
PRIVATE JOSEPH DELANEY

WE have had supper and my wife and I are sitting on our porch. It will not be dark for an hour yet and my wife has brought out some sewing. It is pink and full of lace and it is something she is making for a friend of hers who is going to be married soon.

All about us are our neighbors, sprinkling their lawns, or sitting on their porches, as we are doing. Occasionally my wife and I speak to some friend who passes, and bows, or stops to chat for a moment, but mostly we sit silent. . . .

I am still thinking of the book which I have just completed. I say to myself: "I have finished my book at last, but I wonder if I have done what I set out to do?"

Then I think: "This book started out to be a record of my own company, but I do not want it to be that, now. I want it to be a record of every company in every army. If its cast and its overtones are American, that is only because the American scene is the one that I know. With different names and different settings, the men of whom I have written could, as easily, be French, German, English or Russian for that matter."

I think: "I wish there were some way to take these

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stories and pin them to a huge wheel, each story hung on a different peg until the circle was completed. Then I would like to spin the wheel, faster and faster, until the things of which I have written took life and were recreated, and became part of the wheel, flowing toward each other, and into each other; blurring, and then blending together into a composite whole, an unending circle of pain. . . . That would be the picture of war. And the sound that the wheel made, and the sound that the men themselves made as they laughed, cried, cursed or prayed, would be, against the falling of walls, the rushing of bullets, the exploding of shells, the sound that war, itself, makes. . . ."

We had been silent for a long time, and then my wife spoke: "I'd take out the part about shooting prisoners."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because it is cruel and unjust to shoot defenseless men in cold blood. It may have been done a few times, I'm not denying that, but it isn't typical. It couldn't have happened often."

"Would a description of an air raid be better?" I asked. "Would that be more humane? Would that be more typical?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes. That happened many times, I understand."

"Is it crueler, then, for Captain Matlock to order

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prisoners shot, because he was merely stupid, and thought the circumstances warranted that, than for an aviator to bomb a town and kill harmless people who are not even fighting him?"

"That isn't as revolting as shooting prisoners," said my wife stubbornly. Then she added: "You see the aviator cannot see where his bomb strikes, or what it does, so he is not really responsible. But the men in your story had the prisoners actually before them. . . . It's not the same thing, at all."

I began to laugh with bitterness: "Possibly you are right," I said. "Possibly you have put into words something inescapable and true."

Then my wife reached out and took my hand. "You think I'm hard and unsympathetic," she said; "but I'm not, really, darling."

I sat silent after that, watching the Ellis children across the street shouting and laughing and playing on their lawn. It was early June and there was a faint breeze carrying with it the smell of spiced pinks and Cape jasmine. Gradually it got darker and my wife put away her sewing, yawned and rubbed her eyes. All about us were the green, well-kept lawns of our neighbors, with flowers in bloom and shrubs banked against walls and fences. The sight of this green, flowing smoothness made me think, somehow, of old battlefields which I have seen. . . .

PRIVATE ARCHIE LEMON

THE fourth day out was a Sunday, and that morning the Captain held services on deck. It was December, but the sun was shining on the surrounding water, its light reflected blindingly in the ship's brass. It was almost too warm, in the sunlight, for the heavy overcoats we wore. We stood there for a while, and then the services began. They were very simple: a hymn, a prayer and a short sermon. Then, at the end, a benediction in which the chaplain asked God to give our hearts courage, and our arms strength, to strike down our adversaries. He said we were not soldiers, in the accepted sense of the word: We were crusaders who had dedicated our lives and our souls to our country and to our God that the things we revere and hold sacred, might not perish.

When we got back to our quarters, we were all silent and thoughtful. We lay on our bunks thinking of the chaplain's words. Sylvester Keith, whose bunk was next to mine, gave me a cigarette, and lit one himself. "The chaplain has got the right dope," he said: "I mean about saving civilization and dedicating our lives to our country."

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You can always tell an old battlefield where many men have lost their lives. The next Spring the grass comes up greener and more luxuriant than on the surrounding countryside; the poppies are redder, the corn-flowers more blue. They grow over the field and down the sides of the shell holes and lean, almost touching, across the abandoned trenches in a mass of color that ripples all day in the direction that the wind blows. They take the pits and scars out of the torn land and make it a sweet, sloping surface again. Take a wood, now, or a ravine: In a year's time you could never guess the things which had taken place there.

I repeated my thoughts to my wife, but she said it was not difficult to understand about battlefields: The blood of the men killed on the field, and the bodies buried there, fertilize the ground and stimulate the growth of vegetation. That was all quite natural she said.

But I could not agree with this, too-simple, explanation: To me it has always seemed that God is so sickened with men, and their unending cruelty to each other, that he covers the places where they have been as quickly as possible.

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Bob Nalls had come up, and joined us. "I've been thinking over what he said about this being the war to end injustice. I don't mind getting killed to do a thing of that sort. I don't mind, since the people coming after me will live in happiness and peace. . . ."

Then we sat there smoking our cigarettes and thinking.

PRIVATE PHILIP CALHOUN

AL DE CASTRO and I sat crouched in a small shell hole, excited, watching the German artillerymen destroy Marigny. A shell-shocked dog was huddled against the community wash house. His tail curved under him, and the hair on his back was stiff and erect. Water ran from his eyes and his mouth slavered. Occasionally he would spin rapidly in a circle, and attempt to bite his tail; then he would stop, exhausted, and snap weakly to right and left; or occasionally he thrust his muzzle to the sky, and his jaws opened widely, but the sound of his voice was lost in the sound of the shelling.

At last little remained standing in the town except one wall of white limestone. On this wall was a religious print, in a gilt frame, showing a crown of thorns and a bleeding heart from which flames ascended; while beside it, on a wooden peg, hung a peasant's shapeless coat. I lay on my belly and stared at the wall. . . . The shells fell faster and the frightened dog began again to spin and chase his tail. The white wall trembled and a few stones fell, and when I looked up again, the coat had slipped from its peg and lay in the dust like a sprawling,

PRIVATE EDWARD ROMANO

I WAS out on observation post near Hill 44 and it was raining. There was no wind and the rain fell straight down. To the north there were flashes, like heat lightning, along the horizon, and the low growling of distant batteries. As I crouched in the trench, wet to the skin and shivering with cold, I thought: "It's quiet here to-night, but up to the north terrible things are happening: There, at this instant, men are being torn to pieces, or stabbed to death with bayonets."

A Very light went up suddenly, to break in the sky with a faint kiss, and against its flare I saw the intricate intrenchments of rusting barbed wire. I saw, too, the slow rain, gleaming like a crystal against the light, and falling in dead, unslanted lines to the field. I lay huddled and trembling in the shallow trench, my rifle pressed against my body. . . . The rain was washing up bodies of men buried hastily; there was an odor of decay in the air. . . .

I saw a man walking toward me, upright and unafraid. His feet were bare and his beautiful hair was long. I raised my rifle to kill him, but when I saw it was Christ, I lowered it again. "Would you have hurt me?"

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dead bat. . . . Then, suddenly, the shelling stopped, and the silence that followed was terrible. The dog sniffed the air. He lifted his voice and howled.

I got up, then, and put on my pack and a moment later Al stood beside me. For a moment we both looked at the white wall, still standing, and at the sacred picture untouched in its place.

Al walked over to the wall and stood regarding it curiously: "Why should that one wall remain?" he asked. "Why should it alone be spared? . . ."

Then as he stood there adjusting his pack, and fumbling with the rusty catch of his cartridge belt, there came a tearing sound, and a sharp report; and down fell the wall in a cloud of dust, smothering the heart from which flames were ascending, and crushing him to death with its weight.

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he asked sadly. I said yes, and began to curse: "You ought to be ashamed of yourself to let this go on!—You ought to be ashamed! . . ."

But he lifted his arms to the sodden field, to the tangled wire, to the charred trees like teeth in a fleshless jaw. "Tell me what to do," he said. "Tell me what to do, if you know! . . ." It was then that I began to cry, and Christ cried, too, our tears flowing with the slow rain.

At twelve o'clock my relief came. It was Ollie Teclaw, and I wanted to tell him what I had seen, but I knew that he would only laugh at me.

AT first I used to listen to Les Yawfitz and that fellow Nallett argue in the bunk house. They'd been to college, and they could talk on any subject that came up. But mostly they talked about war and how it was brought about by moneyed interests for its own selfish ends. They laugh at the idea that idealism or love of country had anything to do with war. It is brutal and degrading, they say, and fools who fight are pawns shoved about to serve the interest of others.

For a while I listened to them, and tried to argue the thing out in my mind. Then I quit thinking about it. If the things they say are really true, I don't want to know it. I'd go crazy and shoot myself, if I thought those things were true. . . . Unless a man does feel like that, I can't understand how he would be willing—how he would permit himself to—

So when they start talking now, I get up and leave the bunk house, or turn over to the wall and cover up my ears.

PRIVATE WILLIAM NUGENT

THE warden asked me again if I wouldn't see the chaplain. "What the hell do I want to see him for?" I asked. "Say, listen to me—you'd better keep that bird out of here, if you don't want to get him told! If there's anything I hate worse than cops, it's preachers!" I said.

Everybody in the House was listening to me telling the warden. "I'm a tough baby," I said. "I bumped that cop off. Sure I did. I never denied that at the trial, did I? . . . It wasn't the first one, either. I'd bump off a dozen more, right now, if I had a chance. . . . Tell the chaplain that for me, will you? . . ."

Then the warden went away and after a while my cell door opened and the chaplain come in. He had a Bible in his hand with a purple ribbon to mark the place. He come in softly and closed the door behind him, a couple of guards standing outside to see I didn't harm him none.

"Repent, my son, and give your soul to God! Repent and be saved before it is too late!"

"Get out of here!" I said. "Get out! I don't want to have nothing to do with you!"

"You have sinned, my son," he said. "You have sinned

DID you ever stand alone on a quiet night while the world trembled to the vibration of guns, and watch soundless light touch the horizon in unexpected places? Did you see a moon rise behind poplars and watch it climb upward, limb by laced limb, until it swung clear of the dead branches and into a quiet sky? . . . I have seen these things, and I tell you they are beautiful.

Then there are rockets, Very lights and flares (white, golden or green) that rise indolently to the air in long curves. Sometimes the rockets puff softly before your eyes into impersonal light that drifts down the wind; and sometimes they become stars of warm and beautiful coloring that burn purely for a moment, and expire before you can mark the instant of their annihilation.

I never see flares of Very lights floating over the trenches that I do not think of time and infinity, and the Creator of the universe; and that this war, and my despair, are, in His sight, as meaningless, and, no doubt, as remote as are the ascending and falling rockets to my finite mind.

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in the sight of Almighty God. . . . 'Thou shalt not kill!'—Those are the words of our blessed Lord. . . ."

"Listen," I said. "Don't pull that stuff on me, or I'll laugh in your face. I'm wise to how things are done. . . . Sure I killed that cop," I said. "I hate cops! Something burns me up and I get dizzy every time I see one. I bumped that cop, all right. Why not? . . . Who the hell are cops to make a man do things he don't want to do? . . . Say, let me tell you something about a big job I pulled once when I was in the army. I was a young fellow then, and I believed all the holoney you're talking now. I believed all that. . . . Well, anyway, we took a bunch of prisoners one day. It was too much trouble to send 'em back to the rear, so the cop of my outfit made us take 'em into a ditch, line 'em up and shoot 'em. Then, a week later when we were back in rest billets, he lined the company up and made us all go to church to listen to a bird like you talk baloney. . . ."

"My son," said the chaplain, "this is the last day of your life. Can't you realize that? Won't you let me help you? . . ."

"Get out of here," I said, and began to curse the chaplain with every word I knew. "You get out of here! If there's anything I hate worse than cops, it's preachers! . . . You get out!"

The preacher closed his Bible, and the guards opened

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the door. "I guess I got that bastard told!" I said; "I guess I blew his ears down for him!"

The other boys in the House began to beat on the sides of their cells. "That's telling him, kid!" they said; "that's telling him!" Then I sat down on the side of my bunk and waited for them to come in and slit my pants and shave my head.

PRIVATE COLIN URQUHART

I SAW much during my thirty years as a professional soldier, and I have watched the reactions of many men to pain, hunger and death, but all I have learned is that no two men react alike, and that no one man comes through the experience unchanged. I have never ceased to wonder at the thing we call human nature, with its times of beauty and its times of filthiness, or at the level of calm stupidity that lies in between the two.

I have no theories and no remedies to offer. All I know, surely, is that there should be a law, in the name of humanity, making mandatory the execution of every soldier who has served on the front and managed to escape death there. The passage of such a law is impossible, of course: For Christian people who pray in their churches for the destruction of their enemies, and glorify the barbarity of their soldiers in bronze—those very people would call the measure cruel and uncivilized, and rush to the polls to defeat it.