

Under The Drums

Kenneth Lentz

IT'S a small patch of sunlight, there on the floor. Six inches square? A soft, dream-like, warm yellow. The window frame crosses it; the outline of someone's joke, a hangman's knot in the shade cord, twists in the wisps of fresh, cool morning air that stirs. As my eyes stare into the illimitable depths of those four golden-light-lined doors to reverie, "thack!—thack!—thackthack-thack" my fingertips softly, softly scarcely audibly tap out the old march beat.

Far, deep back I look into my retreated years. "Thump!—Thump!—thumphthumphthump." Drum beat, war beat: tempo of my life. Born under the dying throb of drums; to die under the deafening roar of the insistent, eternal, perpetual beats. My few years have gone forever, marching to the drums of war (faintly, faintly, from '23 to '31, but ever present). Boyhood days in a world of peace—a peace deceiving, like the crust of oxide over a thermit melt, dead-seeming but beneath, the fury of molten metal.

The drums were faint when I came. The army—sandbag that had held us against the flood—was limp, its million grains flowed out to scatter, sift with the tides of Time. Very softly, breathlike, the drums rolled now . (Boom!—Boom!—boomboomboom.) The last war had been won. War was slain, was dead: Versailles was its gravestone. But the drums were there, beating; in Manchuria the volume swells a little, here only the echoing tones, unheard.

Eight years later, 1931, and armies are marching again. The drums will keep marching, feet in step, left—left—hut!, for another generation. These eight years have seen me to boyhood. We little fellows played at war, were heroes. We thrilled to the sounds of movie gun-fire, cheered the American, booed the German. War was glorious to us—in our battles we shot "bang!" and killed the other fellow, but of course everyone got up and played it all over again. We believed, as children, that real soldiers fought as did we.

Ten years old, and where the old Kaiser had ruled now marched a funny little guy (looked like Charlie Chaplin!) and some Germans tramping about with that silly, foolish goose-step that we couldn't imitate (it hurt our knees). "Hell's Angels" had just come out and we would all be pilots and air fighters. The drums roll louder: "Men will be marching, marching all over the world soon; young ones, you shall have *your* war." But no one hears them but an ex-corporal and a Japanese army officer.

It is 1935. I am becoming a reader. In grandmother's oak, glass-doored bookcase, among dusty albums of men and women unknown to this generation—little people—I find *All Quiet on the Western Front*, years unread. My mind was developing—I do not now throw down the volume with "Aw, war isn't like that! He's just trying to scare people. The movies are different." I'm twelve. Maybe war isn't all banners and no blood; the first tiny beam of enlightenment pierces my old conception. Fascinated I read Remarque's sequels, sickened as the truth shatters my ideas of glory, honor, bugles sounding, charges, victories. Truth filters in as I learn to understand, to appreciate. Boom!—Boom!—boom-boomboom. The war drums of Europe are beating louder now, as a score for the Saar and Rhineland dramas. The German corporal is drumming his war drums now, but none hear. My war comes closer, closer.

Then, again, on a September third the armies march against each other. The war that has drummed through the years now roars forth hammering, pounding. The beats can be heard distantly, faintly, across the Atlantic, but the swelling notes, we think, can only be momentary. We have been warned, but we have not heard, have not recognized the warning. Throughout these years the drums have beat, a counterpoint of soft, peaceful, lulling fluting of "peace in our time" has swelled and died—drowned, overwhelmed by the rolling, insistent, roaring bass notes.

America is in it now; the war drums are deafening. My war, my generation's war, has come to all of us. We have grown into it, our heritage, and we shall die therein. The few formalities of registering have reached us, the younger men, now. It will not be long until we go forth and few of us will return. Perhaps those who follow us may live to carry on our share of progress.

We shall go to our deaths and men shall go to their deaths until some day the little folk will rise up.

We do not grieve, we must all die—but it would have been interesting to have lived those lost forty years.

* * *

A cloud passes over and the patch of sunshine is gone. My reverie has ended. I see I have missed a discussion of poetry. Qu' importe, apres tout?

We

Keith Shillington

I lie here on new white sheets
 And carefully taste the West Wind
 As it floats in from the mulberry tree's frost-tissued leaves
 Outside, the brocaded night is smiling itself to sleep,
 And the wind, uneasy in the quietness, wants companionship.
 It is a cool wind and talks of home,
 For it has rolled in the new-plowed earth like a horse just out
 of the barn,
 And has kissed and seduced the wild crab apples,
 Leaving them blushing on the steep hillside,
 And brought their odors to me.
 I talk of home, forgetting
 The wind has never known what home is.
 It tries to understand—
 Then whimsically grasps a vortex of whirling leaves in its arms
 And carries them over to my neighbor's yard.
 It looks to see if I am watching,
 And when I smile, comes running back in my window,
 Dragging its cold hands over my bared throat and chest.
 But I am tired—
 Tomorrow is started and man must sleep.
 So I roll over into my pillow
 And leave the West Wind lonely.