No Man's Land found its voice – a mindless, sightless voice that howled on and on. No Man's Land was a picture of hell.

PASSPORT TO HELL

ROBIN HYDE

'This man is the biggest, laziest, rottenest, most troublesome—
And in the trenches he's one of the best soldiers I ever had.'

Passport to Hell is the story of James Douglas Stark—Starkie—and his war. Born in Southland and finding himself in early trouble with the law, the young Starkie tricked his way into a draft in 1914 by means of a subterfuge involving whisky and tea. In his subsequent chequered career in Egypt, Gallipoli, Armentières, the Somme, Ypres, he showed himself 'a soldier and not a solider', with a 'contempt of danger and discipline alike'. Hyde took the raw horrors, respites and reversals of Starkie's experiences and composed a work of literature much greater than a mere documentary of war. She portrays a man carousing in the brothels of Cairo and the estaminets of Flanders; looting a dead man's money-belt and filching beer from the Tommies; attempting to shoot a sergeant through a lavatory door in a haze of absinthe, yet carrying his wounded captain back across No Man's Land; a man recommended for the V.C. and honoured for his bravery – but also subject to nine courts martial.

Robin Hyde was one of New Zealand's true literary trailblazers, and in this book she redefined the parameters of novel and memoir. In its psychological acuity and emotional depth, *Passport to Hell* is one of the finest war books we have.

Published to mark the centenary of this quintessential New Zealand war story, this newly reset edition includes Hyde's final authorized text from 1937 and an introduction and notes by D. I. B. Smith.

Robin Hyde (1906–39) was a New Zealand journalist, novelist and poet. She began her journalistic career at the *Dominion*, aged sixteen years old, and in succeeding years worked for the *Christchurch Sun*, the *Wanganui Chronicle*, and the *New Zealand Observer*. Over ten years of great turbulence in her personal and professional life Robin Hyde wrote ten books of poetry and prose, among them the autobiographical novel *The Godwits Fly*, the two documentary novels featuring Starkie, *Passport to Hell* and *Nor the Years Condemn*, and the travel book *Dragon Rampant*. A biography of Hyde, *The Book of Iris*, written by her friend Gloria Rawlinson and son Derek Challis, was published by Auckland University Press in 2002.

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Introduction to Starkie

I FIRST HEARD OF STARK when a very glum welfare worker – a friend of mine – informed me that he had declared, that unless he could lawfully come by a pair of trousers he was prepared to steal them. This raised rather a pretty little point of law – whether it were best for Starkie to help himself to the main form of covering prescribed by society, and almost inevitably – he being fatally conspicuous in size and colour – be picked up by the police; or to go ahead, minus trousers or in trousers no longer fitted for the gaze of eyes polite, and thus eventually be arrested for the sort of offence which makes thoughtful parents gently remove the newspapers from the hands of growing girls. 'What's a man without his breeches?'

However Starkie resolved this affair with his conscience he was, when I first saw him at his little house in Grey's Avenue, wearing trousers. He had also an elderly and sleeveless black shirt, which made him look like a Fascist general – but a finer figure than most of them. He had no socks, no fingers on the left hand – the thumb of which was brilliantly tattooed with the legend, 'Here's the Orphan' – and an unconquerable smile. When something happened to amuse Starkie – and a good many things amused him – his black eyes lit up and sparkled, his mouth cracked open to show as many magnificent white teeth as half a life-time of combats with N.C.O.s, military police, common or garden coppers, and other heretics – all of

whom he described impartially as 'The Villains' – had left him.

Apart from these marks of identification, Starkie had a little blue ring tattooed on his massive bronze chest. That was where the sniper's bullet tore through his lungs; and his Colonel, the regret in his voice strongly tempered by relief, remarked: 'Curtains, Starkie.' On each shoulder are tattooed the handsome stars of captaincy. During the War, Starkie became by degrees very tired of the manner in which his laurels wilted before the blasts of hot air emanating from those holes where gentlemen with long memories sat and brooded over crime-sheets. One honour at least, he decided, should be his beyond recall. So he spent an hour with a Maori friend, and came out pale but triumphant – the one and only tattooed captain in the whole army.

Grey's Avenue was built in Auckland City's first slow edging towards the beautiful and true. It was then known as Grey Street; and despite the fact that it was christened for the most distinguished gentleman who ever acted as Governor over the unruly Benjamin of British colonies, it was characterized by an invincible lust for the disreputable. The three-storeyed red-and-white bawdy-houses of Upper Queen Street extended into Grey Street, and mingled happily with Chinese grocery-shops, masonic clubs, and pakapoo saloons, all known to the city's then very few moral uplifters as 'Chinese Dens'. Needless to say, the little Celestials were by far the most orderly of the street's tenants. But Grey Street's reputation was well-founded.

There was really no reason why it should not have been rather a beautiful byway. So near the city that the Town Hall's posterior is thrust into its lower half, it is afflicted by neither street cars nor buses, and slopes upwards, fine and straight, garnished with a double row of half-hearted English trees whose falling leaves, in their sallow little pools, add to the general

shiftlessness. But nothing could be done about it. Grey Street remained the sort of place where husbands with impunity and gusto thrash their wives – and *vice versa* – where policemen with a great deal of sound and fury, signifying probable fines of from £50 to £100 to be inflicted later in the police courts, smash in the steel doors of opium dens, and where it is possible – though very remotely – to win £60 by marking your ten characters correctly on a green sixpenny pakapoo ticket.

The name of the street was changed to Grey's Avenue, apparently in a wild hope that the more distinguished nomenclature might induce in the savage breasts of the inhabitants some dim longing after respectability. Nothing much happened. The Salvation Army took up its head-quarters on one side of the street, setting down a solid white ferro-concrete chunk of gospel truth which looked like a market-woman among whores. Adjoining this depressing building there is now a free kindergarten and a park – rather a nice little park, where the children slither down mighty chutes and wear out cotton drawers bouncing about on see-saws. But the other side of the street – the side where you will find, near the top, Starkie's little house – remains given over to the shiftless pools of dead leaves, to Chinese cafés so grimy that even University students won't eat in them, to shops that appear to be empty until after nightfall.

These empty shops of Grey's Avenue are rather intriguing. In the more prosperous days of my childhood a better pretence was kept up. They appeared as pastrycooks, confectioners, or grocers; but the curious thing was that nobody ever went in to buy pastry, confectionery, or groceries at these particular shops. There were, of course, respectable provision merchants a-plenty in the street. We were strictly forbidden to approach the street at all, and, technically, at least, remained in complete ignorance as to the existence of its masquerading shops.

4 *Cup for Youth*

BETWEEN BRISCOE'S CORNER and the little fish-shop were exactly seventeen lamp-posts. In the fish-shop, sitting on a high stool and swallowing down the sweet little rock oysters from Stewart Island, he felt comparatively safe. But the slatternly girl who thrust the food across the marble-topped counter stared at him, and turned aside to titter. His crumpled clothes. . . . He walked back to Briscoe's Corner. Back to the fish-shop again, to stare in at the window, anxious that nobody passing by should notice him. He stood there until the white pool of the sunlight was gone from the streets, and instead, around each lamp-post, swam the cautious little aureoles of orange.

That night he spent four of his remaining eleven shillings on a bed in a small hotel. He had no sleeping-kit, and crept naked between grey-white sheets. In the morning, passing over the necessity of breakfast for the heavier need of hoarding the money he had left, he went back to Briscoe's Corner. Although he had been born in this town, a door seemed to have closed between him and the intimacies of his childhood. He wasn't going home. Nobody whose face was familiar went past. The passers-by looked harassed, and greatly intent upon their own business; even the mangy stray dogs loped swift and stealthy from one butcher's shop to the next.

But Starkie had one acquaintance in Invercargill who was not likely to disown him – a collective acquaintance, with many slight differences in face and build, but always with the same stolid stare, the same heavy hand on his shoulder, the same heavy, jocose voice. This acquaintance came and stood beside him midway through his second morning at Briscoe's Corner. The big paw dropped on his shoulder. The voice said, 'Where are you working now, Stark?'

'Looking for a job,' he muttered, never looking at the big, bland face.

'Don't be funny, Stark.' The grip on his shoulder tightened. 'I'll give you a job, my lad – two jobs. You can have a job at a ha'penny a day blocking the swamps, or a job at a dollar a day fighting for your King. What's it to be?'

Something inside the mind of the boy who could have two jobs disliked the idea of being run by the police. He had served his time in tomb and mud-hole and irons. He twisted in the policeman's grip.

'I'll give you a job,' he shouted, 'pulling yourself out of this!' Then he took to his heels. The policeman, taken by surprise, floundered on his back in the middle of Briscoe's window-display, splintered glass framing fat body and outraged face. In a minute a whistle shrieked, feet pelted. The running boy was out of sight.

That night Starkie slept in an extremely wet and mouldy haystack down in Roach's Paddock, and found that the fascinating tramps who in his childhood had praised this form of sleeping accommodation were liars like the rest. The hay knotted toughly in his ribs, smelt of mildew, and was full of a tiny red creeping parasite which bit. For two days he spent his time dodging the public. He bought his food, sixpenn'orth at a time, warily over the counters of obscure shops. Always the eyes

of those who served him seemed hard and watchful. Always he listened for the sound of the whistle. He made a business of slinking through town on an elaborate, useless system of cross-streets, never proceeding straight in any direction. It was all purposeless, blind and hopeless. He would be picked up, and he knew it. But apart from the game of hare and hounds, he had nothing to do and nowhere to go.

It was on one of these elaborate games that the hare found himself outside the Drill Sheds. He had a feeling that They were on his heels. He edged down to the Zealandia Hall, noticed the flutter of the cotton Union Jack, and the straggling little queue of men in civilian clothes, fell in line with them. He was safe, camouflaged, doing what other men were doing without attracting the notice of the police. He was inside the hall, looking across a desk into the eyes of a clean-shaven man who snapped absent-mindedly as he asked a string of questions, but whose thin mouth had a good-humoured quirk at the corners.

'Ever been in gaol?'

He jumped. But 'No,' he said stolidly.

The eyes of the Captain behind the desk stared with some amusement at his clothes, still bearing the creases of a year in the prison stores.

'Nationality? Age?'

Starkie gave the nationality right, but his age as twenty.

'Had any trouble at *all*?' drawled the Captain.

Starkie shook his head.

'Very well, Stark.' The Captain bent his head, scribbled for a moment on a piece of paper. 'Chit for Dr Bevan, rooms in Speight Street. Hop it, and report here when he's done with you.'

Dr Bevan was easy. Hands that felt the stringy muscles in his lean body, shrewd eyes that stared at him. He went back with the chit to the Zealandia Hall, passed fit for active service.

14 Le Havre

FIRST THE BARBED WIRE, not little eighteen-inch cobwebs such as were spun over No Man's Land, but sprawling entanglements of a considerable height; then the tents where the military prisoners lived, except when under special punishment, which meant indoors attention in the galvanized iron boxes. All around the compound, which covered about an acre and a half, were little sentry-towers like the pill-boxes of No Man's Land. Separated from the military prisoners only by the barbed-wire entanglements, German prisoners sang, worked, and tramped stolidly up and down their own little cage in full view of the three hundred British soldiers – Tommies, Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians, men from every corner of the Empire – who were the especial charge of the English Major and N.C.O.s who ran the gaol. These were all Imperial Army men, and tougher than their own boots, or even than the meat they served out to the prisoners.

Starkie's first three days were in the cell. He was kept in irons, and lived on the daily ration of a pound loaf of bread, thrown into his little box every morning. They gave him as much water as he could drink, but no tobacco and no society, for which, at the end of his spell in solitary confinement, he was beginning to pine. There wasn't even the tramp of a sentry passing by. He was as alone as though the blazing crumps had really

finished the world once and for all, as so often in the trenches they had threatened to do.

On his fourth day in Le Havre he was put into a tent with Ginger Crombie, of the Royal Irish Rifles, doing a stretch of five years, and the two new-comers who had arrived with him – George Moran and George Cummings. Moran seemed dazed and stupid; but as soon as Starkie had time to settle in his tent, he knew that part of it was all right. Each one of his tent-mates passed him over a little parcel, bread and meat saved up from their own rations. It was law in the military prison that the prisoners stood together, and infinitely closer to them than the officers were the round-eyed, square-headed giants whose vacant faces stared through the barbed-wire entanglements from the German compound.

But when the prisoners were put to work next morning, Starkie knew that this was no place for him. The basic idea of discipline for the refractory was 'breaking them in'. This was best done by endless, purposeless tasks, with no reason and no completion: no moment when the satisfaction of a job finished and done with might make a man's eyes light up. The individualist was dealt with by being treated as the ox under the goad. Early in the morning they started to roll heavy bridge timbers, fourteen feet in length, across the prison-yard, building them up in tiers of an equal height. When this was finished, they tore the timber-stacks down, rolled them on to handcarts and trundled them off to be stacked up again in another corner. Over and over again the same movements, the wrenching, back-breaking tugging at the great timber-piles, were made, and made for nothing. The rain poured down, but in no way infringed on their occupation. At noon they were marched back to the gaol, given potatoes and a tin of fat and water glorified by the name of bully beef, taken back to the yards, and put to precisely the

same toil. At four o'clock they were marched back to the gaol and locked up.

There is another excellent means of taming the rebellious, and it was used at Le Havre. Hunger. After a few days Starkie was used to seeing military prisoners hunt like pariah dogs for scraps of food. They grubbed in the mud for pieces of banana and orange peel, and the days which took them down to the beach to hammer stakes into the sand were welcomed for the chance they brought of picking up potatoes washed in from the boats. Cigarette butts were treasured like gold. French soldiers walked past the prisoners on the beach, chewing tobacco, and when they spat the cuds from their mouths, these were picked up, taken back to the compound and dried out, to be rolled in bits of bark for cigarettes. Tobacco was the worst craving, and gaunt British soldiers handed bread over the wires to the German prisoners, who would trade cigarettes for food. No gift packages, however belated, ever got through to the military prisoners, whereas the Germans did occasionally get the parcels made up for them by mothers and sweethearts in little towns behind the Black Forest. Hunger and cold weren't as formidable as the craving for tobacco. Soldiers hung about by the compound wire, dodged the guards, and threw the shirts from their backs to the Germans, in the hope – usually vain – that a cigarette might be tossed back.

The four o'clock march back to the prison tents didn't mean any cessation of their duties. Each man was given a prison task of burnishing up old iron – stirrups, spurs, and chains, left lying about on the battlefields. It came into the prison with the red rust of its months on No Man's Land eating into it; the prisoners, with rags and sandpaper, had the duty of burnishing it like silver. Failure at this meant shot drill.

Starkie got three days' shot drill at an early date. The prisoners were marched out into an exercise yard under Sergeant Jackson. Each man was given a forty-pound block of concrete. He had to hold this straight out from his body, keeping his arms rigid, march four paces, bend his knees, and lower the concrete block to the ground, his arms still held straight; then rise, lift the block back to its first position again, march another four paces, and go through the same performance. It had the same happy logic possessed by the treadmill and the crank in the vilest of the early Victorian gaols.

When Starkie had lifted and lowered the concrete block twenty times, Sergeant Jackson still didn't like the way he held his arms. 'I'll show you how to hold that thing,' he snapped, and did so. 'Hold it like this.' Starkie received the block thrust into his arms again, but only for a moment. Then he dropped it on the sergeant's toes, and a howl of fury showed that even the Imperial Army self-control may be flawed in certain emergencies.

After that he was given seven days on bread and water in the punishment cell, with 'figure eights' for four hours each day. When the bread was thrown in, early in the morning, his arms were locked behind him at wrist and elbow. A wise man would have waited for freedom, but his body was crying out for food. He would creep across the stone floor of the cell, and kneeling or lying on the ground eat the bread exactly as a dog gnaws a bone. The contortions involved by this amused his guard, and he usually had an audience of grinning faces and voices barking encouragement. The ghost of a chance, and he would have murdered at least one of those men – it wouldn't have mattered which, they were all the same, shadows of the face he had loathed since his childhood. He could dream at night of bringing down his handcuffs on their heads, waiting behind the wood-stack with a club. The chance never came.

The men were woken at six o'clock, in the bitter black twilight of the winter mornings, with a faint rime of sea-salt on the wind. They stripped to their trousers and were marched out to the square. Half the company drilled while the others crowded into the wash-house to scrub faces and heads under a tap. A watch was kept on them in the latrines, and if they didn't tumble out quickly enough to suit their guards they were dragged out. After half an hour's drill they were marched into line and received their breakfast dole – bread, a bowl of porridge without either milk or sugar, and water in lieu of tea. A new prison task was set for them after the first few weeks. They were put to making duckboards for the trenches.

Every man was expected to make thirty duckboards a day, and it couldn't be done. A little yellow-faced devil of an ex-carpenter curried favour by setting a crack pace, and grinned over his shoulder as the inexperienced, with their butter-fingers, cursed in trying to keep up with him. They hurried, blundered, smashed their fingers and thumbs with the hammers, and were always behind in the end. Starkie knocked off work for a moment to pick up what looked like a heaven-sent cigarette butt from the mud. Sergeant Jackson's little cane played its tattoo on the back of his knuckles.

This time Starkie didn't hit the sergeant or anyone else. He grew as pale as is possible for a man of his colour, and stared at him.

'Well, Butterfingers, what about it?' invited Sergeant Jackson.

'I'm going to get out of here, I'm going to escape.'

'Mad, are you? Well, try escaping from the clink for a start.'

Door locked, walls of iron, floors of stone, no sky, no voice. Then the tall Major stood over him.

'What's this about escape, Stark?'

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