Severin Comes Home

Paul Alverdes

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I AM writing from a village inn at N., in Franconia. It is night and outside the rain is coming down in a constant murmur. I have had writing materials and a lamp brought up to my room and shall make a night of it. I brought Severin home to–day. He lies now where he wished to lie—in the green and sacred wilderness of the old grave–yard. There was something so extraordinary about the way he took leave of life that I feel compelled to tell you about it while it is fresh in my mind.

You remember that some time ago I travelled to W., in Switzerland to paint the portrait of a silk merchant there. On the way I went to see Severin who was in a Sanatorium high up in the mountains, where he was being treated for injuries received in the Flanders trenches. You know him from the drawings I used to make of him when I was a boy and from all I have told you about him. You know that we all loved him—all of our little group, I mean—but that no one really understood him. He did not, in any case, himself know what was going to come of him. He kept bees, he made telescopes, photographed spiders and beetles, and had at his home, in innumerable receptacles and glass cases, all kinds of insects which he was set upon taming. Then again he was always busy with various kinds of wood which he steeped and soaked by a secret process and then made lutes and violins on which he played strange music. We might have laughed at him for all this; but the intense earnestness with which he devoted himself to all his undertakings checked us, and many a night we sat with him among his breeding–boxes and varnish–pots, looked at the motions of the stars through his telescope and listened while he explained that they were spiritual beings; or declared that the morning wind which often found us still together when it came in at the slanting window of his attic room was a cosmic visitant. And though we understood nothing we dreamt much.

Later, for a few university terms, he studied in one school after another; had trouble over a twelve–year–old girl to whom he chivalrously devoted himself and for whose sake he made himself a laughing–stock; then suddenly left the university and for month after month lived alone in a cave in Deisterwald on mushrooms and the wild berries of the woods and the fishes which he was an adept at catching with his bare hand; and according to his own account he was on the track of many secrets. Not long after I made friends with him, the news came that his father, with whom he had fallen out, had lost his life in an accident while shooting, and he had to take charge of the estates, which were close to his retreat. Then came the war and he joined the army. He was then just twenty.

I remember the day when I went to say good–bye to him in his room at the cavalry barracks at W., on the Dutch frontier. It was in the first six months of the war and his squadron was leaving for the front, and I, who was four years younger than he, helped him to pack and turn out his cupboards, wearing an ancient uniform far too big for me which I had acquired only a week or ten days before. My heart swelled in my breast as I heard voices singing and bugles calling in the barrack yard, and saw all the fine young fellows in warlike array going quickly along the passages from room to room with a jingle of spurs and a clapping and rattling of iron and leather, carrying saddle–bags, coats and saddles, swinging carbines, flowers in their button–holes, flowers between their teeth, loud–voiced, slapping each other on the shoulder, pale beneath the tan of their faces, and many, too, with hands that were never still, and a step that betrayed their suspense—but all with the eyes of young eagles.

I myself could not stop talking. I gabbled on about triumphal arches and glorious victory and all the young women who would be clothed in white when we came home again in the spring at latest; and then there would not be one among them who would find it in her heart to resist any more.

But Severin said nothing. At last, with his eyes half closed and looking straight before him, as though he were trying to see into an infinite distance, he asked whether I did not know that the game was up, up long ago, and that we should return home broken? At that time such an idea seemed to me merely a joke. I told him to try his profound wisdom on someone else and asked him why he troubled, in that case, to get into the saddle at all. He buttoned his collar–slip, buckled his belt tight and clapped his cap on his head, still looking into the distance as before. Then he remarked that the part of Cassandra was all right for old maids; but that all who had broad shoulders must help prop up the walls. This was the last we saw of each other for that time. You know that I was taken prisoner by the Russians in the following winter.

And so it was seven years before I saw him again up there on a terrace above Bergen facing the mountains, and he held my hand and his face was a mask of grief and nothing else. When I could speak—for that last parting came back to me in all its force before I was aware and those seven years of exile and tribulation now past beat up again like a storm, blinding me and scattering the words as they formed on my lips—when at last I could speak he raised his hand with its snow–white and almost transparent nails and imposed silence.

"Seven years," he said after a moment. "Seven years. Don't tell me any news of home. And what news is there in any case but disaster! It has all been in vain."

We did not talk much that evening, and nothing we said concerned what I have to tell you here. We sat together looking across at the mountain which was suddenly smitten with the shooting rays of a sun breaking out at the last moment from behind clouds, and inflicting on it gaping wounds until breast and sides flowed with the tide of blood. Later it lay naked and gaunt like the corpse of a giant in the lurid light. An ice–cold wind got up and we went to bed.

The next day I talked to Severin about his return to Germany; for the doctor had told me that there was every reason to expect a complete recovery.

"Don't talk of it," he said, "I have had enough. I am waiting for the end, and I am sick of waiting any longer. I have had enough of living from one lie–begotten moment to the next."

"The doctor—" I began, but he raised his hand and drawing his chair close to mine he looked into my face and said: "I will tell you why there is no help for me. The reason of course is spiritual . . . or rather it is the affliction . . . ." Here he

paused and seemed to puzzle over something difficult. "My affliction," he went on at last and bent his head and laid his finger on my knee, "My affliction—time; and that is mortal."

I stared at him; he smiled a peculiar smile, screwed up his eyes and looked far away. Suddenly he pulled out his watch, tapped the glass with his finger and said: "It is here, you see; not inside me!" He put the watch to his ear, listened, nodded and let it fall again.

"I will ask you a question," he said after a moment. "The fact is I find plenty to think about up here. But I haven't got it clear yet where you have gone to, all of you. I mean the dead, of course, or rather——" and he let the watch swing to and fro between his knees like a pendulum. "Look here at each swing of the pendulum—where is it now or where has it gone?" He took up the watch and looked sadly into the distance as though he expected no answer.

"Where is it? " I said involuntarily. "Gone, my friend!" And what other answer could I have made?

"There you are," he replied quickly. "That's it. Gone. Quite right. Gone—gone—gone. That is just how my heart beats at night, and I am forced to lie still and listen as each beat devours the next. And then I realise of a sudden how it is with the earth. How it rages through infinity like the discharge of a bullet, second after second, always just one, single, golden, thundering unutterable second, and behind it streams the plague–flag of those that are done and wasted and consumed, and in the course of centuries there are as many of them as there are stars in the sky, but not a single one, not a single hour left that could ever be of any use or ever have life, but all of them rubbish and refuse for the sake of one crazy moment we call the present which for ever breeds with itself."

I did not know what to answer and did not see what he was getting to. He had spoken as though in anger and I scarcely knew him. Now I understand it all—the coil he had got into it and his wonderful release.

That evening I continued my journey in order to paint my silk merchant. It turned out to be a sickening job. He was a regular bourgeois who saw nothing in his mountains and lake but a refuge for himself and his possessions. During the sittings he tried to rub it into me that we had behaved infernally and still did—all of us, he maintained, who had taken part in the late war in Europe—but I tell you he meant us, for he spoke German, and was only too glad to tell me that no one expected anything of us now but the stench of graves and the wreck and ruin of an utterly criminal folly. They did well, he said, to keep their frontiers clean of us. Well—with a paint brush in my teeth from ear to ear, I could say little in reply; and I thought of Severin. In this way three months went by.

I had promised Severin I would go back to him when my job was done. I wanted, too, to spend a few weeks with my easel and my brown canvas and the snow and the ice–blue lakes in front of me and see what I could make of them. Then just before I set off I had a strange letter from him. He wrote that he would soon have to return home. He had had a call which he could not disregard. But, for the journey home, he needed the escort of a trusted friend, and he wished to ask me to do him that service. Every preparation was made, so that there would be little for me to do. What else he had to say he would say when we met. But there was no time to lose.

I was greatly surprised to see him at the station. He appeared to be in good spirits and laughingly threw his arms round me.

"Thank you for coming," he said. "But ask nothing and say nothing.

Everything is done and I feel fine." And putting his arm in mine he led me off.

The days that followed were very happy ones. His health seemed to be completely restored and he was just as I had known him years before. His eyes were frank, and, as he used to do in moments of confidence, he suddenly opened them wide for a second, with a glimpse of his heart, and then shut them again. But now when he suddenly looked at me in this way it was as though someone took me into a dark room with a curtained window and unexpectedly drew the curtain aside and gave me a fleeting glimpse of the blue sea outside. I don't say that his eyes were what is called expressive. They were simply clear, with a clarity which was beyond courage. It was infinity. Something entirely incomprehensible, my friend. I should like to paint it, but the task appals me, for how can I to put the sea into a face?

Well, one afternoon—we were sitting in the little cemetery where they bury those who lose their lives in the mountains and where one has a view right down the valleys—Severin began to talk openly. He was, as always during these days, living in memories, never tired of conjuring up old stories, all the wonderful days and nights in the country when, a band of five or six boys together, we wandered up and down Germany, passing the nights under canvas or in the open or in barns, adventuring up stream or down in barges, getting lifts in lorries, a gang of tramps and vagabonds, a bugbear or perhaps a temptation to orderly folk. He still remembered everything about our dead comrades, all the jokes and little adventures which I had long ago forgotten, and all they confided at night about the stars or their girls or dreams for the future of our race, when the stars gleamed through the smoke of the wood fire or the wind forced its way through the shingle roof of the loft and it was impossible to get to sleep in the cold straw. Of the war, which these old friendships had not survived, he said nothing—as though it were and must remain a mystery.

"Now you are the last," he said, "to keep count of it all."

I shook my head.

"Two lie in Flanders," I said, "one in Wallachia, one in Karst. Four of them."

"And one," he answered and again I saw the sea, "and one in Germany. Very soon now."

"A ghost, Severin," I cried.

"Call it a ghost," he said slowly and resolutely, "but the fact is, I die to–day."

I said nothing.

"They have shown themselves to me, all four of them, Gerhard, Vita, Manfred and Sebald," he went on. "It was not long after you were here the first time. Since then everything is different. I was still occupied with those ideas about seconds. I don't know whether you remember. It doesn't matter. Then one day at noon I went down the hillside there in the sun. I don't know how I got into the garden. It was a lovely green garden, with hanging willows and waving elders, luxuriant with grass and shrubs. There sat the four of them on a grass bank one beside the other, in their grey uniforms, caps on their heads and one in a helmet. They looked at me and I recognised them at once. They spoke and one said: 'Are you going to betray it all?' The second: 'It's all true, though.' The third: 'Well, you see us, don't you?' But Sebald only said my name and smiled. When I stepped forward to vindicate myself, everything vanished and there was no garden there at all. I went home after that and, since, I have thought a lot."

"Well?" I asked when he was silent.

"Well," he said, and made a big sweep with his arms as though he wished to confound earth and sky. "It is all living!" He stood up and took a handful of earth

from one of the grave–mounds, looked fixedly at it and let it trickle slowly through his fingers. "Eight days ago," he then said, "I was in the garden again. This time it was down there by the bridge behind the village just where the stream goes over the weir. The sun was shining. This time they were silent, but I can't tell you with what a strength and love they drew me to them. The third time I shall remain with them."

My dear friend, it was beyond me to make any common–sense reply to this either then or when he told me more as we went down the valley. As for death, he said, and how its realm was ordered, he knew nothing. But all the same, some thing had been made wonderfully clear to him. I can never forget his smile and his look as he asked me: "Don't you know how the apostles and prophets in the cathedrals stand on one another's shoulders? If one of them were dead, how could he bear up the other? You see—and so all is well. And now I will tell you the dream too. Every night when I am asleep a hand gently takes hold of mine to lead me. And I soar up and up through an immense cathedral. It is of immense height, for I see the arching roof set with gilded stars so far above me that it might really be the sky. And it rests on a forest of pillars of grey stone and I soar up through them. But I cannot see their bases, for there is a vast depth below me and they extend far above and below me, and are lost as though in night; and I cannot see their capitals either, which at a vast height carry the vault of the roof. But if I look closely I see that the pillars are made of the bodies of men, standing on each other's shoulders. There are always seven of them in a circle, with their backs turned to one another so that they face outwards. And on their shoulders stand seven others, and again seven others. Some wear crowns and some are bareheaded, some with hats and some with helmets and some with veils and some with long floating hair; some are whole, some are maimed—and many, many more. Some I know at once and recognise more and more whenever I turn again. And at first I took it all to be stone and sculpture. But they live. I don't know how I know this. For they neither move nor look nor speak. But the living heart can respond in the way it does with me there only to what is living. Once I asked my escort: 'Where am I?' and my invisible companion answered: 'You are at home.' Perhaps it was I myself who said this."

He stood still. We had reached his house. "Perhaps," he added, as he raised his head and looked full in my eyes, "perhaps you understand now why you are to bury me in Germany."

With this he gave me his hand, turned away and went slowly up the steps. I saw him for the last time that evening. When, three days later, I came down from the mountains where I had been painting, he was no longer alive. He had been found in a vineyard, sitting against a low wall beneath a vine. His face was happy and he was dead, a little blood on his lips. How he got there is not clear, for the vineyard is some hours distant below the village on a lonely hill–side, and it was well fenced and the gates locked.

A letter addressed to me was found among his papers. It gave directions for the final ceremony. He had had a zinc coffin made weeks before, and the necessary papers as well as a sum of money were all there ready. He had left no record of his visions. I set off at once with the body and came here where his family have ancient rights of burial among the peasants.

Postscript.— Day began to break and I heard the birds singing in the rain. I put out the lamp and went outside. Sounds of men and beasts came already from the village. But the burial ground was silent—except that now and again the morning wind shook the wet trees. and then there was a patter on the paths, like the sound of fruit falling. I went to the grave and drank water from the leaves of the trees, and buried my hands deep in the freshly heaped earth. I felt as though I drank eternal life, and as though thousands of hands grasped mine in the moist soil. I cannot tell you how happy I was.