

The Man without Fear

Paul Alverdes

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STAFF-CAPTAIN AXEL VON BERRMANN-PLHWE, of the Livonian branch of that family, sat one April night in 1916 on the log floor of a communication trench east of Smorgen, in Russia. The Petersburg guards with whom he served according to the tradition of his family were to raid the German lines, which were some distance away on the edge of a pine forest, at dawn.

The stars were beginning to grow pale and disappear, and the men stood to all along the trench, restlessly shifting about in the ranks and waiting for the first glimmer of day. Their long thin bayonets were fixed and their rolled cloaks tied aslant across their chests like officers' sashes. Now and then one of them leant back out of the ranks to look for a comrade who was separated from him, or to whisper something across those who stood between. Others were praying bare-headed, bowing their heads again and again before little pictures which they had fixed up on the side of the trench. The N.C.O.s tramped to and fro behind, pushing their way along as they told off the men, compared their watches and argued with one another.

Axel sat a little to one side of them wrapped in a light fur and smoking one cigarette after another which he took from a gold cigarette-case lying open between his feet. He was thinking that that morning might be the last he had to live; and he was afraid. Yet when he tried to go over the thirty years of his life, he found scarcely anything which it would cost him a tremor to leave behind. But no sooner had he realised this than he knew that there lay the real reason why death was so repugnant.

Yes—when had he ever really lived? He threw away his cigarette and sank his neck deeper into the collar of his fur cloak and felt its soft caress. He thought of a summer morning not long before the outbreak of war when he swam alone across the wide lake in the grounds of his estate. It was fringed with sparsely-grown beech woods, and their deep green foliage was softly dappled by the water which dazzled him with innumerable sparkles of reflected sunshine. An ecstasy of joy suddenly came over him; he had never since been able to think of it without intense longing. He spun round like a top on the mirror of the lake and luxuriously inhaled breath after breath, which filled him to overflowing with a sense of refreshment and renewed life. Sometimes he waved his arms and shouted aloud across the echoing expanses without thinking whether there were anyone to hear him. Then he lay almost motionless, gently twirling his hands and whispering to the water beneath him as though to a lover. It pressed caressingly between his lips and he replied with kisses.

Afterwards—but quite in vain—he tried sometimes to recapture this fulness of emotion in which alone seemed to lie the whole pleasure of living on this earth. It eluded him, do what he might. But a different experience unexpectedly brought it back to him. It was in the gambling rooms of the regimental club where he was playing for recklessly high stakes.

Axel was genuinely fond of play, but he almost always had notoriously bad luck, and for that reason he usually resisted the fascination of the card tables. Winning or losing meant little to him, but it wounded him in the inmost core of his being that an invisible and mysterious power, whose influence was obvious enough, should persist in an undeserved but insatiable hatred against him. After nights like these he could scarcely rid himself of a profound dejection. He vexed and wearied himself, until he felt a loathing of life, with questions to which no one has ever yet found any answer.

One night, however, his luck abruptly changed. He had merely to take up a card to find that it was the very one he wanted. The others might stake what they liked against him everything in an incomprehensible manner served

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his turn. Banknotes, gold, and I.O.U.s heaped themselves round him while he sat thrilled and blissful, scarcely venturing to move in his chair. A demon, an angel of God or Satan, had put an irresistible power at his disposal, and silently he offered up prayers and petitions and promised to worship him all his life long if only he would never desert him.

Next day he gave the money away to the poor and the monasteries, and tore up the I.O.U.s.

But the angel departed and, conjure him as he might, his old luck came back.

Axel gave a pull to his cap and passed his hand over his eyes. Other scenes emerged from the past, but, as though they had never had any real life, they passed away again, colourless and nebulous, on the stream of time spent which with a dream-like rapidity flowed through his memory. Then he sought about among the women, the dancers and singers and expensive courtesans with whom, like others of his sort, he had had affairs of one kind and another. But as soon as he tried to draw near them in reminiscent emotion he found their kisses insipid compared with the kisses of the water that morning, and their bodies cold compared with the power of the demon who had sat unseen beside him at the card table with his incorporeal arms resting on his shoulders.

Next he tried the first days of the war. He saw the faces of many of his friends, now dead, transfigured and glowing with an inner light as though with kisses of invisible lips. He had seen it with envy at the time, for his soul felt nothing of this enchantment. He was a soldier of the Czar according to the tradition of his family; when the Czar went to war he did not hang back; he did what he could and what came along. He had no other reason than this for sitting where he was on the log floor of the trench, into which now the rising dawn wind precipitated rivulets of fine sand and pebbles, while he tried to master his apprehension at the thought of an untimely end.

When the moment came and the whistle blew, he climbed calmly out of the trench and strode with a heavy revolver in one hand and a riding switch in the other in front of his men towards the low, pale mounds of throwup earth which were all that could be seen of the German trenches. But before he reached the rusty wire, he was hit in the left arm by the first shot to be fired. It shattered his elbow and he fell senseless to the ground. It was not till nightfall that his batman, with the help of two or three more brave fellows, was able to bring him in, for the attack did not succeed in getting a footing in the German front line.

In due course Axel found himself in a hospital in St. Petersburg, and there he got to know the young and lovely Irina Feodorovna, who had volunteered as a nurse. It was there they fell in love with one another. Irina was the wife of Prince Oblonski, who at the outbreak of war had been sent on a diplomatic mission to French Headquarters where he still was. Not long after his departure she put her little son into the charge of a relative and had come to this hospital as a nurse.

At first they paid each other little attention, and indeed displayed a marked indifference hardly in keeping with the situation. But then they began to look at each other, and to listen when the other spoke, with an ever-deepening pleasure, and before long their eyes involuntarily met whenever they were together and lingered in a look of mutual tenderness. Axel had never encountered looks like these. They did not sadden or oppress him. Rather, they illumined his being with a peace which made it vast and still like a landscape beneath a wide sky. We live and are here, her two eyes said unceasingly as long as he gazed into them, and he felt that he saw the sky for the first time with the golden progress of the stars and that he had only heard of it until then without ever being able to believe in it. The word "eternal" now came often to his mind. He had encountered it with envious contempt in volumes of famous love-letters in his library, where many a lyrical passage and many a signature, and even the very kisses and embraces of the lovers were harnessed by this word to the motion of the planets. Now he knew its truth. It was nothing less than the indubitable experience of eternal life that met him in the eyes of his beloved and put him far beyond fear once for all.

Nevertheless, they made no confession, and nothing occurred which had the force of a confession until they were parted for the first time.

One evening, towards the end of June, Axel sat lost in a book with a lamp beside him. A large moth fluttered down from the lime trees in bloom outside the open window. It was a strange beast of a kind he could not remember having seen before—half bird, half moth, with a body nearly a finger's length swathed in light brown fur as soft as velvet, on which was folded a pair of tremulous and shimmering grey wings. It seemed to be ailing or injured, for it kept quite still on the spot where it landed after eddying down, and did not shrink from the cautious touch of Axel's finger. Carefully he put it on his hand, and now he saw that it had a face, round and feathered like an owl's, with a fiercely curved beak of the colour of an apple-pip, and a pair of large, lidless,

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wide-open eyes as black as jet. It was an earnest, valiant bird-face, like an eagle's or an eagle-faced man's, and Axel was lost in contemplation of it.

He was utterly convinced that this ghostlike creature was linked with the being of his beloved. She had sent it to him, or, at any rate, it was enclosed within the cycle of their love and was mutely aware of it.

He was tormented by the longing to make it an answer and to acknowledge its presence with love, but it had no means of appeasing his pain. The tears of a bliss he had never known before streamed down his face while he sat with this visitant from infinity on the palm of his hand and stammered out to it Irma's name.

"A friend has come to us, Princess," he said next morning when Irina came into his room, "a friend who loves us has come." He slipped a piece of paper carefully underneath the creature, which had stayed where he had put it the night before. "He is still alive, and who knows what he wants of us," he said seriously. "I should like to show him the love and honour he has shown us. But I don't know how it is to be done, and we shan't ever know either."

He looked up at her in perplexity and then gazed down again at the creature on his hand, which now began turning itself about with wavering movements of its feet and a tremulous fluttering of its wings. Irina bent slowly down, and abruptly, with a sound like a groan, he pressed his face against her hip and covered her hand with kisses. She stood and stared down at the crown of his head and a wild longing to bury her lips in his hair swept through her. But at once she felt as though a poison paralysed her and she could move only her hand. She turned it round beneath his lips and offered each finger in succession and at last the palm, which she closed over his mouth. She stayed like this for a long time. Then in silence she released herself and left the room with her head bent low to her breast.

That very day she made an excuse for resigning her duties at the hospital and escaped, as she thought, to her married sister's country house in Livonia without having seen Axel again. Not long after, Axel also left the hospital and got his discharge—for his arm was permanently crippled. He went back to his estate, which was at some distance from the one where Irina had taken refuge. She knew nothing of this; nor had he the least idea where she had gone.

It was October before they met again. Every year at this season Irma's brother-in-law used to have a big shoot in his woods and to invite all the landowners from far and near, who were fond of sport, to spend several weeks at his place. Axel was invited with the rest. He could only handle a gun with the help of his servant, but it was oblivion, not sport, he was in search of. On the evening of his arrival he entered the hall where the family and their guests were assembled and saw Irina in front of him. She swayed unsteadily and for a moment all the colour left her face, but she made no sign of recognition that any other could see and, after greeting him as she greeted the rest, turned away. But at dinner their eyes met, and hers, like a twin constellation in the pale heaven of her face, greeted him this time with a dark glow.

Now all turned out as she had feared and longed. Speechless and shivering with delight they lay that very night in each other's arms. Blissful days and nights followed, while in the sacred intoxication of those who truly love, they dared to make destiny their own. Their kisses and embraces had their source in a power that lies beyond all earths and heavens. It seemed that it made for them its one and only appearance in this world and had never been granted to mortals before. Thus the days of the shoot passed away and one early dawn the day of parting had come.

Axel's carriage waited in the courtyard and he sat by Irma's bed, ready to go and holding her hand once more in his. They had never, so far, said a word of the future, and Axel, as he kissed her hand, stammered out the brief words which were all that his utter conviction needed to say. But Irina sat with altered face, silent, a frown of stubbornness on her forehead. Suddenly she burst into tears and threw herself on his breast. Sobbing wildly, she said that for her son's sake she could never be his.

He sat mute and erect and stared in front of him. The tears streamed down her face while she went on to say in a voice which only confirmed her refusal that though their happiness was over, the terrible penalty of a life without him was not too high a price to pay for it. In spite of her agony she had wrung this resolve from herself. She gasped out her words with difficulty and dug her nails deeply into his arm. In a few days, she said, she was leaving with her son to join her husband in Paris.

Axel was silent with despair. At last he got up and bending again and again over her hand, he said, without looking at her, that for him life was over and all that remained was a slow death. He turned and left her; and she, blinded by uncontrollable tears, fell back on her pillows, and while she nodded her head to confirm the verdict,

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her arms were tremulously outstretched and her agony of grief seemed to give the lie to all her resolutions. They never saw one another again.

A few months later, as though anticipating what lay before him, Axel wrote her a letter:

"Ever since you made me realise," he wrote, "that we no longer counted for each other among the living, I have spent my days in a state of resigned indifference of which it would be difficult to give you an idea. I did not, my unforgettable love, come to your arms as a boy, yet, until I lay on your breast, I had never passed a day without fear. I do not mean fear of death, but, if I am not mistaken, fear of life, with which death is intertwined. I was always afraid of living without living, of dying without having lived. Now it is all behind me. Since you kissed me for the last time, wherever I turn it is always downhill. But when life has no more happiness in store it hides no unhappiness either. And so I live without dread while the world we know collapses round us. And perhaps that is the same as saying that I live no longer . . ."

As it happened, Irina did not receive this letter in Paris until long afterwards, and with it came the news of Axel's death. Shortly after he wrote it, the revolution broke out in Russia, and in Livonia as well the peasants and labourers rose against the landowners. Then the series of murderous riots began, which exterminated the nobility in those countries, and all classes of society connected with it.

The castle of Berrmann-Plehwe was one of the first to go up in flames. Axel had been warned by loyal peasants, but he replied with indifference and even contempt. Then one dark and rainy night the revolutionaries arrived in lorries. The gates were opened by treachery, but the first of them who tried to enter the inner courtyard received the fire of Axel's revolvers and the guns of two of his grooms who had remained faithful. The darkness and confusion were increased by a fire which broke out in the wings, and it was some while before the revolutionaries, two or three of whom fell dead in the court-yard, were able to carry out a concerted attack. After that it did not last long. Both grooms, taking too little thought of cover, fell together, shot through the head. Axel fired off all his cartridges and then retreated up the steps which alone gave access to the house, if the attackers meant to pursue him. By a still undamaged cellar passage which served as a store for disused furniture and empty barrels and bottles, he reached the stables through the back yard and outbuildings. There were only a few of the revolutionaries posted there with torches and shot-guns, and they probably mistook him for one of their own party, or for one of the treacherous inmates of the castle. Meanwhile, their companions in front of the house prepared for a final assault with a loud outburst of firing, not knowing that the enemy had retired.

Axel led the stallion he always rode out into the jumping ring by a fodder door at the back of the stables, and mounted. Nothing but a low railing separated him from the park and the forest. But the animal, though usually it obeyed the lightest touch on the rein or the least pressure of the knee, seemed suddenly crazed. Rearing up, it turned about in a circle and then danced sideways on all four feet and finally came to a stand with legs extended and teeth chattering as though bewitched. Thus it stood like a rock, front feet thrown forward, head pressed into its neck and held low between its knees, and neither whip nor spur could make it budge.

Axel threw away his riding switch and abruptly dismounted; then with a clap on the animal's neck which was lathered in sweat and foam, he walked slowly up to the insurgents. Gaping awkwardly, they collected round him, at a loss to know what to make of it. He gave himself up as the owner of the castle and told them to bring him to their leader.

That same night he was taken in a lorry to the neighbouring town, which was in the hands of the revolutionaries. They had turned the large cellar of a vodka distillery into a prison. Two armed men conducted him there at dawn. He found there a number of landowners and priests who had been brought in from the country round and were all in the same plight as himself. Some were wounded and bandaged with improvised bandages torn from their clothing; and some, anxious and alert, tried with a childish and pathetic amiability to make a joke of what was no joking matter, in the hope of extracting from their stolid or officious guards some favourable news of the fate that awaited them. There were others, however, who succeeded in preserving the dignity and calm which alone were in keeping with the situation; and one of these, an elderly priest with a bearded fallow face, now approached the new arrival very courteously and offered him the consolations of religion. The day ahead of them, he observed with a quiet smile, would afford little time for such matters.

Axel got up from the heap of faggots on which he had sunk down in his exhaustion and bowed politely. He thanked the priest for the well-meant attention, but said that as far as he was concerned no consolation was necessary, for he was in no distress either of body or mind. The priest conveyed by a gesture that Axel had

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misunderstood him; whereupon Axel explained by way of apology and with a certain embarrassment that for him—unlike the rest, no doubt, who had been brought together in such unhappy circumstances—nothing could happen that had not already happened long ago. He then very politely bowed again and begging that his fatigue might be his excuse sat down again on his heap of firewood. The priest looked at him in sorrowful perplexity and then with a bow of respectful consideration walked away. Shortly after, their new rulers summoned the prisoners before a court-martial, and here Axel witnessed a scene which was utterly incomprehensible to him. The trial was held in the chapel of the school close by, and the tribunal sat behind the barrier which on former occasions separated the pupils from the staff. Two of its members came from a company of refractory soldiers which had been stationed in the town, two more, who were apparently overwrought and over-excited, were drawn from a committee of revolutionaries, and the fifth was a cobbler who, on the strength of a dogmatical familiarity with revolutionary writings, dragged out the proceedings in a manner that greatly disgusted his colleagues, who were in favour of making short work of the business.

And now when one of the prisoners, the great landowner, Prince L., a stout man with a white moustache, suddenly threw himself on his knees before the tribunal begging for mercy, protesting his innocence and pleading the good-will of which he had given life-long proof, Axel broke loose from his guards and forced his way to the barrier and laid his hand on the shoulder of the kneeling man. "But, my dear Prince," he said, bending down close to his ear, "do you remember nothing? Does nothing come to your mind for which you are not glad here and now to pay the price?"

"No, no," wailed the prince. He raised his face swollen with blows and streaming with tears and caught hold of Axel round the knees. "My dearest Baron," he implored, "save me, save me, for my son's sake."

"Well then," Axel cried almost indignantly, and shook him as though to rouse him from a dream or a drunken state, "think of the night when you begot him or of the moment when you saw him for the first time."

"For the last time, for the last time, my precious, my beautiful Mischa," the old man howled, suddenly recollecting afresh the events of the past night. Then raising his hands he turned back to his fellow-prisoners to shew his son being beaten to death by the rifle butts of the rioters. Axel made a gesture of despair at this useless display, and went back to his place while the prince, still raving, was dragged out by the guards.

After a moment Axel was called forward and in a bored voice made a few casual replies to the questions he was asked. Then putting one hand over his eyes he called out: "Enough. Not another word. Now I wish to think."

From that moment he was silent, and no threat could elicit any answer to the questions they put him. The priest, whose life was saved by the accident that the cobbler recognised him as a past benefactor, related afterwards that the smile beneath the hand which veiled Axel's eyes was of unforgettable beauty, though he could give no explanation of his behaviour. He went on to say that when at midday Axel, with the rest of the prisoners, was stood against the wall of the school gymnasium and shot, he died with this smile still on his face.
