine and bookstalls on the Seine. Then one day he was going to sea in a ship that was streaked with gray and green paint and filled with men in uniforms.

You won't see any bookstalls on the Seine. This is war. These men had come from farms and cities. They weren't ready to die and yet they would die. Ninety thousand men lost in one battle. . . . That town is your objective. Aim. Fire. He was firing and running . . . a sergeant sneering . . . Jesus Christ, do you want to live forever? Yes, he wanted to live forever. Ninety thousand butchered men. I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord. How could he think and live, lying in blood and mad with half the world in dead flesh pressing against him.

All he could see was whiteness. He tried to turn his head. A nurse was bending over him. He knew he was going to die. He wasn't afraid. Always he had been seeking life, unsatisfied. Always knowing that he was nothing in the world but all of it . . . that he was here not only now but had always been here. That he was confused and timeless. He seemed to have been waiting a hundred years, waiting for an explanation of it all. And yet it had been only a short while ago that he had come in. He had lived, trying to hold the earth as close as he could and never being able to hold it close enough. And the important thing was that all the time he had gone on believing that there was something above and beyond just life, and that it was beautiful and everlasting . . . You're going to be all right now. I know, nurse . . . let me tell you about it . . .