

Erich Remarque - All Quiet On The Western Front

ONE

We are at rest five miles behind the front. Yesterday we were relieved, and now our bellies are full of beef and haricot beans. We are satisfied and at peace. Each man has another mess-tin full for the evening; and, what is more, there is a double ration of sausage and bread. That puts a man in fine trim. We have not had such luck as this for a long time. The cook with his carrot head is begging us to eat; he beckons with his ladle to every one that passes, and spoons him out a great dollop. He does not see how he can empty his stew-pot in time for coffee. Tjaden and Müller have produced two washbasins and had them filled up to the brim as a reserve. In Tjaden this is voracity, in Müller it is foresight. Where Tjaden puts it all is a mystery, for he is and always will be as thin as a rake. What's more important still is the issue of a double ration of smokes. Ten cigars, twenty cigarettes, and two quids of chew per man; now that is decent. I have exchanged my chewing tobacco with Katczinsky for his cigarettes, which means I have forty altogether. That's enough for a day.

It is true we have no right to this windfall. The Prussian is not so generous. We have only a miscalculation to thank for it. Fourteen days ago we had to go up and relieve the front line. It was fairly quiet on our sector, so the quartermaster who remained in the rear had requisitioned the usual quantity

of rations and provided for the full company of one hundred and fifty men. But on the last day an astonishing number of English heavies opened up on us with high-explosive, drumming ceaselessly on our position, so that we suffered severely and came back only eighty strong.

Last night we moved back and settled down to get a good sleep for once: Kaczinsky is right when he says it would not be such a bad war if only one could get a little more sleep. In the line we have had next to none, and fourteen days is a long time at one stretch.

It was noon before the first of us crawled out of our quarters. Half an hour later every man had his mess-tin and we gathered at the cookhouse, which smelt greasy and nourishing. At the head of the queue of course were the hungriest-little Albert Kropp, the clearest thinker among us and therefore only a lance-corporal; Müller, who still carries his school textbooks with him, dreams of examinations, and during a bombardment mutters propositions in physics; Leer, who wears a full beard and has a preference for the girls from officers' brothels. He swears that they are obliged by an army order to wear silk chemises and to bathe before entertaining guests of the rank of captain and upwards. And as the fourth, myself, Paul Baumer. And four are nineteen years of age, and all four joined up from the same class as volunteers for the war.

Close behind us were our friends: Tjaden, a skinny locksmith of our own age, the biggest eater of the company. He sits down to eat as thin as a grasshopper and gets up as big as a bug in the family way; Haie Westhus, of the same age, a peat-digger, who can easily hold a ration-loaf in his hand and say: Guess what I've got in my fist; then Detering, a peasant, who

thinks of nothing but his farm-yard and his wife; and finally Stanislaus Katczinsky, the leader of our group, shrewd, cunning, and hard-bitten, forty years of age, with a face of the soil, blue eyes, bent shoulders, and a remarkable nose for dirty weather, good food, and soft jobs.

Our gang formed the head of the queue before the cook-house. We were growing impatient, for the cook paid no attention to us. Finally Katczinsky called to him: "Say, Heinrich, open up the soupkitchen.

Anyone can see the beans are done."

He shook his head sleepily: "You must all be there first." Tjaden grinned: "We are all here."

The sergeant-cook still took no notice. "That may do for you," he said.

"But where are the others?"

"They won't be fed by you to-day. They're either in the dressing-station or pushing up daisies." The cook was quite disconcerted as the facts dawned

on him. He was staggered. "And I have cooked for one hundred and fifty men--"

Kropp poked him in the ribs. "Then for once we'll have enough. Come on, begin!"

Suddenly a vision came over Tjaden. His sharp, mousy features began to shine, his eyes grew small with cunning, his jaws twitched, and he whispered hoarsely: "Man! then you've got bread for one hundred and fifty men too, eh?"

The sergeant-cook nodded absent-minded, and bewildered.

Tjaden seized him by the tunic. "And sausage?"

Ginger nodded again.

Tjaden's chaps quivered. "Tobacco too?"

"Yes, everything."

Tjaden beamed: "What a bean-feast! That's all for us! Each man gets- wait a bit-yes, practically two issues."

Then Ginger stirred himself and said: "That won't do."

We got excited and began to crowd around.

"Why won't that do, you old carrot?" demanded Katczinsky.

"Eighty men can't have what is meant for a hundred and fifty."

"We'll soon show you," growled Müller.

"I don't care about the stew, but I can only issue rations for eighty men," persisted Ginger.

Kaczinsky got angry. "You might be generous for once. You haven't drawn food for eighty men. You've drawn it for the Second Company. Good. Let's have it then. We are the Second Company." We began to jostle the fellow. No one felt kindly toward him, for it was his fault that the food often came up to us in the line too late and cold. Under shellfire he wouldn't bring his kitchen up near enough, so that our soup-carriers had to go much farther than those of the other companies. Now Bulcke of the First Company is a much better fellow. He is as fat as a hamster in winter, but he trundles his pots when it comes to that right up to the very front-line. We were in just the right mood, and there would certainly have been a dust-up if our company commander had not appeared. He informed himself of the dispute, and only remarked: "Yes, we did have heavy losses yesterday." He glanced into the dixie. "The beans look good." Ginger nodded. "Cooked with meat and fat." The lieutenant looked at us. He knew what we were thinking. And he knew many other things too, because he came to the company as a non-com, and was promoted from the ranks. He lifted the lid from the dixie again and sniffed. Then passing on he said: "Bring me a plate full. Serve out all the rations. We can do with them." Ginger looked sheepish as Tjaden danced round him. "It doesn't cost you anything! Anyone would think the quartermaster's store belonged to him! And now get on with it, you old blubber-sticker, and don't you miscount either."

"You be hanged!" spat out Ginger. When things get beyond him he throws up the sponge altogether; he just goes to pieces. And as if to show that all things were equal to him, of his own free will he issued in addition half a pound of synthetic honey to each man.

To-day is wonderfully good. The mail has come, and almost every man has a few letters and papers. We stroll over to the meadow behind the billets. Kropp has the round lid of a margarine tub under his arm. On the right side of the meadow a large common latrine has been built, a roofed and durable construction. But that is for recruits who as yet have not learned how to make the most of whatever comes their way. We want something better. Scattered about everywhere there are separate, individual boxes for the same purpose. They are square, neat boxes with wooden sides all round, and have unimpeachably satisfactory seats. On the sides are hand grips enabling one to shift them about.

We move three together in a ring and sit down comfortably. And it will be two hours before we get up again.

I well remembered how embarrassed we were as recruits in barracks when we had to use the general latrine. There were no doors and twenty men sat side by side as in a railway carriage, so that they could be reviewed all at one glance, for soldiers must always be under supervision. Since then we have learned better than to be shy about such trifling immodesties. In time things far worse than that came easy to us. Here in the open air though, the business is entirely a pleasure. I no longer understand why we should always have shied at these things before. They are, in fact, just as natural as eating and drinking. We might perhaps have paid no particular attention to them had they not figured so large in our experience, nor been such novelties to our minds-to the old hands they had long been a mere matter of course.

The soldier is on friendlier terms than other men with his stomach and intestines. Three-quarters of his vocabulary is derived from these regions, and they give an intimate flavour to expressions of his greatest joy as well as of his deepest indignation. It is impossible to express oneself in any other way so clearly and pithily. Our families and our teachers will be shocked when we go home, but here it is the universal language.

Enforced publicity has in our eyes restored the character of complete innocence to all these things. More than that, they are so much a matter of course that their comfortable performance is fully as much enjoyed as the playing of a safe top running flush. Not for nothing was the word "latrinerumour" invented; these places are the regimental gossip-shops and common-rooms.

We feel ourselves for the time being better off than in any palatial white-tiled "convenience." There it can only be hygienic; here it is beautiful. These are wonderfully care-free hours. Over us is the blue sky. On the horizon float the bright yellow, sunlit observation-balloons, and the many little white clouds of the anti-aircraft shells. Often they rise in a sheaf as they follow after an airman. We hear the muffled rumble of the front only as very distant thunder, bumble-bees droning by quite down it. Around us stretches the flowery meadow. The grasses sway their tall spears; the white butterflies flutter around and float on the soft warm wind of the late summer. We read letters and newspapers and smoke. We take off our caps and lay them down beside us. The wind plays with our hair; it plays with our words and thoughts. The three boxes stand in the midst of the glowing, red field-poppies. We set the lid of the margarine tub on our knees and so have a good table for a game of skat. Kropp has the cards with him. After every misare ouverte we have a round of nap. One could sit like this for ever. The notes of an accordion float across from the billets. Often we lay aside the cards and look about us. One of us will say: "Well, boys...." Or "It

was a near thing that time...." And for a moment we fall silent. There is in each of us a feeling of constraint. We are all sensible of it; it needs no words to communicate it. It might easily have happened that we should not be sitting here on our boxes to-day; it came damn near to that. And so everything is new and brave, red poppies and good food, cigarettes and summer breeze. Kropp asks: "Anyone seen Kemmerich lately?"

"He's up at St. Joseph's," I tell him.

Müller explains that he has a flesh wound in his thigh; a good blighty.

We decide to go and see him this afternoon.

Kropp pulls out a letter. "Kantorek sends you all his best wishes." We laugh. Müller throws his cigarette away and says: "I wish he was here."

Kantorek had been our schoolmaster, a stern little man in a grey tailcoat, with a face like a shrew mouse. He was about the same size as Corporal Himmelstoss, the "terror of Klosterberg." It is very queer that the unhappiness of the world is so often brought on by small men. They are so much more energetic and uncompromising than the big fellows. I have always taken good care to keep out of sections with small company commanders. They are mostly confounded little martinets.

During drill-time Kantorek gave us long lectures until the whole of our class went, under his shepherding, to the District Commandant and volunteered. I can see him now, as he used to glare at us through his spectacles and say in a moving voice: "Won't you join up, Comrades?" These teachers always carry their feelings ready in their waistcoat pockets, and trot them out by the hour. But we didn't think of that then. There was, indeed, one of us who hesitated and did not want to fall into line. That was Joseph Behm, a plump, homely fellow. But he did allow himself to be persuaded, otherwise he would have been ostracised. And perhaps more of us thought as he did, but no one could very well stand out, because at that time even one's parents were ready with the word "coward"; no one had the vaguest idea what we were in for. The wisest were just the poor and simple people. They knew the war to be a misfortune, whereas those who were better off, and should have been able to see more clearly what the consequences would be, were beside themselves with joy. Katczinsky said that was a result of their upbringing. It made them stupid. And what Kat said, he had thought about.

Strange to say, Behm was one of the first to fall. He got hit in the eye during an attack, and we left him lying for dead. We couldn't bring him with us, because we had to come back helter-skelter. In the afternoon suddenly we heard him call, and saw him crawling about in No Man's Land. He had only been knocked unconscious. Because he could not see, and was mad with pain, he failed to keep under cover, and so was shot down before anyone could go and fetch him in.

Naturally we couldn't blame Kantorek for this. Where would the world be if one brought every man to book? There were thousands of Kantoreks, all of