The Next Man

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ONE night in the autumn of 1915, during a violent assault on the German lines south of La Bassée, a lad—he was scarcely more than a boy—who had volunteered on the outbreak of war, found himself alone in one of the dugouts of his battery. Since midday when Moroccan and Indian divisions made an unexpected attack under cover of a thick mist, the battery had been firing without a pause, and now he had been detailed to cook a meal for his gun on the little iron stove. He was just about to ladle out the steaming soup into the dixies which stood in a row in front of him when a bearded face appeared through the ground−sheet curtain at the top of the steep steps. A moment later the curtain was pushed aside and the man came slowly down . He belonged to some other unit and was in full marching order,—helmet, overcoat and full pack.

His sudden appearance took the boy by surprise; but he found it even more disconcerting for a moment than the occasion seemed to warrant. He felt that he had known this man a long time and had been expecting him any moment. Yet he tried in vain to remember where he had seen him before and what occasion had brought them together. He conjured up face after face, and face after face rose before his eyes. One after another they came, young and old, fair and foul—all the men with whom he had jumped from shellhole to shell−hole or threaded the labyrinth of the trenches in the dark of night. But this man, whose mysterious attraction had almost the force of a father's love, was not among them.

When he reached the bottom of the steps, the stranger stood still. He was so tall and powerfully built that though he was heavily laden all he carried about him looked like toys. He had thick, straw−coloured hair, which showed in a mass beneath the rim of his backward−tilted helmet, and a bushy beard of the same colour. His eyes, beneath bushy white eyebrows, were small and very bright blue. They had a searching, restless look—not as though he feared danger, but as though he expected at any moment to be called upon and was anxious not to be found wanting. His pack was set high on his shoulders, his rifle, with the breech and lock still carefully wrapped round with rags, was slung across his chest, and the seven or eight full bandoliers hanging from his neck and shoulders made him lean forward a little with their weight. A rough stick with a very wide and long hook hung from his wrist by a leathern thong.

"Looks all right here," he said in a manner which was half humble and half confiding, as he took off his helmet and held it hanging down in his hand like a hat. He gave a glance at the great pan of soup.

"Yes, Landwehr, you've come to the right place," the boy answered, and bent lower over his pots and pans. "We're all good fellows here."

The man now bent down too, with his chin to his chest, for at that moment another of the shells from a naval gun was heard passing on a flat trajectory straight over the dugout. They had been howling over all day long, hugging the ground, as though all the more unerringly to find their target.

After waiting for the explosion, he went on to say in a low voice, speaking almost in the other's ear, that he was back from leave and had had a long march. He belonged to a Prussian Landwehr regiment which he had been told was in the line somewhere in front there and he wanted to find his company before daylight, and meanwhile a drink of soup would be welcome, as he had nothing with him to eat.

Without a word the boy held out one of the dixies. He quickly clipped his helmet between his knees and raised the dixie to his mouth in both hands and drank it off in big gulps without lowering it again, keeping his eyes all the time on the boy's face. Then he wiped his beard, gave back the dixie, murmuring his thanks, and began to look into space as though tactfully expecting something more. "Don't take it amiss," he said after a moment with an earnest look, when he saw that he did not make himself understood—but might he have the same over again? He was two men in girth, but generally he only got enough for one. That was a terror, and often he didn't know how to carry on.

The boy filled the dixie again with some reluctance and an anxious glance up at the entrance of the dugout, for rations were beginning to get short, and to share them unnecessarily with members of other units was already being regarded here and there by superior officers as treason to one's fellows and a punishable offence.

The stranger again empted the dixie. Then he put on his helmet, fixed the chin strap and turned to climb the steps with a gruff—"Good luck to all here, mate." But the boy now remembered a parcel of cakes which he had had from home that morning. He had put it on a shelf at the head of his bunk. So he called the man back, and standing on the steps above him, tied the parcel to the strap of his pack with string. The big fellow stood still and looked on, shaking his head with a heart−felt sigh which seemed to express regret at going off with such a priceless treasure. Then abruptly he raised his head and put his great hand up to the rim of his helmet in a salute. He remained for long in this attitude while he smiled at the boy with an expression of sheer wonderment and delighted love. Then in a moment he had pushed through the curtains and disappeared.

When, shortly after, the boy too went out across the open, with the dixies collected up in both hands by the handles, he was just in time for a renewed storm of shrapnel, bursting with twitching green flashes, and the battery was still firing away like mad. Off to the left stood the four guns, fairly close together in the soft meadow−land, dug in only to the axles. The gunners were crowding behind the shields, and further back were the signal units in shallow trenches with the sergeant−major ceaselessly bawling out the range and the firing orders. They could all be distinctly seen in the quivering glare of the night attack, now in a spasmodic ruddy glow as though of fires in the distance, now as black shadows silhouetted against the white light of a burning munition dump, and then again, as the eddying brilliance of dozens of Very lights descended over them, illuminated so clearly by the blinding glare that every grass stem and every leaf on the trees showed up as vividly green as they would in daylight.

The Landwehrman was still there, standing leaning on his stick in the cover of

the ruined buildings beneath which was the dugout. He looked up at the sky and shook his head. He might have been looking at the weather and repeating one "Lord have mercy on us" after another. Then he went up to the boy who was getting his breath to make a dash through the fire with his dixies. Bending forward, he peered in silence long and intently into his face. Finally he turned away and climbing over the bank of the road on the right of the battery, tramped off under his load in the direction of the infantry fire which grew fiercer every moment.

Not long after this the battery ceased fire, and the attack seemed to have been broken. Sentries were posted and the rest flung themselves on their beds in the dugouts. And the boy did the same. But though he was utterly tired out he could not sleep. The Landwehrman began to haunt him, and again he ransacked his memory for that face and form and voice. "He's for it," he thought as he listened anxiously to the confused uproar from the front line trenches. "He'll be done in. I could see it in his face, and now I know where I saw him before." At last he pulled his thick woollen cap over his ears and shut out the noise and fell asleep. But he had a strange dream. He saw an immense extent of open country in the first light of dawn, and countless numbers of soldiers standing in grey coats and grey helmets. It must have been the whole German army. They were drawn up in circles, their faces turned to one another as though for a game. Now it seemed to be beginning. All raised their hands in salute and bowed to each other. They were all alike, for each had the face of a flaxen−bearded Landwehrman. Then suddenly the sky flamed with forked lightning, a terrific clap of thunder rent the air and now the soldiers rushed wildly through each other's ranks, brandishing their weapons, and instantly each was transformed into a different figure.

At that moment he awoke. The sentry gave the alarm. The gunners rushed cursing up the steps into the open, where the explosion of bombs, the crackle and rattle of infantry fire and the confused outcry of voices shouting one command upon another were to be heard close by.

While he stumbled along after the others to his gun, he thought he saw a glimpse of blue above the dim grey of the dawn sky. There'll be another fine day again soon, he thought. Above him too, and all round, there were numbers of birds singing. But then he became aware that it was the whistling and twittering of rifle bullets. They came thick and fast, and pretty low, over the hollow in front; and when he threw himself down behind a willow to avoid the explosion of a shell which was about to pitch nearby, he was bestrewn with a shower of leaves and twigs ceaselessly and silently eddying down. Suddenly he knew that this was the day of his death. It was like a thing decided long ago which he had only forgotten for the time. In reality he had never thought of it. He had thought only of his father's blessing when he embraced him before he left for the front, and he had believed that this blessing had a power which no bullet could overcome. Now, however, it seemed that nothing could be simpler or more obvious than to die there beside the ruins of the French farm, and he was surprised to find that he no longer shrank from it, although often and often he had thought of death with pangs of terror which he had been quite unable to overcome. From this moment he spent the day without fear. He was conscious only of anticipating his death in a suspense as to when and how it would arrive.

He reached his gun and soon after sunrise No. 3 got a bullet in the hip. Bent double and pressing both hands to his side, he could still totter a few steps to one side. But now he lay fiat on his back on the grass with his lips parted as though he were only asleep. There was no time to carry him away. The boy had sprung

forward to take his place behind the shield close to the barrel of the gun. He wore a blue woollen cardigan, his cap was jammed askew on his head and his face was streaming with sweat and smeared with oil and rust.

"Keep it up! Same range! Another and another after that!" the sergeant−major yelled out again and again, jumping about behind the battery as though possessed. "Fire!" No. 1 roared hoarsely, leaning right over the handspike, his eyes starting from his head, and the boy bent to the work and grimly set his teeth and tore at the leather lanyard and the shell rushed from the muzzle. Then at the thunderous report the howitzer reared up; the short thick barrel started back, sunk between the sides of the gun carriage, and then slowly, with a groan of reluctance, slid to its former position. While it was doing so, the boy was already opening the breech; with a puff of smoke the empty cartridge was ejected to the rear and a fresh one was pushed in behind the next shell. Then he raised his free arm and pressed his hand to his ear and the fire order barked out as the breech action shot home. So it went on hour after hour until the spent cartridges made a mound and the shell baskets a mountain behind the guns. More and more frequently, however, a shell crashed and exploded among them, or a group of shrapnel burst just above the gun shields, forcing them all to flatten themselves on the ground; and more and more of the men lay motionless on their faces and did not stir again, or abruptly ran off with staring eyes, staggering like drunken men and streaming with blood. But the boy came through without a touch.

When it was nearly evening the battery had shot its last shell. A further supply was not to be had, and those of the men who were left assembled in one of the dugouts, expecting either to receive the order to abandon the position or else to be taken prisoners. Meanwhile a sudden outburst of rifle fire and the shrill cries of the black troops as they renewed the attack gave warning that the end was near. It was at this moment that a wild suspense took hold of the young volunteer, and he pushed past the sergeant−major, who had just gone up to have a look for the eagerly−awaited ammunition column, and ran out into the open. And there, on the bank of the road running to the right of the battery, he saw a man whom he thought he recognised, painfully crawling to the rear on all fours. He was bare−headed and his yellow hair hung down over his eyes. The sergeant−major saw him too, and tried with shouts and signs to make him crawl closer to the remains of a wall that bordered the road at that point. At the same time he caught hold of the boy to prevent him going across to the wounded man; for the English machine−guns swept the road and the battery had had several casualties that day owing to men trying to go to the help of the wounded who were struggling back along it.

The wounded man must have heard the shouts. He came to a stop and stared across irresolutely. But suddenly his arms gave way under him and he rolled over on his side. Then with his face turned away he made signs with his arms to show that he was in agony for water. At this the boy broke loose and ran over to him. But while he knelt beside him and pulled out the cork of his water−bottle with his teeth, he realised that he had been mistaken. The wounded man was not the Landwehrman. He wore the badge of another regiment. With one hand beneath his head he put the bottle to his lips. The wounded man tried to drink, but a sudden spasm passed over his face and he pushed the bottle from him with his mud−caked hand. Apparently he wanted to say something, but then he shook his head and looked up into the boy's face with a rueful look as though he was sorry to have given so much trouble and after all to be unable to drink. His head fell sideways in a helpless roll. Once more he pushed the bottle aside and then lay

still with death in his eyes. At the same moment a crossing bullet caught the boy in the throat and he fell headlong over the dead man with his face on his. But he sprang up again at once, and pressing his handkerchief to the wound, staggered back and fell at the sergeant−major's feet.

By a miracle the arteries of the neck were not severed, or at any rate they did not bleed for the moment; and so, scarcely able to breathe and quite unable to speak, he was got back that night to the nearest field hospital on that sector of the front. The surgeon at once performed an operation to help him breathe more easily and it met with some success.

When he awoke at noon next day he was in a large barn which had been turned into a hospital. Facing each other were the long rows of wooden bedsteads, and above the head of each was mounted a small black placard on which in white letters were written the name, unit and age of its occupant. There was an utter silence in the room, as though they were all asleep or already dead. The sunlight slanted steeply in.

When the boy turned over on his side he saw the Landwehrman sitting up in the next bed. He recognised him at once though he was greatly altered. His hair had been given a military crop and his beard shaved off—clearly in order to get at his wound, for he had been shot in the neck or chin. His neck was closely swathed in bandages and he sat upright propped up on pillows, breathing with difficulty. But it did not seem to worry him, or else he wished to hide his discomfort, for he looked straight in front of him with an air of composure. His eyes now looked big and they had lost all trace of restlessness.

The boy drummed with his fingers on the frame of his bed to call his attention, and slowly the man turned his head; but he shewed no surprise. He merely smiled dryly and then, lowering his eyelids, made a calm gesture of assent, as though to say that he knew it all long ago and what was still to come also. He would see to it all. No need to worry. Then he turned his head to the front again, put a finger to his lips and looked with composure into the distance. The boy lay back consoled and fell into a deep sleep.

It was the middle of the night when he was awakened by a noise close beside him. At first he could not make it out. It was a whistling and choking and rattling, repeated in more and more rapid and insistent gasps. Then he realised that his neighbour was in the throes of death. By the dim light of the shaded lamp he saw the figures of orderlies standing round the bed, and he heard the clink of surgical instruments and the low voice of the surgeon giving orders. At this a horrible dread came over him. He has got to die, he thought, and I have got to die with him. There is no help for it. He covered his face with his hands and found it wet with tears and perspiration. He tried to pray, but could not. The words of piety turned to despairing curses and blasphemies. He pulled the clothes over his head and buried his face in the pillow and tried to plumb the uttermost abyss of despair and of death itself—simply to find an end. But he could not find it. And now his breath, too, began to rattle and his heart fluttered in his breast and the whole room began to rock in a dizzy see−saw and to turn in circles, now this way, now that. But suddenly all was quiet in the next bed. The light went away. He listened. Deep and regular breathing came from the bed.

He has got through, he thought. We have got through. He relaxed again and closed his eyes. As he dozed off he put his hand over his heart and felt its strong and regular beat.

When he awoke in the morning he was wonderfully refreshed. His skin was cool and he felt every sign of a swift recovery. Then two orderlies came and

lifted a tall figure from the bed next his and carried it out. It was enveloped in a sheet from head to foot and perfectly motionless. He jumped up in bed and held out his arms. His lips moved, but not a sound came. Then he sat motionless with glowing eyes. When one of the two orderlies returned after a moment and wiped out the name and regiment above the empty bed, he sank back and covered his face with his hands. It was certain now that he would get home after all, and he was ashamed—though not, perhaps, in the sight of men.

He was, in fact, sent later on to a hospital in Germany, where in time he recovered.