Honourable Men All

A Story by **Ab Douglas Driediger,** *Medicine Hat, Alberta*

The brown manila envelope bearing the words "On His Majesty's Service" had been expected. It was early August 1941, a month since Ike had reported to the medical board and found to be fit for military service. His examination card had 1-A stamped on it.

He slowly pulled a table knife out of a kitchen drawer and took a long look at the address. "Mr. Isaac P. Doerksen, Box 50, Kirkcaldy, Manitoba." He carefully slit it open and began to read: "Dear Mr. Doerksen:" (He had only been addressed as "Mr." once before when he'd been told to report for his medical). "You are hereby summoned to appear before the Mobilization Board of Canada at the Court House in the town of Worden in the province of Manitoba on August 15, 1941 at 10:00 a.m. At that time your request for conscientious objector status will be heard before Mr. Justice John L. Stevenson. You are advised to appear before the board alone without counsel or any other person speaking on your behalf. Failure to appear..." Ike folded the letter and slipped it back into the envelope.

"Worden on the 15th," he said to his mother, who was bent over a half-submerged washboard in a tub full of work shirts. "Why can they us Mennonites not alone leave," she sighed.

Ike's mother was a slight, thin woman of 45. She had been through hard times. War, revolution and famine had etched their lines of march across her face. Perhaps as a reaction to the harsh hand fate had dealt her, her piety did not come naturally, seeming to serve as a veneer masking the bitterness of deep

personal loss. Nevertheless she was a woman of simple faith. Above her shone the sun by day, and the moon and stars by night. Beyond them lay God's eternal heaven where a better life awaited her. The fires of hell, reserved for the souls of the damned, raged below. What might exist beyond her three-storied universe was not for her to know or ask.

She dried off her hands and hoisted a large basin of bread dough onto the table.

"In Holland four hundred years ago they could us not alone leave. Also in Germany, then in Russia, and now in Canada they can't us alone leave." As she spoke, she pushed first one fist then the other into a small mountain of white dough.

"You know Isaac, now it is nearly 150 years that Tsarina Catherina our people brought to Russia from Germany." She paused. With the grace of a wrestler throwing a compliant adversary she flipped the pillow-sized mound over and began kneading the other side.

"Ya, then they said to our Mennonites, 'We want to have farmers. Soldiers need we not.' The tsar made it for us Mennonites in the First War so they did not have to take anyone's life. Your father they let serve as medic."

"If I had to," Ike interjected, "I'd join as a medic, but they say if they let all the Mennonite boys into the medical corps there wouldn't be room for anyone else."

His mother carried on as if she hadn't heard.

"Ya, your father carried no gun, and nobody did he ever kill. He stayed a good Mennonite. But the war took his life anyway."

"The cold and the snow. His lungs," Ike said, picking up the story he'd heard a hundred times. His father had loaded wounded soldiers on the Russian front onto horse drawn sleighs and wagons, and hauled them to the railway line where they were put on hospital trains. He was never well after that, and died ten years after that war ended.

"I guess the Russian generals never trusted us Mennonites because we're German," said Ike as a way of leading into the next story he'd also heard many times before.

"No, your father said sometimes they would not let him on the battle field, scared he would go over to Germans."

"Lucky he didn't get captured. The Russians would have shot him after the war." Ike waited for his mother to pick up the story again.

"Ya, the Germans captured once a whole hospital train of Mennonite medics. 'Make it fast,' their Russian commander had said, 'load these wounded in twenty minuten and I give you all George Medal mit black and yellow ribbon.' The boys did it in fifteen minuten."

"Not fast enough," said Ike.

"No, not fast enough. They were all taken prisoner. When they were to Germany sent, the Russians said they were spies and should be shot."

"But," Ike continued, "after they got home the Socialists came to power and saved their lives."

"You must before Judge Stevenson stand?" asked Ike's mother, abruptly changing the subject.

"Yes."

"Friesen's Harry went before him. They let him off."

"Yeh, ended up in a work camp in the B.C. bush for conscientious objectors," Ike said.

An endless tawny ocean of wheat, barley and oats, the monotony occasionally broken by green patches of late-seeded crop, rolled past the train window. August had been a hot month, and the fields all seemed to be ripening at once. Ike wondered how his stepfather was making out on the south quarter which he had started cutting that morning.

"Even if you have to go, they'll give you a few months to help with the harvest", said Pete, as if reading Ike's mind. Pete Harms, who had his own appointment with Stevenson, had also boarded the train in Kirkcaldy.

Pete had a reputation for being a bit of a swell. In the eyes of the evangelical Mennonite faction to which Ike's mother and her second husband belonged, he was a 'worldly' chap. The evangelicals viewed him as a prime candidate to get saved at one of their revival meetings.

Pete had a natural elegance which Ike secretly admired, and as a born-again Christian felt guilty about it. His going to the Friday night movies at the Odd Fellows Hall and shooting pool at Gauthier's billiard rooms was certain to put a bit more grease on the skids leading Pete straight to the mouth of hell. Laughter came easily to Pete, and if he sensed that his immortal soul was in danger he didn't show it. He was always so sure of himself. He had been good in school, a smooth talker who knew all the angles. Even the "English" boys his age looked up to him. Except for being Mennonite, he was everything Ike was not.

"Hot isn't it?" said Pete. Both boys had been silently staring out the window at the passing countryside for a long time. Ike had been trying to rub an arc of flyspecks off the window with his sleeve until he realized they were on the outside.

"Yeh, think I'll take off my jacket," said Ike, wishing he hadn't gone and got all dressed up in his scratchy blue serge suit... just the pants, shirt and windbreaker, like Pete, would have been better.

He envied Pete's teal blue fedora too ... made him look just like the pictures of Clarke Gable and Robert Taylor he'd seen in the movie magazines at the barber shop. Self consciously he pushed his salt and pepper cloth cap a bit farther under the small cardboard box tied with binder twine which held his safety razor, toothbrush and a pair of oversized boxer shorts his mother had made on her old Singer sewing machine. His appearance before Judge Stevenson would require an overnight stay.

"I guess us Mennonite guys are in for a rough ride," Pete smiled, lighting up a tailor-made Turret. "Kinda between the devil and the deep blue sea, like the English say. If we join up, we get kicked out of the church. That is, if we've

been baptized. I know some guys who didn't even volunteer; got called up, put on the khaki suit and now their families won't talk to them. Shunning it's called. Actually our Mennonites don't even have a word for it. They just seem to think it's what God wants them to do."

Pete paused to take a long drag on his cigarette sending two white shafts of smoke through his nostrils.

"If we tell old Mackenzie King where he can stick his draft notice he'll give us a couple of years at hard labour. If we're lucky we end up in some CO bush camp cutting trees nobody needs and building roads nobody drives on."

"I hear they might open up the Medical Corps for Mennonites." said Ike hopefully. "Like the tsar did in Russia in the last war."

"Don't count on that either. Your old man's healthy. Your kid brother is fifteen and you've only got a half section."

"Can't figure it," said Ike. "Our neighbors, the McNaughtons got deferments for both their boys and they work the place with a tractor. Of course old man McNaughton's got a bad back."

"Yeh, " Pete sneered, "he's got a bad back and good connections. Guess we'll just have to go down in history as cowards. Cowards to the English if we don't fight, and cowards to our people if we do."

That word coward bothered Ike. He looked straight at Pete sitting in the seat opposite. He saw him not in his white shirt, suit pants and snappy felt hat cockily perched on his wavy blond head, but bare naked standing as if frozen on the river bank, muscular arms hanging limply at his sides.

It hadn't been more than three months ago, a Sunday ... one of those real scorchers that hit the prairies in early summer. It happened right after church.

It was a two mile hike in sweltering heat through thick bush to get to the Assiniboine, but Ike and Pete thought it was worth it. Both were annoyed when Helmut Wiebe insisted on tagging along. He was the same age as Ike and Pete, but slightly built and a poor swimmer. But that wasn't why Helmut was an outcast among the Mennonite boys. Unlike other fathers, his did not farm. His, in fact, did very little of anything. Although he attended church, he didn't believe a word of it. The little money he earned by doing odd jobs went to buy tinned tobacco and strange books about stars and planets from a mail order house in the States. The family depended on charity and handouts.

The river was still running high after a heavier than usual spring run off. Two young Métis boys, their smooth brown skin glistening in the sun were already at the favored spot, so the three newcomers moved a bit farther up stream.

The shriek for help came just as Ike tossed his shorts over a nearby chokecherry bush. Pete was already at the river's edge testing the water with one foot. Helmut, slow as usual, was still in his pants. Pete was first on the scene. Ike was close behind, rubbing a shin he'd skinned tripping over a log. Both boys stopped abruptly on the high bank.

In the eddy below a mop of coal black hair billowed to the surface, sank, then rose again. One of the Métis boys, no more than ten, had dog paddled too close to a sharp drop-off and got caught in the current. Pete, Ike, and the other boy stood immobile as Helmut rushed past them. Still wearing his pants, he dove awkwardly into the spot where he'd seen a black circle of hair disappear under the water. An eternity of ten seconds passed before two heads bobbed out of the water. The boy had both arms locked around Helmut's scrawny red neck pulling him down so that only the top of his blond head showed. With one arm around the boy he made first one, then another desperate lunge at a partially submerged poplar which had been felled, then abandoned, by a beaver.

Ike and Pete watched motionless from the bank above as Helmut and the boy finally wrapped their arms around the fallen tree. Exhausted, they stayed in the water for a long time, resting their heads on the trunk. Slowly they made their way, monkey-bar style, to the safety of the shore.

Without a word or a glance at Ike and Pete, Helmut put on his shoes, grabbed his shirt and disappeared into the bush headed for home.

"There's really no difference between a coward and a hero," said Pete staring blankly out the train window. "Both are motivated by fear."

That Pete, thought Ike, always reading those books about philosophy and stuff and being able to figure things out real good. Yet, he wasn't convinced that Pete was right.

"Sometimes you can't slide a cigarette paper between what's right and what's wrong," Pete continued, lighting up another Turret.

"Yeh... I hear a lot of Mennonites are buying or renting all the land they can get their hands on so their sons have a better chance of getting draft deferments for farm work."

"Nothing wrong with that," said Pete.

"Maybe not. Then there are all the guys getting themselves baptized in a real hurry so they can tell the judge they're church members."

"Like me," said Pete, blowing three perfect smoke rings against the window.

"Old Rev Schultz gave me the sprinkle job last Sunday. 'Course it's not so easy for you Brethren guys. You've got to get dunked."

"I wanted to get baptized this summer," Ike said. "My mother tried to arrange it, but the pastor from Winnipeg couldn't make it."

"Won't do you much good tomorrow."

"No, but I'd like to get baptized anyway, whether it helps with the draft board or not."

"Maybe you can squeeze it in before fall if you get harvest leave."

"Not likely. It's been so dry this summer Swanson's slough is nearly dried up and you can wade across the river where we swam in May."

"Worden, Worden, next stop Worden." the conductor sang out, steadying his ample frame on the wicker seat backs with one hand and fishing a gold watch out of his vest pocket with the other.

"If I can just persuade the judge I'm a CO, I'll be on easy street," Pete mused.

"Easy street?" asked Ike incredulously, "Easy street? What's easy about cutting trees in snow up to your armpits when it's forty below?"

Pete didn't answer. Then, almost as if he were talking to himself, he said, "Stevenson is tough. He chews nails and spits out ball bearings. If I show him my little baptismal certificate from old man Schultz it won't be worth shit."

"Easy Pete, no need to talk like that. We'll just tell the judge what's in our hearts. Whatever happens will be the Lord's will."

"Yeh, the Lord works in mysterious ways, doesn't He?" There was more than a tinge of sarcasm in Pete's voice.

Judge Stevenson took his powerful position on the War Services Board seriously. No, he took it more than seriously. He saw it as his God-given mission to get as many Mennonite men into uniform as possible and, while he was at it, free them from what he considered to be their misguided faith. In fairness to the judge, he was charged with the impossible task of plumbing the inner recesses of a man's conscience... that unpredictable faculty that distinguishes bad from good, right from wrong.

That the Mennonite faith forbade the taking of human life, even in defence of one's country, was completely beyond the judge's comprehension. He himself had served with an infantry battalion in the First World War. As a university graduate he had automatically been given an officer's commission. After only a few months in England, and just before his unit set sail for France, Lieutenant John Stevenson returned to Winnipeg with his right foot in a cast. How he had been injured before reaching the front had remained something of a mystery.

Nevertheless, the judge had a reputation as a man with a keen sense of justice, and his new role as chairman of the local mobilization board gave him wide latitude in interpreting justice as he saw it. In hearing the petitions of conscientious objector applicants like Ike and Pete, he was not only judge but also prosecutor and jury. Each candidate appearing before him, no matter how inarticulate, was obliged to act in his own defence.

Pete wasn't inarticulate. He had, as both his friends and detractors said, a way with words. There were even those who suggested he'd be a natural as a preacher. Pete thought his talents could be put to better and more lucrative use as a criminal defence lawyer. But his father scratched out a precarious living for his large family on a quarter section of hard scrabble farm. So, as soon as Pete finished the eleventh grade he went to work as a farm hand. His dream of getting his Twelve and going on to law school remained just that —a dream.

Nor was there any encouragement from his parents, or the rest of the Mennonite community. Higher education was a sure-fire way of being led from the straight and narrow. The legal profession in particular was frowned upon. Courts of law were decidedly un-Christian and the swearing of oaths contrary to the Bible.

None of this mattered in the least to Pete. The only doctrine of Mennonite faith that had any significance in his life, since getting his draft notice, was that of nonresistance. The task at hand was convincing the judge of his sincerity.

"We're both still up for tomorrow morning," Pete said, as he scanned the list posted on the door. "Gives us the rest of the day to listen to more of Wayne's b.s."

"He's not such a bad guy, Pete. He helped me write out my opening statement for the judge. I think that's what he called it, an opening statement."

"You mean he wrote it for you. Typed it out too. I don't think that was too smart. Like you said Ike, you should just say what's in your heart."

"When I get up there I won't be able to say two words straight. I know what I want to say, but my mind will be a blank and I'll make a fool of myself."

Wayne Ketchum was what the Kirkcaldy folks would call a city slicker. His father, a prominent Winnipeg lawyer, had grown up in Worden where his older brother still operated the family hotel. Wayne worked for his uncle behind the desk during the summer when he wasn't at university. His self-assured manner and neat appearance impressed Ike. His short-cropped hair seemed to be moulded on his head, every single strand of which knew its assigned place. There was no rooster tail at the back that had to be constantly tamed with Brilliantine. His complexion was astonishingly clear without even the hint of a blemish. No pitch fork had ever raised a callus on his long, narrow hands.

"Well Pete, guess your friend should be getting acquainted with the judge about now," said Wayne. "My old man knows Stevenson," he went on, with the emphasis on *knows*. "He's in thick with the Liberals in Ottawa. The old man says your bishops are doing a lot of complaining and the politicians are starting to listen."

"You'd think that with all the trouble Mackenzie King's having with the Frenchies he'd be happy as the proverbial pig with Stevenson slapping us into uniform," said Pete.

"Sure, that's what Stevenson thinks. But Mennonites vote too. Winning elections is just as important to King as winning the war. Maybe more important," Wayne added with a laugh.

"Yep," he continued, "Stevenson wanted to get into Parliament in the worst way. But every time he tried, some Tory rattled a little skeleton in his closet and he withdrew."

"What do you mean, a skeleton?"

Wayne lowered his voice to a near whisper. "It's just a rumour. But the story goes that Stevenson injured himself on purpose in the last war while he was training in England. Broke every little bone in one foot with a trenching tool. Says it was an accident. Who's to tell? There was nobody around at the time. But it got him out of the army and back home."

The judge was much smaller than Ike had imagined. He was impeccably dressed. The creases on the trousers of his dark gray suit were sharp as a butcher's knife. Ike was conscious of how rounded his were, but realized it was

the best his mother could do with the heavy irons she had to heat on the wood burning kitchen stove. And the judge's shirt—it was so crisp and white. Ike's eyes were drawn to the judge's polished black shoes as he strode to his seat on the raised dais at the front of the court room. He thought he noticed a slight, almost imperceptible limp every time he put weight on his right foot.

"Mr. Isaac Doerksen?" the clerk looked inquiringly at Ike. "You are up first. Remember to address Judge Stevenson as "Your Honour."

Ike stood before the judge the same way he stood in church during prayers, his arms hanging down, hands folded over his fly. After intently studying some papers for a long time, Judge Stevenson slowly raised his eyes over his reading glasses and fixed his gaze on Ike. For some time he said nothing. Then...

"Why don't you like your country, Mr. Doerksen?" Ike was taken aback. When he opened his mouth he was surprised to hear himself speaking in the upper register of his throat.

"I, I don't like... I mean I *do* like my country," Ike stammered. Then quickly added the 'Your Honour.'

"Speak up young man. Don't mumble. You like your country, but not enough to fight for it, is that what you are saying?" The judge didn't wait for a reply. "You know, Mr. Doerksen, if you do not help your country in her hour of need you are helping Hitler. Is that what you want to do?"

"N-n-no, Your Honour."

"Then why don't you want to serve in the military?"

"My mother... uh, I mean my parents. They say it is wrong to kill."

"Don't any of you young men think for yourselves? Every last one of you comes in here whining about what your parents or your preachers told you to say. And these are the same parents who only a few years ago were begging to be let into this great country because the Communists were taking their land away and starving them. Is this the thanks you give your new country?"

Ike sensed that the judge had already made up his mind and his conclusions were not in his favour.

I just hope he doesn't ask me whether I'm a member of the church, Ike thought, and I have to explain about my mother not being able to get the preacher out before Swanson's slough got all weedy, and the river nearly dried up. But he didn't ask. He assumed.

"I get you fellows in here all the time. Get themselves baptized just in time for these hearings and think that will get them off. Well young man that kind of a dodge doesn't cut any ice with me."

Again, the judge didn't seem to expect a response. He immediately posed another question.

"Mr. Doerksen, why should I exempt you from military service by granting you conscientious objector status?" This time he obviously *did* want an answer. Ike fumbled a folded piece of paper out of his hip pocket and began reading: "I, Isaac P. Doerksen, of Kirkcaldy, Manitoba hereby claim conscien-

tious objector status on religious and mor...." Judge Stevenson whipped off his glasses and fairly bellowed.

"What in God's name are you doing?"

"I don't speak so good Your Honour. I got it all written out for you."

"Give me that!"

The judge grabbed his glasses again and began scanning the neatly typed page. He flipped it over to look at the other side, which was blank, and dropped it on the table as if he had accidentally picked up something with a bad smell.

"Are you trying to make a fool out of me?" he roared, removing his glasses very slowly.

"N...no, Your Honour."

"Well then, perhaps you'll tell me who wrote this for you."

"A...a friend." Ike didn't want to implicate Wayne even though he was only a casual acquaintance. "A friend," Ike continued, "he helped put my thoughts on paper."

"You were clearly instructed before appearing at this hearing not to employ counsel or get assistance of any kind. You are obviously a young man who has never learned to follow orders. Well, we can correct that. Conscientious objector status is denied. You will receive official notification and details by mail.

"B...but Your Honour," Ike interjected lamely.

Judge Stevenson's voice was tight and hard. "I have nothing further to say to cowards."

The hearing had lasted less than ten minutes. But in that short time something had changed in Ike. He somehow didn't feel like the same person who had walked into the courthouse. What exactly had gone out of his life that morning, or what had come into it, he couldn't say. But he felt different. The clarity and openness with which he had viewed the world up to that moment had suddenly become dark and murky.

"Didn't go so well, eh?" Wayne asked, as he glanced up from behind the reception desk.

"Nope."

"You mean my little presentation didn't impress the judge?"

"Guess not. Maybe too many therefores and whereases." Ike slumped into a large leather armchair, resting his head on its high back. His eyes wandered across the lobby ceiling, walls and doors without registering what they were seeing. "Coward." The word had stung, and it still stung.

Ike's mind was a swirl of contradictions. His mother never let him forget that this wonderful country had taken them in as refugees from Stalin's terror when no other country wanted them. Was he now failing his country in her hour of need as the judge had charged? Or, was his mother right, that such gratitude did not demand killing people or offering sons as cannon fodder? And she knew all about cannon fodder from Ike's father who had spent two years gathering shattered bodies and parts of bodies from the battlefields of Tannenburg and

Ostrolenka. And to what end?

Then there was the all important article of Mennonite faith - nonresistance. Failure to live up to that admonition could bring another into play - shunning. Was Ike ready or capable of cutting his emotional and religious ties to family, church and community and face a cold and indifferent outside world of which he knew so little? If he refused military service, as his faith demanded, was he prepared to spend a year or more in jail at hard labour as the law demanded?

"So what are you going to do?" The words came from Wayne sitting behind his desk preparing next week's beer order.

"Don't know," said Ike, continuing to stare at the wall in front of him. "Wouldn't mind getting into the medical corps. My dad was a medic in the last war. Russian army. Never carried a gun. Never fired a shot. Pete says I don't stand a chance."

"Probably not." Medical's full. It's infantry they want," said Wayne.

"Well, I'm not about to go over there and kill people," Ike said defiantly. "But," he added with quick defensiveness, "I'm no coward."

There was silence. Ike had expected Wayne to say something like 'of course you're not', but Wayne said nothing.

"What are *you* going to do?" Ike asked, unable to hide his anger. "You're draft age."

"Me? I'm already in. Sort of. Second looey in the university contingent."

"What?" Ike had no idea what he was talking about.

"Second Lieutenant. Army's university unit. They make all us brainy types officers right off the bat," Wayne laughed. A girlish laugh, Ike thought. "I'll be going active as soon as I get my law degree this fall."

"Infantry?" Ike asked.

"Heck no, the old man's got it all worked out—Vancouver, if you can believe it. The Army's Judge Advocate General's Department."

"What's that?"

"Army lawyer Ike, I'm going to be an army lawyer. Help guys like you get your ass out of a sling when you get into trouble, or get it into one. Depends which side they put me on."

After the typed statement to the judge, Ike wasn't sure he'd ever want any help from Wayne. He pulled his Westclox watch out of a side pocket of his dress pants and checked the time. Pete should be out of the hearing soon.

Why couldn't his parents be more like Pete's, he thought. Pete's folks were easy going. They weren't dogmatic church goers, and if Pete ended up in the army which, given his own experience, he was sure he would, his parents wouldn't lose a minute's sleep over it.

"Guess your folks will give you a pretty rough time when they see their Johnny come marching home with shiny buttons on his suit, eh, Ike?" Wayne said somewhat sarcastically. Ike didn't answer.

"Tell you what you do."

Here he goes again, Ike thought, more of Wayne's half-baked advice.

"Your mother—er, your folks, would tolerate you being a medic—no blood on your hands—well you know what I mean," Wayne chuckled.

"Yes, they would," Ike replied hopefully.

"Here's what you do. Sure as God makes little green apples they'll whip you into infantry after basic. Unless of course you decide to go to jail, which I don't think you will. So, just go to the base tailor, or better still slip the corporal in Quarter Master's a few bucks and get yourself a set of medic's shoulder flashes. For good measure get a sew-on Red Cross badge too. That should look good in church. Sew them on your tunic when you're on leave, and presto!, you're a medic. Until you get back to base, of course."

"I don't know," Ike said, after giving Wayne's latest scheme some thought. "Sounds dishonest to me. Maybe even illegal." Wayne was clearly annoyed that Ike hadn't responded with more gratitude.

"You naive Mennonite sod busters better learn something. Your sheltered little world of loving thy neighbour, turning the other cheek, and all that bullshit won't get you very far in the real world. I'm afraid you're in for a few bruising surprises."

Wayne snapped a piece of paper into his typewriter and went on tapping out his beer order. Ike remained silent, his eyes scanning the by now familiar walls of the hotel lobby. There were the portraits of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. The King was dressed in a scarlet military tunic, his chest draped with medals. The Queen wore a snow white gown, a blue sash hung across her ample bosom. Under the portraits was a crudely lettered banner: "For King and Country." Ike was studying the stuffed head of a bull buffalo directly above the door bearing the sign 'LICENSED PREMISES" when it swung open. It was Pete coming in from the street through the beer parlor entrance, a mile-wide grin stretched across his face.

"So what have you got to be so happy about. Don't tell me you got a deferment?" Ike asked.

"Deferment, hell. I got full conscientious objector status." Pete was still grinning from ear to ear. Ike stood dumbfounded. He had always thought he had a stronger case than Pete. Sure, Pete had got himself baptized but it wasn't his fault the Mennonite Brethren insisted on baptism by full immersion and Pete's church just sprinkled. And it wasn't his fault the preacher couldn't come from Winnipeg sooner, and that Swanson's slough had turned into mud.

Well, he thought, maybe none of it would have mattered. The judge seemed to have made up his mind the minute he laid eyes on him, and Wayne's stupid statement probably clinched it. But the judge could have gotten Pete real easy on a technicality. He hadn't filed his claim for CO status within the required eight days after getting his letter to report for his medical.

"Yeh," Pete exuded, with a faint whiff of beer on his breath, "the good Lord sure does work in mysterious ways."

"How did you do it?" Ike asked incredulously.

"Piece of cake old pal, a piece of cake. Oh sure, the guy climbed up one side

of me and down the other for filing late, but my father—I didn't call him the old man, thought father would sound more respectful, so I says my father was sick and I had to help him out on the farm and couldn't get to the post office."

Ike knew that was a lie. When Pete's dad was sick, and often when he wasn't, it was his mother who did the work.

"As for my baptism, I told him it just worked out that way. The public profession of my faith as a Christian and a Mennonite is something very close to my heart." The Reverend Ellsworth Carlson, the evangelist on the Fargo radio station, couldn't have said it with more conviction.

Pete was momentarily preoccupied with backhanding a blue cloud of cigarette smoke when Ike jumped in.

"Guess he must have believed you."

"Not a word," Pete replied matter of factly.

"Then how come he let you off?"

"Well," Pete continued, "I told him about how I was going to bugger up my hand by sticking it in the grain crusher drive belt, about how I'd heard that if you injure yourself bad enough the army won't take you. But, I told him I decided not to because that wouldn't be an honourable thing to do, and if I ever did such a thing I wouldn't be able to look at myself in the mirror." That stupid grin spread over Pete's face again.

"Well, I tell you the old judge's false choppers nearly fell out of his mouth. He looked down at his papers for a long time, took off his glasses but didn't look up. Then he said, 'Mr. Harms, you have made a most convincing case concerning your request for conscientious objector status. You are an honorable man. We are honorable men all. It gets down to a matter of conscience doesn't it? Then he says, on behalf of His Majesty's government my request for CO status is granted. End of story."

"I don't know why you're so happy Pete. Dragging logs out of the bush in Ontario or busting rock in B.C. isn't what I'd call a holiday."

"Ike, old pal, none of that crap for me. You know the big red brick building up on the hill in Brandon?:

"You mean the Mental?"

"I mean the Provincial Psychiatric Hospital. I'm checking in." Pete roared with laughter. Ike was indeed wondering whether his friend had lost his mind.

"Yeh," Pete went on, "they're taking COs at the hospital as male nurses. Already got a line on an opening."

"You're crazy Pete," said Wayne who had been silently listening with undisguised amazement. "Who in their right mind would want to clean up after a bunch of loonies who've forgotten how to go to the toilet?"

"Just think of the side benefits old pal." The "old pal" was beginning to grate on Ike's nerves.

"Side benefits?" Ike asked.

"Right. There must be a hundred female nurses up there. Husbands and boyfriends overseas. You know what I mean?" Pete gave Ike an exaggerated

wink and a jab in the ribs as he walked towards the check out desk. Matter of factly, and without looking at Ike, Pete said in a low voice,—"I ran into Helmut's old man on the way back from the court house."

"Oh, what's Helmut up to?"

"He's in jail."

"Helmut's in jail? Helmut? What did he do?"

"Nothing. Well, I guess Stevenson wouldn't think so." Called Helmut a few nasty names and turned him down for conscientious objector status. Didn't show for military training and got himself tossed in the jug. Twelve months hard labour.

Ike spoke with undisguised bitterness. "Well, at least us Mennonite farm boys know all about hard labour."

"It's not the hard labour that will get to him," said Wayne. "It's the older prisoners and even some of the guards."

"They give the kids a bit of a hard time, do they?" Pete inquired with a mocking laugh.

"Yeh, you might say that, if you know what I mean," Wayne muttered under his breath. "You know some of those guys prefer you pretty boy hicks over the ladies." There was a look of annoyance on Pete's face. He fancied himself as something of a man of the world and certainly didn't consider himself a hick.

"See what you've got to look forward to?" said Pete, as if he was already distancing himself from Ike's mundane little world.

Ike never did cotton on to what all the sniggering about pretty boys had been about, but he knew that Wayne was right on at least one count. Growing up in the comforting cocoon of a Mennonite community was to be made vulnerable to all kinds of unsuspected hurts and truths. He'd have to brace himself against the chill winds of a hostile outside world he instinctively knew was waiting for him.

Pete snapped the brim of his fedora with his index finger, and pushed it ever so slightly into the fashionable rakish angle. "Don't take all that guff about buggery in jail too seriously," he told Ike who was tightening the binder twine around his cardboard packing box.

"Don't you worry. I won't be putting on no jail bird's suit. Next time you see me in Kirkcaldy, I'll be all decked out in the King's uniform with RCAMC - Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps flashes on my shoulders, and a red cross sewn on my sleeve. Everybody will be happy, Judge Stevenson, the prime minister, our English neighbors, the Mennonite church and my parents. At least they'll be as happy as they ever get."

"You're dreaming Ike. Our preachers have run up against a stone wall in Ottawa trying to get a special Mennonite medic unit."

"Well, let's just say that the Lord truly does work in mysterious ways."