RETURN TO MERVEIL

BY

POZ

UNCHANGED by the years the diminutive station glinted like a newly painted toy in the harsh bright sunlight. Out in the courtyard where the tall palm-trees drooped lazily and the heat shimmered against the yellow adobe walls, Caesar was stretched in an open-mouthed siesta over the front seat of his familiar brown Renault. Cocking one eye open at our approach, he smiled a broad, gold-toothed welcome, but casually as if it were only yesterday and not two years ago that the Garrison had paraded sorrowfully for the last time on the cobbled stones of the town square. That in itself was not surprising in this secluded corner of southern Europe where time is simply a figure of speech and coincidence is apt to be the commonplace.

Without any irrelevant questions he stowed away the luggage, and climbing into the car we started off on a sentimental journey. The road to the town skirts the northern shores of the Mediterranean. It climbs and dips and twists suddenly, but always it hugs the beaches, and on one side you see the Chateau Merveil crowning the Black Mountain, and on the other, stuck out in the middle of that blue, blue sea, a compact group of little islands which at night scintillate like the ships of a battle squadron.

I knew every inch of that road—the pot-holes, the pill-boxes and the shattered gun-emplacements. At this corner where the road runs by the edge of the salt-beds, the Germans fought desperately, bitterly and almost silently to the last man. Where the road disappears under a long canopy of trees, the men of the Resistance ambushed and destroyed a large convoy, and in doing so scored their first great victory. By the ruined wireless station where the road forks sharply, my Jeep “Cantharides” skidded and overturned and Chad and I were the only two who survived. Chad was the driver, and had missed death narrowly so many times that we often wondered for what great future he was destined. Shortly before I left England I heard that chance had wisely seen fit to preserve him for his present rôle—an anonymous but highly esteemed donor in an Artificial Insemination Clinic.

In his usual fashion Caesar hung resolutely over the steering wheel as if the process of driving was a momentous test of supremacy between himself, time, distance and the machine. He had in no way changed from the days when he had been Chief Civilian Driver, H.Q. British Force Merveil. Notwithstanding his insoluble link with the dramatic heroism of the Liberation, in the years before the deluge, as a shrewd blackmailer, an agent-provocateur, and a trafficker in drugs, contraband and women, he had enjoyed a well-merited notoriety in the waterside dives of Marseilles, Toulon, Trieste and Genoa.

When the Germans rolled threateningly over the South, Caesar sublimated his anti-social instincts and became a militant patriot. He attached to himself as comrades and bodyguards Zilli, a phlegmatic, stocky little shipping clerk
from Marseilles, and Nikolai, a charming, unscrupulous and dangerous gigolo from Monaco. Together they fought a relentless, private war against the invader with the declared object of eliminating the Boche, anywhere and in any quantity. They bludgeoned and garrotted, stabbed and pistolled and created for themselves, particularly amongst the Gestapo for whom they had a morbid preference, a legend of terror. The ordinary people of the region loved them, the partisan groups grudgingly admired them, and the British agents who had been parachuted in to organize resistance detested them as highly irregular and politically dangerous meddlers. Once they ambushed the German Town Commandant, slit his throat and left him to dangle like a slaughtered pig from a post in the main square. The reprisals were horrible, and it was eventually felt by everybody concerned that the original gesture, although impressive, was somewhat lacking in good taste. Cesar, however, was not often guilty of this type of tactical blunder. Mainly concerned, after national honour had been satisfied, with the economics of guerrilla warfare, he, his followers and dependants lived on the plundered fat of the German Army.

After peace came to Merveil, Zilli went back well satisfied to the capacious bosom of his Provençal family, Nikolai profited by the gullibilities of the G.I.s, and Cesar was faced with the responsibilities of being a hero. The children called him respectfully "Cesar the Great," and the police obligingly tore up his dossier. For a long time he considered the financial possibilities of honesty, and finally decided that he could make it pay. Accordingly he persuaded, with certain unanswerable arguments, an ex-collaborator to part for a nominal sum with the contents of his garage. Then with admirable foresight he hired himself and his Renaults to the British and became Civilian Transport Section, Force H.Q. Merveil.

The final incursion of Cesar into an almost legitimate business coincided with the formation of British Forces in Merveil. When the Allies took a sudden but effective snap at this succulent portion of the soft underside of Europe, the British Element, like a poor relation straggled hesitantly and modestly along. As the establishment of G.I. clubs, P.X. canteens, and the triumphant blare of boogie-woogie consolidated the forward onslaught of the forces of liberation, the British, consisting mainly of technical and supply personnel, lagged farther and farther behind. Finally they withdrew to the coast and there entrenching themselves as an independent unit in the pre-war health resort of Merveil became officially known, for want of a better name, as British Forces Merveil.

Between the Army and Merveil it was love at first sight. And there was every reason why it should have been, for Merveil had a long and well-founded pro-British tradition. Victoria, as a young Queen and radiant wife, had spent an idyllic holiday on one of its loveliest hillside estates. A statue of Edward VII smiled good-humouredly across the Place to the Mairie, and the Hotel Grande-Bretagne and the Café de l'Entente Cordiale jostled each other for pride of place on the splendid Boulevard of Victory. Not even the intensive efforts of the Herrenvollk had succeeded in eradicating the evidences of this partisanship,
and therefore when the British troops appeared as liberators, if only by proxy, they were welcomed with open arms as old and valued friends. Merveil itself was an aggregation of natural beauty. White villas, green-shuttered and red-roofed, clung haphazardly in a series of crazy terraces to the wooded slopes of the mountains, and meandered down by the sides of twisting dusty roads to silvery, pine-fringed beaches. There were palms and eucalyptus trees, oranges and scarlet oleander blossoms; the sun, the sand and the sea, and pervading everything the warmth which, with its narcotic quality of tropical languour, dulled and softened the irritations of war.

As the fighting died away to the north the prestige and authority of the Merveil sub-area grew steadily in importance. The senior officer, a staff-captain, became a major, and the major became a colonel, and the colonel one day dying in a surfeit of ecstasy he was replaced by a G.O.C., and Merveil had definitely arrived on the military map. Staff officers clustered and cackled and pecked inquisitively at juicy appointments, for the star of Merveil was rising and careerists were rampant. For those who were already in possession it was a time of rapid and worrying expansion. Standing on a hill behind the town was the magnificent Hotel de la Mediterranee, which, in the days of the Occupation had been a rest-home and convalescent depot for the "little grey mice" of the Nazi Women's Army. This was taken over as the headquarters of the administration and the billets of the garrison, and being a hygienist's paradise was for ever after quoted with pride in sanitary diaries.

The Officers' Mess, following the example of the defunct German C.-in-C. was sited after a careful search for booby-traps in the mediaeval Chateau Merveil which crouched dark and forbiddingly on the crest of the mountain. It was spacious and damp and its walls were cemented with the stuff of history. Its absent owner was an international armaments king, addicted to patriotic speeches and fetishism, both pursuits, he was wont to claim, appearing to be good for business. It was soon after his most stirring appeal to his countrymen not to yield another square inch of territory to the enemy that the S.S. Divisions swept down to the Mediterranean, and he, in order not to embarrass his influential friends in both camps flew under diplomatic protection to his luxurious hacienda in South America. It was from there that he intimated through his contacts in the Nazi High Command that neither his castle nor its treasures were to be damaged by the peculiar accidents of war. He left behind him as his chatelaine an ennobled and half-witted kinswoman who, fluttering and twittering in the sombre library where she was perpetually dusting the backs of the leather-bound volumes which were stacked in piles reaching from floor to ceiling, reminded us continually that the Germans had always been "very correct." I was never very comfortable in that billet. The vaulted ceilings were too high, the corridors were too long, and too many ghosts from the past whispered in the dark corners of the stone stairways and empty boudoirs. Perhaps I was glad when the advent of a new Commander changed the tenor of our lives. This General, apart from appointing himself the paramount and final authority on all matters medical, was content to
leave us to our own devices. With a small entourage he moved from the castle to a huge and ornate villa by the sea.

Relieved of the tedium of constant formality and supervision we too quitted the chateau. Setting up individual messes in the pleasant comfortable little villas that dotted the wooded hillside we allowed the summer months to pass tranquilly by. The men were fit, happy and deeply bronzed by the sun, and words such as “Repat.” and “Demob.” began, even when they did occur in conversation, to carry less and less conviction until finally they completely disappeared. Sick parades were minute in size, and the magnificently equipped hospital on the seashore, empty and avid for patients, served merely as an advanced base for beach parties and afternoon regattas.

Although it seemed that we were living in an Arcadian isolation detached from the realities of war, it was constantly stated that we were fulfilling from a military point of view a very necessary and arduous function. On that happy basis of mutual understanding we were quite prepared to rest. Moreover, in addition to all the official festivities which marked the milestones on the road to a complete and overwhelming victory, we had our domestic excitements. One day, the Intelligence Officer, living surprisingly for once up to his name, announced with some self-satisfaction his engagement to a young and vivacious war-widow who, besides being endowed plentifully with many physical attributes, was the sole heiress to the richest and largest estate in the province. This was the first liaison to be recognized and blessed by authority, and both we and the civilians saw in this an appropriate symbol of understanding between two ancient allies. On the day of the marriage the whole town was en fête, and they danced in the streets and drank in the houses till the dawn light breaking over the roof tops found even the national flags of the two countries intertwined in a libidinous embrace. When the Senior Supply Officer, a highly choleric and unpopular individual, was afflicted at the height of an alcoholic argument, which he had provoked, with a mild apoplexy it was felt by everyone that the occasion had been an unqualified, even though wearing, success.

The musical comedy atmosphere of our peaceful occupation was not always apparent. Occasionally one had a glimpse of the bitterness and impartial cruelty which inevitably mark the aftermath of an international catastrophe. There were the days when the menfolk of Merveil trickled back from forced labour battalions and concentration camps. Changed by privation, prematurely aged and strangely silent, they came back to find, in many cases, that there was a gap of experience between themselves and their families that could never be bridged. But they were never as vociferous in their indignation against the Germans as the local Committee of Patriots who, engaged in a perpetual witch-hunt, sought to uncover and humiliate those who had dared to collaborate in any way with the enemy. The term “collaboration” was relative, for every inhabitant of the town in order merely to exist had been forced to come to some sort of terms with the conquerors. Ironically enough it was noticeable that just as after the Liberation there appeared a sudden crop of quasi-leaders of the Resistance who had never resisted, so the most
self-righteous members of the Committee of Patriots were those who had gleaned most profit from the Occupation and whose personal conduct had been anything but above reproach. The greatest zeal was expended in punishing those women who had fraternized with the Germans and the Italians, and the simple method of denunciation to the Committee became a much-abused weapon of personal vengeance in the matter of old jealousies and feminine feuds.

In one of its rare excesses of communal sadism the mob, inspired by a rejected and mentally warped suitor, dragged from her house Suzanne, who was known to many of us as a charming, intelligent and beautiful girl, the only surviving child of a very brave soldier who had died in his country's defence. She was accused of entertaining alone and at night an Italian officer. She could have told them the truth, that in fact he was a distant kinsman who had paid her a short formal visit and had left after a cold exchange of courtesies. But she, in the manner of her kind, disdained to give any explanation, and remained completely unmoved until they tore the dress from her shoulders and began to crop her golden hair close to her skull. And then she began to sob and moan in an intensity of shame and anguish which would have moved any but a crowd besotted with its own sense of worthlessness and guilt. The few British soldiers who were passing rushed to help her and ignoring the impressions of the rabble removed her to the security of the Military Hospital. It says much for her courage that as soon as she was able she went back to the town and with a cool detachment carried on as if nothing had ever happened to disturb the unexciting routine of her ways.

But of course all these things that happened were the fault of Merville itself. There was something in its sensuous hot-house atmosphere which made a grotesque caricature of people's personalities. Having a communal barrack life with its real material earthiness to keep them sane the other ranks were not nearly so affected as the officers. One young subaltern wrote passionate sonnets in ancient Greek and presented them to mystified and disappointed country girls. Another would spend hours relating with psychopathic charm and an air of conviction the most improbable and fantastic stories of his experiences with the European underground. One major, a rugger International in his prime, collected dungeons. Carefully tracking down some ancient prison or keep he would sit patiently in a dank cell alone and in the dark, and afterwards write copious notes on his vintage detentions. If the mood took him he would have himself chained to rings in the wall, and being fed with bread and water would pass with equanimity a quiet and solitary week-end. In our own Mess a certain taciturn gentleman would spend all his leisure locked in his room where behind shuttered windows and oblivious of the warm sunlight he would hammer and hammer away at some mysterious and unending project. No one was immune from these idiosyncrasies, for in the fertile soil of Merville eccentricities germinated and grew. The district was a psychiatrist's happy hunting ground, and even those who retained some vestiges of insight would sometimes peer with trepidation into their shaving mirrors in the morning half-expecting to see the beginnings of a sort of Jekyll and Hyde transformation.
Enemy capitulations followed each other in rapid succession and soon we settled down in an uneasy armistice to receive the blessings of peace. Not the least among these was the fact that for the first time Service families were to be allowed to be reunited on foreign soil. Innumerable conferences were held, and with a flourish of welfare trumpets the first wives and children arrived. Beside the radiant, golden-brown Amazons of the South the women looked a little shabby, strained and tired. This perhaps accounted for part of their initial unfavourable reaction to Merveil. It was a sentiment with which we could sympathize and understand. They resented above all the fact that whilst in England there had been endless queues, short rations, buzz-bombs and worrying children, here in this military backwater their men-folk had lived securely in an abundance of warmth and exotic splendour. Many husbands who had temporarily shelved their obligations were awakened with a rude shock from their Mediterranean enchantment. When the wives had adapted themselves to the new sensation of comparative luxury and the ego-satisfying status of victors in a less fortunate country they began to find that time hung unexpectedly heavy on their hands. So they began to bicker, at first individually and later collectively, occasionally on matters of importance but more often about trifles. The repercussions inevitably affected the husbands. Where once in the Messes there had been camaraderie and a measure of good-natured tolerance there was now a communal despondency and a perpetual sense of irritation. The old masculine bonhomie was fast disappearing, but I was spared the sight of the final desecration of our erstwhile Eden by being posted to the North.

It was on all these things and a million others more pleasant that I reflected as the car rattled over the level-crossing and turned down the gentle slope in to the centre of Merveil. The town dozed on in a dreamy somnolence. The location signs were missing, but apart from that very little had changed. The Transit Officers’ Club, bearing no scars of its once nightly ordeals, still stood in dignified isolation at the corner of the square. Where the Y.M.C.A. had offered buns and entertainment there was now a gaudy, chromium-plated cafe. There were even a few old Army trucks, unsuccessfully disguised, standing forlornly in shady back alleys and possibly regretting in their stolid, mechanical ways the days when they had been fairly reasonably maintained.

"Ah—yes," said Caesar, breaking in with an embarrassing clairvoyance on my train of thought, "those were the days—there was always something to look forward to. Now what have we got? Peace? Some peace! We’ve got a Black Market—the best in the world, and we’ve got the Communists. And to fight the Communists we’ve got to rely on the others. Up there in the North the Boche is laughing at us. I tell you, my old friend, like you British with your pitiful few pounds, we’re between the Devil and the deep blue sea.”

He turned one palm outwards, shrugged his shoulders, and gave a wry smile.

"Who would ever have thought that we would look back to those days with even the smallest bit of regret? Do you remember the night I took you and the fair-haired young captain over in your boat to the islands?"

"No," I said.
"But, monsieur, you must remember!" gasped Caesar, his blue jowls becoming slack in incredulous astonishment.

"No," I stated with firmness and finality, "I don't remember. And what is more, you are probably mixing me up with somebody else. And even if it did happen, it most likely happened before or after my time."

It was really a stupid denial because I could never forget either that one or any other single incident of those eventful days. You closed your eyes in a flat in London and once again you saw the torchlight gleaming on the bayonets in the Victory Parade, the trail of the moon across the phosphorescent water, and heard in imagination the nocturnal symphony of frogs and nightingales. But my wife, who understands and speaks the language better than I do, was listening much too intently, and I decided that it were better for the futures of all of us if those recollections remained undisturbed in the unofficial war diaries of H.Q. British Forces in Merveil.