

Reminiscences : how I got into the Sergeant's good books [to follow]

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REMINISCENCES.

How I got into the Sergeant's good books.

By ST.

For some of the bitterest and most unhappy hours of my pilgrimage through this valley of sorrow, I have to blame my old sergeant Röstli. (This, of course, is not his real name). These distressing moments coincided with my *début* as a soldier — well do I remember the day, when I wended my way to the barracks in order to say valet to my civilian life for a few weeks, or as it then turned out, a few months. Never before have I felt more patriotic; I was determined to become a good and faithful soldier of my beloved country, and if my life would have been demanded for the protection of its independence, I would have gladly given it there and then. Visions of Sempach and Morgarten flicked through my head, dying for one's country is so sweet — I was told — but, of course, being young I preferred to live for it. These, and many others, were the feelings when I entered the portals which closed behind me with a loud crash.

I was then introduced to Sergeant Röstli, or to be correct, he introduced himself to me. I held out my hand, and told him how very pleased I was to make his acquaintance, but my outstretched hand was purposely ignored; I was somehow disappointed, but I argued to myself that some people have manners and others haven't.

It would lead too far to relate here how I discarded garment after garment of my civilian outfit, but by about five o'clock that afternoon I looked as near a soldier as could be expected. I have forgotten now, whether my figure was already then an awkward one, but somehow I did not like the look of myself, neither did the sergeant; he, *f.i.*, gave me such a blow on the top of my *képi*, that I got nearly stunned, and and I attribute my slight flat-footedness to this adjusting attention. He also pulled the collar of my tunic in such a violent fashion, that I nearly choked, using at the same time rather strong language, which I tried to overlook, as I was told beforehand that sergeants sometimes do swear. By this time my enthusiasm for a soldier's life received a bit of a damper: but worse was to come the same evening. I somehow had a feeling that my sergeant did not like me. I do not know whether it was my face or my manner of speech which upset him, I tried to be so very polite.

Not having been taught how to salute, we were not allowed to go outside the barracks that night, and our next job was to make our beds. Now I had never made a bed in my life before; some general instructions were given, and my comrades in arms set to work. I looked left and right trying to copy them, but somehow my bed showed various *outstanding* features, which were not noticeable with the others. Suddenly the sergeant's eye detected my intended resting place; he called the inmates of the whole room together to have a good look at my bed; was the tide turning after all?, was I to be held up as an example of neatness and tidiness? My heart beat quicker, a word of praise then would have gone a long way to restore my waning enthusiasm.

It was not to be, with a sarcastic smile on his face, the sergeant invited me to demonstrate to the *audience* how I expected to enter my bed, and I must

now confess, to my everlasting shame, that trying as hard as I could, I was unable to find a convenient opening. Oh, how I hated that night, the malicious smiles of my comrades, who courted favour by making fun of one of their comrades in distress.

I tried to put on a brave face. After all, I thought, greater people than I have been laughed at, and I set to work again and managed to make a fairly good job of it; but as it happened I had not yet emptied the "cup of sorrow" to the bitter end. On laying an aching heart to rest that night, I unfortunately covered it with a pair of pyjamas, which, in those days, were quite a novelty, and I will spare my readers an account of the remarks which were hurled at my bewildered head, but early next morning the following few lines were despatched:—

"Dearest Mother,

For Heaven's sake send me a nightshirt,

Yours disillusioned son."

The following days were not much more successful; gone were those visions of Sempach and Morgarten. Was this, I reasoned during a sleepless night, what is called the romance of a soldier's life? Did not all the cheerful soldiers' songs tell miserable lies? Oh! how utterly unhappy I felt.

But it is so ordained that even the darkest hour has its glimmer of hope, and it so happened that one day sergeant Röstli had to make a report to his C.O. Now, I have not the slightest hesitation in admitting that he was an efficient and keen soldier, he could swear and drink like a trooper; he was a bully of the first order, but he could not spell. I watched him

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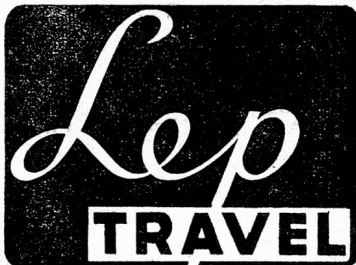
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trying to compose this report, which seemed to have unnerved his martial countenance. Here at last was a chance for me. "Can I help you sergeant?" I asked timidly. A growl answered me, but I was not to be put off.

There was not the slightest doubt that sergeant Röstli was in dire distress, he had started his report with a perfectly new pencil, and after he had jotted down only a few lines, he kept on biting bits off it, thus reducing it to an infinitesimal size. Surely, I argued to myself, he can't be that hungry, especially as I have seen him doing full justice to his evening meal barely half an hour before. I could not watch this mental agony any longer. In spite of his having made the first days of my soldiering career a perfect hell, a feeling of sympathy and pity took hold of me, and mustering all my courage, I asked him again to let me write the report for him. I could see a battle raging within him; on one hand he welcomed my offer, on the other hand, he was afraid to lose some of his authority. He gave me a searching look. Was I going to take advantage, should he submit to my entreaties? he, no doubt, turned over in his mind, but there I stood in all my humbleness, two large brown eyes filled with human understanding and with an expression of willingness to relieve him of this arduous task. Even a Sergeant has a heart sometimes. With a deep sigh he passed on his papers to me, saying, "Let me see what you can make of it." After a few explanations, I set to work and I put heart and soul into it. Never before have I racked my brain so much in order to make a good job of it.

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:: WORK ::

Line after line, page after page followed each other, and when, on finishing, I passed it on to him, and eagerly watched him reading it. "Not so bad," was his verdict. "I'll copy it." That night I could perceive the silver lining on the dark clouds which overhung my young soldiering career. The next few days brought me some relief. I saw a slight improvement in the treatment towards me, his authoritative voice sounded to me less harsh, and once or twice he even had a word of praise. I began to think that even a soldier's life has its recompenses.

Then came the great day, which proved to be the turning of the tide. Sergeant Röstli asked me to meet him later in the evening at a certain restaurant in the vicinity of the barracks. This unexpected request completely unnerved me for the rest of the day. I was at a loss to understand what the reason for this meeting could be. Punctual to the minute I turned up at the appointed place, where he was waiting for me. He greeted me rather cordially, saying that he had turned over things in his mind, and that he had come to the conclusion that I was, after all, quite a decent fellow, to which I replied that I never had any doubts about it. This reply was perhaps a bit unfortunate, as it seemed to put a slight doubt into his head whether I was congenial. Anyhow, after much fidgeting and coughing, which betrayed a certain nervousness, which I have never noticed before, he acquainted me with the fact that he suffered from a complaint which is commonly called "love-sickness," as an explanatory remark, I ought to mention that sergeant Röstli was a member of the worthy guild of bakers. — The cause of this not unfrequent disease was apparently the daughter of a well-to-do miller, from which the sergeant bought his flour. "Oh, you artful devil," I thought to myself. He bargained, no doubt, not only for the sacks of flour, but also for the daughter of his supplier; this man had an eye for business. To cut a long story short, he asked me point blank whether I would be agreeable to compose the letters to his heart's desire, as he was not very handy with his pen, and considering the report which I had written previously for him, he thought I would be the very man for this job. This request put me somehow in a quandary; first of all, I had but little experience in this kind of work; secondly, the person to whom I had to address myself in the most endearing terms was a complete stranger to me. An undertaking of this kind was certainly not as easy as it looked. Was it an honest thing to do? I asked myself; but after sergeant Röstli assured me with a faltering voice (so different to the one I used to hear) that Rösli was awfully fond of him, and had asked him before taking a tender farewell, behind the garden wall, to write to her, I made up my mind to accept his proposal. To enable me to execute this task in an efficient manner, I had to cross-examine the sergeant rather thoroughly, a task in which I found a certain delight; his stammering answers to some of my searching ques-

tions made up for a few of the humiliations I had undergone previously.

I explained to him that, as he did not possess a photograph of Rösli, he must give me instead an accurate description of her appearance, as I could hardly talk in my letters of heavenly blue eyes, when in reality they were green or black, nor could I write about a dainty little mouth, when this organ was rather an outsize, or again about the sweet little ears, in case they were like cabbage leaves. Then the colour of the hair would be of great importance, in case I should allude to golden locks, when in reality they were straight and ginger.

I also wanted to know approximately the size of Rösli, explaining that I could hardly write about her tender, slight appearance, in case she should weigh over 12 stones, also the size of her boots would be required, as I had visions to bring in the "fairy feet which had stepped into a lonely soldier's life."

These questions were very embarrassing to sergeant Röstli, and also to me. He blushed violently on several occasions; but when I, as a final shot, asked him with a piercing look whether he had ever before kissed his Rösli, he simply went purple. He flatly refused to answer, but after I had explained in so many words that this was a most important matter, as sooner or later that would have to appear in the letters, he admitted that he tried, but somehow had missed the mark. I looked at him in a sort of "how could you, sergeant" way. I also found out that Rösli was fond of dancing, and could play the piano with one finger, also that she was rather sentimental, the latter fact was important and I made up my mind to rub it in thickly.

After having devoured a bottle of Neuchâtel in honour of Rösli and the future happiness of the two lovers, I was told to depart, the sergeant explaining to me that it would not do for us to be seen together. This rather hurt my pride a little. Here was I asked to collaborate in paving the way to eternal bliss, and yet I must not be seen with the one for whom I was willing to expose some of my tenderest and innermost feelings; but with a click of my heels and a brave military salute, I drowned those feelings, and went back to the place which harboured so many disappointments. That night I could not sleep for a long time; visions of Rösli kept me awake. From the description received that night, she answered many of my longings. Was I in love with Rösli too?, I asked myself. What a disaster that would be, and for the first time since I slept with thirty-six of my comrades in the same *sanctuary* I did not mind the awful snoring of some of them. It sounded like music, it was like a symphony of love, and the last words which I whispered into a hard pillow were, "Good night, Rösli dear."

(To follow.)

OUR NEXT ISSUE.

Our next issue will be published on Friday, June 27th, 1947.

We take this opportunity of thanking the following subscribers for their kind and helpful donations: A. F. Frikart, E. E. Rognon, M. Wintsch and F. Bieri.

BRUDER KLAUS CELEBRATIONS OF SWISS CATHOLICS.

Whilst in Switzerland in the presence of the Swiss President, Swiss Statesmen and Clergy, Townsmen and Farmers, young and old gathered in Sachseln and in the Flueh on the lake of Sarnen to begin the "Bruder Klausen Year" — the Swiss Catholics met on Sunday, June 1st, at the Westminster Cathedral to do honour to the new Saint.—

Following Vespers at 4 p.m. in the presence of over 1,800 people, the Very Rev. Bishop Myers, M.A., preached on the Saints Life and death, giving a complete record of Niklaus von Flue's wonderful history both as statesman, peacemaker, father and hermit. —

He compared the time of Niklaus' life with to-days troubled world and said that if only the world statesmen of to-day would listen to advice of reason and moderation, as the Swiss statesmen did at Stans to "Bruder Klaus," a better and saner world than we experience to-day would result. —

During the Benediction the Bishop recited the special prayer offered to the New Saint by the Pope during the canonisation ceremonies asking Niklaus' intercession not only for his native Switzerland but also for a christian peace for the whole world. . . .

At the subsequent "Civic meeting at the Cathedral Hall, the Swiss Minister, Dr. Paul Ruegger, thanked Bishop Myers for the impressive sermon and service. He read extracts from the Pope's address in our three national languages to the 7,000 Swiss pilgrims who had gathered in Rome on May 15th.

Mr. H. Marfurt of the S.M.S. College gave an outline of Niklaus von Flue as a Soldier, Judge and Statesman, whilst Rev. Wuerms, M.S.B., showed in word and lantern slide pictures the Saints life, his homeland, etc. Unfortunately owing to a bad black-out the pictures did not show off to great advantage.

Colonel Bon, the President of the Swiss Catholic Committss thanked all those who had worked hard to make this afternoon ceremonies and meeting possible, particularly the Chaplain, Father Lanfranchi.

J.J.B.

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