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I

OUT OF NO MAN'S LAND

On the muddy verge of a shallow little pool the man lay prone and still, as still as those poor dead whose broken bodies rested all about him, where they had fallen, months or days, hours or weeks ago, in those grim contests which the quick were wont insensately to wage for a few charnel yards of that debatable ground.

Alone of all that awful company this man lived and, though he ached with the misery of hunger and cold and rain-drenched garments, was unharmed.

Ever since nightfall and a brisk skirmish had made practicable an undetected escape through the German lines, he had been in the open, alternately creeping toward the British trenches under cover of darkness and resting in deathlike immobility, as he now rested, while pistol-lights and star-shells flamed overhead, flooding the night with ghastly glare and disclosing in pitiless detail that two-hundred-yard ribbon of earth, littered with indescribable abominations, which set apart the combatants. When this happened, the living had no other choice than to ape the dead, lest the least movement, detected by eyes that peered without rest through loopholes in the sandbag parapets, invite a bullet's blow.

Now it was midnight, and lights were flaring less frequently, even as rifle-fire had grown more intermittent ... as if many waters might quench out hate in the heart of man!

For it was raining hard—a dogged, dreary downpour drilling through a heavy atmosphere whose enervation was like the oppression of some malign and inexorable incubus; its incessant crepitation resembling the mutter of a weary, sullen drum, dwarfing to insignificance the stuttering of machine-guns remote in the northward, dominating even a dull thunder of cannonading somewhere down the far horizon; lowering a vast and shimmering curtain of

slender lances, steel-bright, close-ranked, between the trenches and over all that weary land. Thus had it rained since noon, and thus—for want of any hint of slackening—it might rain for another twelve hours, or eighteen, or twenty-four....

The star-rocket, whose rays had transfixed him beside the pool, paled and winked out in mid-air, and for several minutes unbroken darkness obtained while, on hands and knees, the man crept on toward that gap in the British barbed-wire entanglements which he had marked down ere daylight waned, shaping a tolerably straight course despite frequent detours to avoid the unspeakable. Only once was his progress interrupted—when straining senses apprised him that a British patrol was taking advantage of the false truce to reconnoitre toward the enemy lines, its approach betrayed by a nearing *squash* of furtive feet in the boggy earth, the rasp of constrained respiration, a muttered curse when someone slipped and narrowly escaped a fall, the edged hiss of an officer's whisper reprimanding the offender. Incontinently he who crawled dropped flat to the greasy mud and lay moveless.

Almost at the same instant, warned by a trail of sparks rising in a long arc from the German trenches, the soldiers imitated his action, and, as long as those triple stars shone in the murk, made themselves one with him and the heedless dead. Two lay so close beside him that the man could have touched either by moving a hand a mere six inches; he was at pains to do nothing of the sort; he was sedulous to clench his teeth against their chattering, even to hold his breath, and regretted that he might not mute the thumping of his heart. Nor dared he stir until, the lights fading out, the patrol rose and skulked onward.

Thereafter his movements were less stealthy; with a detachment of their own abroad in No Man's Land, the British would refrain from shooting at shadows. One had now to fear only German bullets in event the patrol were discovered.

Rising, the man slipped and stumbled on in semi-crouching posture, ready to flatten to earth as soon as any one of his many over-shoulder glances detected another sky-spearing flight of sparks. But this necessity he was spared; no more lights were discharged before he groped through the wires to the parapet, with almost uncanny

good luck, finding the very spot where the British had come over the top, indicated by protruding uprights of a rough wooden scaling ladder.

As he turned, felt with a foot for the uppermost rung, and began to descend, he was saluted by a voice hoarse with exposure, from the black bowels of the trench:

"Blimy! but ye're back in a 'urry! Wot's up? Forget to put perfume on yer pocket-'andkerchief – or wot?"

The man's response, if he made any, was lost in a heavy splash as his feet slipped on the slimy rungs, delivering him precipitately into a knee-deep stream of foul water which moved sluggishly through the trench like the current of a half-choked sewer—a circumstance which neither suprised him nor added to his physical discomfort, who could be no more wet or defiled than he had been.

Floundering to a foothold, he cast about vainly for a clue to the other's whereabouts; for if the night was thick in the open, here in the trench its density was as that of the pit; the man could distinguish positively nothing more than a pallid rift where the walls opened overhead.

"Well, sullen, w'ere's yer manners? Carn't yer answer a civil question?"

Turning toward the speaker, the man replied in good if rather carefully enunciated English:

"I am not of your comrades. I am come from the enemy trenches."

"The 'ell yer are! 'Ands up!"

The muzzle of a rifle prodded the man's stomach. Obediently he lifted both hands above his head. A thought later, he was half blinded by the sudden spot-light of an electric flash-lamp.

"Deserter, eh? You kamerad – wot?"

"Kamerad!" the man echoed with an accent of contempt. "I am no German—I am French. I have come through the Boche lines to-night with important information which I desire to communicate forthwith to your commanding officer."

"Strike me!" his catechist breathed, skeptical.

There was a new sound of splashing in the trench. A third voice chimed in:

"Ello? Wot's all the row abaht?"

"Step up and tike a look for yerself. 'Ere's a blighter wot sez 'e's com from the Germ trenches with important information for the O.C."

"Bloody liar," the newcomer commented dispassionately. "Mind yer eye. Likely it's just another pl'yful little trick of the giddy Boche. 'Ere you!" The splashing drew nearer. "Wot's yer gime? Speak up if yer don't want a bullet through yer in'ards."

"I play no game," the man said patiently. "I am unarmed—your prisoner, if you like."

"I like, all right. Mike yer mind easy abaht that. But wot's all this 'important information'?"

"I shall divulge that only to the proper authorities. Be good enough to conduct me to your commanding officer without more delay."

"Wot do yer mike of 'im, corp'ril?" the first soldier enquired. "'Ow abaht an inch or two o' the bay'net to loosen 'is tongue?"

After a moment's hesitation in perplexed silence, the corporal took the flash-lamp from the private and with its beam raked the prisoner from head to foot, gaining little enlightenment from this review of a tall, spare figure clothed in the familiar gray overcoat of the German private—its face a mere mask of mud through which shone eyes of singular brilliance and steadiness, the eyes of a man of intelligence, determination, and courage.

"Keep yer 'ands 'igh," the corporal advised curtly. "Ginger, you search 'im."

Propping his rifle against the wall of the trench, its butt on the firing-step just out of water, the private proceeded painstakingly to examine the person of the prisoner; in course of which process he unbuttoned and threw open the gray overcoat, exposing a shapeless tunic and trousers of shoddy drab stuff.

"E 'asn't got no arms—'e 'asn't got nothink, not so much as 'is blinkin' latch-key."

"Very good. Get back on yer post. I'll tike charge o' this one."

Grounding his own rifle, the corporal fixed its bayonet, then employed it in a gesture of unpleasant significance.

"'Bout fice," he ordered. "March. Yer can drop yer 'ands—but don't go forgettin' I'm right 'ere be'ind yer."

In silence the prisoner obeyed, wading down the flooded trench, the spot-light playing on his back, striking sullen gleams from the inky water that swirled about his knees, and disclosing glimpses of coated figures stationed at regular intervals along the firing-step, faces steadfast to loopholes in the parapet.

Now and again they passed narrow rifts in the walls of the trench, entrances to dugouts betrayed by glimmers of candle-light through the cracks of makeshift doors or the coarse mesh of gunny-sack curtains.

From one of these, at the corporal's summons, a sleepy subaltern stumbled to attend ungraciously to his subordinate's report, and promptly ordered the prisoner taken on to the regimental headquarters behind the lines.

A little farther on captive and captor turned off into a narrow and tortuous communication trench. Thereafter for upward of ten minutes they threaded a labyrinth of deep, constricted, reeking ditches, with so little to differentiate one from another that the prisoner wondered at the sure sense of direction which enabled the corporal to find his way without mis-step, with the added handicap of the abysmal darkness. Then, of a sudden, the sides of the trench shelved sharply downward, and the two debouched into a broad, open field. Here many men lay sleeping, with only waterproof sheets for protection from that bitter deluge which whipped the earth into an ankle-deep lake of slimy ooze and lent keener accent to the abiding stench of filth and decomposing flesh. A slight hillock stood between this field and the firing-line—where now lively fusillades were being exchanged—its profile crowned with a spectral rank of shell-shattered poplars sharply silhouetted against a sky in which star-shells and Verey lights flowered like blooms of hell.

Here the corporal abruptly commanded his prisoner to halt and himself paused and stood stiffly at attention, saluting a group of three officers who were approaching with the evident intention of entering the trench. One of these loosed upon the pair the flash of a pocket lamp. At sight of the gray overcoat all three stopped short.

A voice with the intonation of habitual command enquired: "What have we here?"

The corporal replied: "A prisoner, sir—sez 'e's French—come across the open to-night with important information—so 'e sez."

The spot-light picked out the prisoner's face. The officer addressed him directly.

"What is your name, my man?"

"That," said the prisoner, "is something which—like my intelligence—I should prefer to communicate privately."

With a startled gesture the officer took a step forward and peered intently into that mud-smeared countenance.

"I seem to know your voice," he said in a speculative tone.

"You should," the prisoner returned.

"Gentlemen," said the officer to his companions, "you may continue your rounds. Corporal, follow me with your prisoner."

He swung round and slopped off heavily through the mud of the open field.

Behind them the sound of firing in the forward trenches swelled to an uproar augmented by the shrewish chattering of machine-guns. Then a battery hidden somewhere in the blackness in front of them came into action, barking viciously. Shells whined hungrily overhead. The prisoner glanced back: the maimed poplars stood out stark against a sky washed with wave after wave of infernal light....

Some time later he was conscious of a cobbled way beneath his sodden footgear. They were entering the outskirts of a ruined village. On either hand fragments of walls reared up with sashless windows and gaping doors like death masks of mad folk stricken in paroxysm.

Within one doorway a dim light burned; through it the officer made his way, prisoner and corporal at his heels, passing a sentry, then descending a flight of crazy wooden steps to a dank and gloomy cellar, stone-walled and vaulted. In the middle of the cellar stood a broad table at which an orderly sat writing by the light of two candles stuck in the necks of empty bottles. At another table, in a corner, a sergeant and an operator of the Signal Corps were busy with field telephone and telegraph instruments. On a meagre bed of damp and mouldy straw, against the farther wall, several men, orderlies and subalterns, rested in stertorous slumbers. Despite the cold the atmosphere was a reek of tobacco smoke, sweat, and steam from wet clothing.

The man at the centre table rose and saluted, offering the commanding officer a sheaf of scribbled messages and reports. Taking the chair thus vacated, the officer ran an eye over the papers, issued several orders inspired by them, then turned attention to the prisoner.

"You may return to your post, corporal."

The corporal executed a smart about-face and clumped up the steps. In answer to the officer's steadfast gaze the prisoner stepped forward and confronted him across the table.

"Who are you?"

"My name," said the prisoner, after looking around to make sure that none of the other tenants of the cellar was within earshot, "is Lanyard – Michael Lanyard."

"The Lone Wolf!"

Involuntarily the officer jumped up, almost overturning his chair.

"That same," the prisoner affirmed, adding with a grimace of bemisrched and emaciated features that was meant for a smile – "General Wertheimer."

"Wertheimer is not my name."

"I am aware of that. I uttered it merely to confirm my identity to you; it is the only name I ever knew you by in the old days, when you were in the British Secret Service and I a famous thief with a price upon my head, when you and I played hide and seek across

half Europe and back again—in the days of Troyon's and 'the Pack,' the days of De Morbihan and Popinot and...."

"Ekstrom," the officer supplied as the prisoner hesitated oddly.

"And Ekstrom," the other agreed.

There was a little silence between the two; then the officer mused aloud:

"All dead!"

"All ... but one."

The officer looked up sharply. "Which—?"

"The last-named."

"Ekstrom? But we saw him die! You yourself fired the shot that—"

"It was not Ekstrom. Trust that one not to imperil his precious carcase when he could find an underling to run the risk for him! I tell you I have seen Ekstrom within this last month, alive and serving the Fatherland as the genius of that system of espionage which keeps the enemy advised of your every move, down to the least considerable—that system which makes it possible for the Boche to greet every regiment by name when it moves up to serve its time in your advanced trenches."

"You amaze me!"

"I shall convince you; I bring intelligence which will enable you to tear apart this web of treason within your own lines and...."

Lanyard's voice broke. The officer remarked that he was trembling—trembling so violently that to support himself he must grip the edge of the table with both hands.

"You are wounded?"

"No—but cold to my very marrow, and faint with hunger. Even the German soldiers are on starvation rations, now; the civilians are worse off; and I—I have been over there for years, a spy, a hunted thing, subsisting as casually as a sparrow!"

"Sit down. Orderly!"

And there was no more talk between these two for a time. Not only did the officer refuse to hear another word before Lanyard had gorged his fill of food and drink, but an exigent communication from the front, transmitted through the trench telephone system, diverted his attention temporarily.

Gnawing ravenously at bread and meat, Lanyard watched curiously the scenes in the cellar, following, as best he might, the tides of combat; gathering that German resentment of a British bombing enterprise (doubtless the work of that same squad which had stolen past him in the gloom of No Man's Land) had developed into a violent attempt to storm the forward trenches. In these a desperate struggle was taking place. Reinforcements were imperatively wanted.

Activities at the signallers' table became feverish; the commanding officer stood over it, reading incoming messages as they were jotted down and taking such action thereupon as his judgment dictated. Orderlies, dragged half asleep from their nests of straw, were shaken awake and despatched to rouse and rush to the front the troops Lanyard had seen sleeping in the open field. Other orderlies limped or reeled down the cellar steps, delivered their despatches, and, staggered out through a breach in the wall to have their injuries attended to in the field dressing-station in the adjoining cellar, or else threw themselves down on the straw to fall instantly asleep despite the deafening din.

The Boche artillery, seeking blindly to silence the field batteries whose fire was galling their offensive, had begun to bombard the village. Shells fled shrieking overhead, to break in thunderous bellows. Walls toppled with appalling crashes, now near at hand, now far. The ebb and flow of rifle-fire at the front contributed a background of sound not unlike the roaring of an angry surf. Machine-guns gibbered like maniacs. Heavier artillery was brought into play behind the British lines, apparently at no great distance from the village; the very flag-stones of the cellar floor quaked to the concussions of big-calibre guns.

Through the breach in the wall echoed the screams and groans of wounded. The foul air became saturated with a sickening stench of iodoform. Gusts of wet wind eddied hither and yon. Candles flick-

ered and flared, guttered out, were renewed. Monstrous shadows stole out from black corners, crept along mouldy walls, crouched, sprang and vanished, or, inscrutably baffled, retreated sullenly to their lairs....

For the better part of an hour the struggle continued; then its vigour began to wane. The heaviest British metal went out of action; some time later the field batteries discontinued their activities. The volume of firing in the advance trenches dwindled, was fiercely renewed some half a dozen times, died away to normal. Once more the Boche had been beaten back.

Returning to his chair, the commanding officer rested his elbows upon the table and bowed his head between his hands in an attitude of profound fatigue. He seemed to remind himself of Lanyard's presence only at 'cost of a racking effort, lifting heavy-lidded eyes to stare almost incredulously at his face.

"I presumed you were in America," he said in dulled accents.

"I was ... for a time."

"You came back to serve France?"

Lanyard shook his head. "I returned to Europe after a year, the spring before the war."

"Why?"

"I was hunted out of New York. The Boche would not let me be."

The officer looked startled. "The Boche?"

"More precisely, Herr Ekstrom—to name him as we knew him. But this I did not suspect for a long time, that it was he who was responsible for my persecution. I knew only that the police of America, informed of my identity with the Lone Wolf, sought to deport me, that every avenue to an honourable livelihood was closed. So I had to leave, to try to lose myself."

"Your wife ... I mean to say, you married, didn't you?"

Lanyard nodded. "Lucy stuck by me till ... the end.... She had a little money of her own. It financed our flight from the States. We made a round-about journey of it, to elude surveillance—and, I think, succeeded."

"You returned to Paris?"

"No: France, like England, was barred to the Lone Wolf.... We settled down in Belgium, Lucy and I and our boy. He was three months old. We found a quiet little home in Louvain—"

The officer interrupted with a low cry of apprehension, Lanyard checked him with a sombre gesture. "Let me tell you...."

"We might have been happy. None knew us. We were sufficient unto ourselves. But I was without occupation; it occurred to me that my memoirs might make good reading—for Paris; my friends the French are as fond of their criminals as you English of your actors. On the second of August I journeyed to Paris to negotiate with a publisher. While I was away the Boche invaded Belgium. Before I could get back Louvain had been occupied, sacked...."

He sat for a time in brooding silence; the officer made no attempt to rouse him, but the gaze he bent upon the man's lowered head was grave and pitiful. Abruptly, in a level and toneless voice, Lanyard resumed:

"In order to regain my home I had to go round by way of England and Holland. I crossed the Dutch frontier disguised as a Belgian peasant. When I reentered Louvain it was to find ... But all the world knows what the blond beast did in Louvain. My wife and little son had vanished utterly. I searched three months before I found trace of either. Then ... Lucy died in my arms in a wretched hovel near Aerschot. She had seen our child butchered before her eyes. She herself...."

Lanyard's hand, that rested on the table, clenched and whitened beneath its begrimed skin. His eyes fathomed distances immeasurably removed beyond the confines of that grim cellar. But he presently continued:

"Ekstrom had accompanied the army of invasion, had seen and recognized Lucy in passing through Louvain. Therefore she and my son were among the first to be sacrificed.... When I stood over her grave I dedicated my life to the extermination of Ekstrom and all his breed. I have since done things I do not like to think about. But the Prussian spy system is the weaker for my work...."

"But Ekstrom I could never find. It was as if he knew I hunted him. He was seldom twenty-four hours ahead of me, yet I never caught up with him but once; and then he was too closely guarded.... I pursued him to Berlin, to Potsdam, three times to the western front, to Serbia, once to Constantinople, twice to Petrograd."

The officer uttered an exclamation of astonishment. Lanyard looked his way with a depreciatory air.

"Nothing strange about that. To one of my early training that was easy—everything was easy but the end I sought.... En passant I collected information concerning the workings of the Prussian spy system. From time to time I found means to communicate somewhat of this to the Surété in Paris. I believe France and England have already profited a little through my efforts. They shall profit more, and quickly, when I have told all that I have to tell...."

"Of a sudden Ekstrom vanished. Overnight he disappeared from Germany. A false lead brought me back to this front. Two days ago I learned he had been sent to America on a secret mission. Knowing that the States have severed diplomatic relations with Berlin and tremble on the verge of a declaration of war, we can surmise something of the nature of his mission. I mean to see that he fails.... To follow him to America, making my way out through Belgium and Holland, pursuing such furtive ways as I must in territory dominated by the Boche, meant much time lost. So I came through the lines to-night. Fortune was kind in throwing me into your hands: I count upon your assistance. As an ex-agent of the Secret Service you are in a position to make smooth my path; as an Englishman, you will advance the interests of a prospective ally of England if you help me to the limit of your ability; for what I mean to do in America will serve that country, by exposing the conspiracies of the Boche across the water, as much as it will serve my private ends."

The officer's hand fell across the table and closed upon the knotted fist of the Lone Wolf.

"As an Englishman," he said simply—"of course. But no less as your friend."

II

FROM A BRITISH PORT

"And one man in his time plays many parts": few more than this same Lanyard. In no way to be identified with the hunted creature who crept into the British lines out of No Man's Land was the Monsieur Duchemin who, ten days after that wintry midnight, took passage for New York from "a British port," aboard the steamship *Assyrian*.

André Duchemin was the name inscribed in the credentials furnished him in recognition of signal assistance rendered the British Secret Service in its task of scotching the Prussian spy system. And the personality he chose to assume suited well the name. A man of modest and amiable deportment, viewing the world with eyes intelligent and curious, his temper reacting from its ways in terms of grave humour, Monsieur Duchemin passed peaceably on his lawful occasions, took life as he found it, made the best of irksome circumstances.

This last idiosyncrasy stood him in good stead. For the *Assyrian* failed to clear upon her proposed sailing date and for a livelong week thereafter chafed alongside her landing stage, steam up, cargo laden and stowed, nothing lacking but the Admiralty's permission to begin her westbound voyage—a permission inscrutably withheld, giving rise to a common discontent which the passengers dissembled to the various best of their abilities, that is to say, in most cases thinly or not at all.

Yet they were none of them unreasonable beings. They had come aboard one and all keyed up to a high nervous pitch, pardonable in such as must commit their lives to the dread adventure of the barred zone, wanting nothing so much as to get it over with, whatever its upshot. And everlasting procrastination required them day

after day to steel their hearts anew against that Terror which followed its furtive ways beneath the leaden waters of the Channel!

Alone among them this Monsieur Duchemin paraded successfully a false face of resignation, protesting no predilection whatsoever for a watery grave, no infatuate haste to challenge the Hun upon his chosen hunting-ground. In the fullness of time it would be permitted to him to go down to the sea in this ship. Meanwhile he found it apparently pleasant and restful to explore the winding cobbled ways of that antiquated waterside community, made over by the hand of War into a bustling seaport, or to tramp the sunken lanes that seamed those green old Cornish hills which embosomed the wide harbour waters, or to lounge about the broad white decks of the *Assyrian* watching the diurnal traffic of the haven—a restless, warlike pageant.

Daily, in earliest dusk of dawn, the wakeful might watch the faring forth of a weirdly assorted fleet of small craft, the day patrol, to relieve a night patrol as weirdly heterogeneous. Daily, at all hours, mine-sweepers came and went, by twos and twos, in flocks, in schools; and daily bellowing offshore detonations advertised their success in garnering those horned black seeds of death which the Hun and his kin were sedulous to sow in the fairways. While daily battleships both great and small rolled in wearily to refit and dress their wounds, or took swift departure on grim and secret errands.

There was, moreover, the not-infrequent spectacle of some minor ship of war—a truculent, gray destroyer as like as not—shepherding in a sleek submarine, like a felon whale armoured and strangely caparisoned in gray-brown steel, to be moored in chains with a considerable company of its fellows on the far side of the roadstead, while its crew was taken ashore and consigned to some dark limbo of oblivion.

And once, with a light cruiser snapping at her heels, a drab Norwegian tramp plodded sullenly into port, a mine-layer caught red-handed, plying its assassin's trade beneath a neutral flag.

Not long after its crew had been landed, volleys of musketry crashed in the town gaol-yard.