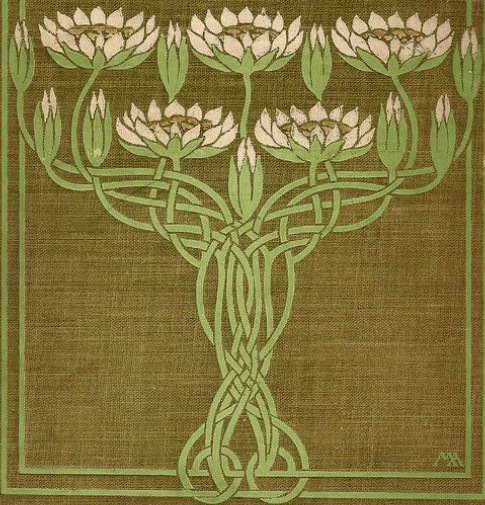


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Laurence Donovan



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Whispering Death

by

Laurence Donovan

WE'RE down on our bellies in the whisperin' grass, "Plug Ugly" and me and the looie.

How come that bunch of stalks had survived down there in the narrow bottom of that ravine, I don't pretend to know. But it had kept on growing until it seeded and dried right in the nose of a three-months rain of hell.

Every time the grass tops, no more than a foot over our heads, sh-sh-sh-ed and whispered like, I scrooched my face into the dirt.

I was scared. So was the looie. And Plug

Ugly? He was, too, but you couldn't pick out a smooth spot in his miscellaneous assortment of features to discover if he was pale.

Beside that, Plug Ugly's mug was all mud-caked where he'd been chewin' wire. And he had a lot of blood dried in his beard from where he'd left a sizable chunk of one cauliflower ear hangin' on that last bunch of inch-long barbs.

Whisper! Whisper! Whisper!

Until I felt like screaming, what with the swooshing death callin' from the big ones rushing by high up and the tops of the grass bendin' and swayin' under the clip of that machine-gun barrage from the Heinies' double nest up there in the cottonwood stumps.

Slap that rim of machine-gun fire down on a hard road and it would sound like men walking. But there in the grass tops it only swished

and whispered like.

Talkin' to us and hissing, "Come up! Come up! Come up!"

What with the numbness passin' and the fire risin' up from the hole in my right knee, where it had been drilled by a piece of shrapnel or a bullet--they were comin' so thick back there I couldn't tell which--I was afraid I might listen too long to that whisper and, "come up."

Just stick my old bean up once. That'd be all. No more pain, no more ice on my chest, chillin' and chokin' me.

Maybe the Heinies knew we were there. Maybe they didn't. But they'd spotted us, eighteen of us, Plug Ugly and me, and Rafferty and Spink, chewin' their wire and lettin' the looie and the other thirteen through the gap.

Before we got onto our bellies down in the grass, they had the thirteen piled up. Whether the looie was behind them, or where, or how, I don't know, but he come crawlin' back to the gap in the wire.

By that time there were only Plug Ugly and me; and Plug Ugly had been all for going ahead after the others. I admit I hadn't any enthusiasm for it.

But Rafferty and Spink were gone. Rafferty lookin' at me like I'd know what to tell his girl back in Beloit where we'd both come from. He couldn't speak, and his face turned green in the flare of a star shell that come floatin' down just then.

It was that star shell that played hell with the looie and his bunch. I still don't know how the looie missed out on the show and come wormin' back to us like a snake on his stomach.

I got it in the old prayer bone about that time, and for a minute or two I was so sick that all I knew was that Plug Ugly was draggin' me. And the looie was coming along, kind of whimpering. Guess Plug Ugly thought the looie was mournin' for the boys he'd led, or pushed, into

that slaughter ring under the gun nest. Plug Ugly was sold on the looie. I never saw the like of it before, and I don't suppose I ever will again.

The pain reached a jumpin' off place at the end of my toes. I got sick at my stomach for a minute. Then that passed and I could look at Plug Ugly and the looie and think.

Nothing to do but wait. Probably the Heinies would ease up pretty soon, and we could sneak back over the ridge and through the wire. That would be the only chance. F company was down to its last thinnin'.

We'd known, when we started on that raid that we had to roust that machine-gun nest or Captain Jack would have to slack off on the point of his push. There'd be no more men to spare for a rescue. The thirteen that went with the looie and us four wire chewers had understood that.

I LOOKED at Plug Ugly and he was looking at the looie. The smoke was getting gray in the east, and light was coming. We knew what that meant. If we didn't shimmy out of there before daylight, it was going to be just too bad.

I said Plug Ugly was looking at the looie. I was trying to puzzle out why Plug Ugly's face had seemed to become different from what it was when what was left of F company a month back had first greeted it.

Except for this Lieutenant Simms, F company was long or short on looks, according to the way you took it. I remember old Colonel Bowling, the first time he reviewed the F outfit, tried to look like he hadn't noticed anything unusual. But he shook his head several times, and put on his glasses, and took them off and wiped them. Sergeant Jock was a fair sample. He had a broken nose and was cross-eyed.

It sure looked like F company had been made up of left-over parts after God got through creatin' all the rest of the homely guys in the

world. It was lucky for the colonel's peace of mind that Plug Ugly wasn't there then.

"Pug" Hogan was his name. He was among the replacements after our first jam when we got back to the rest billet with forty-two men and a few pans salvaged out of the remnants of the field kitchen. Seems Pug had been a punching bag for years around New York's lower East Side, and what nature hadn't done to him, a bunch of second and third-rate pugilists had added.

The first crack Lieutenant Simms made was "For Pete's sake, let th' Heinies capture 'im, have a look an' end this war."

And Sergeant Jock, of whom there was no one more profanely qualified in the A. E. F.—all he could think of when he looked at Pug was, "My gosh—it ain't possible!"

Lieutenant Simms rechristened him "Plug Ugly."

I hadn't explained about this boy Simms. He was F's only misfit. He had curly black hair and big brown eyes a la Hollywood, a nice straight nose and even teeth.

Right from the first Simms froze onto Plug Ugly. Seemed to like to have him around. Guess it helped set off more than ever what a grand gift to women the looie believed himself to be.

And "Plug Ugly"?

Would you believe it? That cross-section of everything that human facial architecture hadn't ought to be, he falls for the looie like he was the world's last kind word. He fetches and carries for him, and is always right in between the looie and trouble, whether it's a jam in an estaminet or a pushover through the stinkin' mud and wire.

Pretty soon they began to make this Damon and Pythias affair look like those old days were a couple of hostiles. Seeing that I was messin' with Plug Ugly, and had got so I didn't mind his face much, I

saw a lot of what was going on.

WELL, it went along like that and then the looie happens onto Jeanne. Knowing the looie, any one could see that Jeanne was just one of a whole series. The looie must have kept a card index on his sweeties back in Paris.

But Jeanne wasn't the soft sort. Haughtytotty, Jeanne was, and I found out it was on account of old Broullier, her dad. He'd come home, feeling his way with his hands.

For all that they had only the loft of a stable that wasn't anyways sanitary underneath, this Broullier had the makings of an aristocrat. And the girl had been taught.

She didn't savvy English, but the looie had a good smattering of French and they got along. Plug Ugly, you would have thought, would have been discarded, but he wasn't.

Seemed like the looie wanted him around. You'd have thought Uncle Sam had drafted him to play bodyguard and valet to the looie.

It set the looie off, having Plug Ugly around.

And Plug Ugly would sit by the hour and listen to old Broullier talking with his hands, while the looie played the white-haired boy to Miss Jeanne.

Along about this time I noticed that Plug Ugly, for all of his scattered countenance, didn't have such bad eyes. Sometimes I'd catch him staring at nothing in particular, and his eyes would get blue and misty and wishful. I couldn't figure it out.

After a while, all of F company was wise. Plug Ugly had divided his hero worshipping of the looie. Not that it lessened his devotion to Simms, but he had added the girl Jeanne to his dreams.

Oh, we all had them then, even that horse-faced Sergeant Jock. It's

something that comes along of listening to the damned guns and the whirring and the whispering, and wondering which whisper is packin' your ticket.

You betchu, it wasn't long until I could see Plug Ugly was up to the eyebrows in love with Jeanne. But that didn't make any difference. Guess he figured that the looie was the world's prize draw for any dame, and he wanted Jeanne to have him. That's the kind of love you read about in fiction, but you don't stumble over it so often in real life--and not once in a million times in war where anything goes double.

Just before this last push and this raid, the looie had given out that he was ticketed for a leave and he had let it be known around that maybe, if he went to Paris, Jeanne might not be seen around, either, for a few days.

Not that the looie had any idea of making a double hitch--not him. And Jeanne wasn't saying anything. But you could tell that Plug Ugly thought they intended to be married, and he looked sad and pleased all at once.

Just before we went in this last time, Jeanne came running out with a lacy affair wound around her head, her face dark and mysterious in the rain. She talked a little to the looie.

Then, as we was pushing off, Jeanne ran over to Plug Ugly, and said something that I know Plug Ugly took to mean that she wanted him to be extra careful of the looie, for he said, "Sure t'ing. Youse'll git 'im back all K. O."

And Jeanne said something more and waited. And of course Plug Ugly only guessed at what she was trying to say, and I could see his twisted ears go fiery red in the rain when Jeanne reached up suddenly and kissed him on the cheek.

"Sure t'ing. Youse'll git 'im back," he muttered again.

AS I said, I was lying there, listening to the whisperin' in the grass,

puzzling over what it might be in Plug Ugly's face that made it seem different. And Plug Ugly was looking at the looie lying there.

The looie must have raised his shoulder a little too high, trying to ease himself over. I saw his face go white through the mud and his eyes go suddenly wide.

Next he slumps down and groans, and a little river of red runs along the back of his hand. Plug Ugly saw it, too. He got to the looie and tries to lift him up a little, but the looie only moans and sinks his face between his arms.

It was getting lighter now, and only about fifty yards away I could begin to make out a grotesque hump above the ravine, between us and the tree stumps where the machine guns were. It made me sick all over. That was what was left of the thirteen that had been with the looie.

Further along the sector the dawn barrage of the heavies opens up. Plug Ugly rolls the looie over and looks at his white face. The looie's lips were twitching.

Plug Ugly must have thought he was out for keeps. He turned to me. His whole face had changed. He looked at me lying there, but I don't think he saw me. His blue eyes glinted and set on something it wasn't for me to see.

I heard his teeth grit out the words, "Sure t'ing. Youse'll git 'im back."

The Heinies' were quiet now in the machine--gun nest. I guess, giving it the once-over, they didn't figure any one was left alive out there. They'd sowed the grass over our head so full of whispers that it looked like a mowing scythe had passed over.

I didn't quite get what Plug Ugly intended to do, until I saw him take a couple of grenades from the looie's shirt.

Then he rolled over to me.

"Gimme them apples," he muttered, reaching his hand.

"You damn fool, you can't go out--"

"Gimme them apples," he repeated, pushing my hands away and grabbing at my shirt front.

He didn't bother dragging his rifle. All he had was his pistol and a shirt full of bombs. I wanted to keep him from going, but the Heinies have long ears and I couldn't argue.

Last thing Plug Ugly did was ease the looie over.

He started out, snaking through the grass to the left. I saw his idea, and it was crazy.

Up to the left of the stumps where the machine guns were planted, was a little hummock. Even if he got up there, I knew there would be at least a dozen Dutchies in the emplacements.

Maybe it was only a few minutes, but it seemed like I had been laying there for hours. One of the Heinies must have seen Plug Ugly crawling before he got to the top of the hummock back of the stumps. Pistols began cracking in the gun emplacement. Still there wasn't a sound from Plug Ugly. I got weak all over. I thought sure they'd got him.

I saw a Heinie sneak out from the stumps and up toward the hummock. Then--that damned fool! The ugliest face in the A. E. F. came leaping from the ground. That Heinie must have thought he had met the devil in person.

I saw Plug Ugly pull the pin of an apple. The Heinie's pistol cracked, and Plug Ugly went down on one knee. But he drew back and he didn't deviate an inch from the regulations in throwing that bomb.

I drove my face into the ground and covered up with my arms. Dirt

and rocks and pieces of tree stumps showered down. When I looked up, something had cut the looie across the forehead, and his cheek was streaked with blood. He groaned, and I knew he was still alive.

But Plug Ugly?

God, he waited until that Heinie had drawn back his bayonet and was coming down. Plug Ugly ducked and his pistol spat a red streak into the Heinie's stomach. The Heinie pitched forward and his bayonet went into the ground.

I could hear men groaning and yelling where the gun nest had been, and a half dozen of the Heinies started up out of the ground at once. Maybe it was luck, and maybe it wasn't. It may be that Plug Ugly, looking death in the teeth, deliberately timed that second pineapple.

Fragments of Heinies was mixed with the flowerpot of dirt that went up. And then, with an apple in each hand, Plug Ugly came yelling down that hummock, straight for the stumps.

Three, four Heinies were falling over each other running away. I got one straight look at Plug Ugly's face. Say, at that minute, I haven't seen a handsomer map in the world.

Plug Ugly? Hell!

Then it got so quiet, except for a booming far away, that I could hear the looie breathing heavy. He was getting up. He looked across and saw there was no one by the machine-gun nest alive but Plug Ugly.

"By God! By God! He got 'em--huh? He got 'em?"

And what do you think? The next thing the looie did was to begin brushing the mud off his clothes. He'd only been nicked a little on one shoulder.

"Sure t'ing," I said. "Youse'll git 'im back."

I couldn't think of anything nastier than that. I guess it hit the looie between the eyes. I think he would have kicked me, except for my busted prayer bone.

Yellow? Sure as hell, he was yellow. We know now he wasn't with the lost thirteen when they got theirs. He'd crawled off to one side somewhere.

That Jeanne. I don't see why I hadn't guessed it. Didn't I say she was a haughty-totty. She'd been taught, Jeanne had. She could read men, that Frenchie, and she had had the looie ticketed long before we guessed him out.

They had me stretched out across from Plug Ugly in the base hospital when Jeanne came in. She went straight to him.

Plug Ugly had been drilled three times, but I tell you, he was tough. He'd been a punching bag a long time.

He opened his eyes and saw Jeanne.

"Sure t'ing," I heard him murmur. "Youse'll git 'im--"

And that was as far as he got, for Jeanne's lips were on his mouth and both her arms were cuddling his ugly cauliflower ears.

That's one language that never has to be translated.

THE END



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