

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

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REMINISCENCES.

How I got into the Sergeant's Good Books.

By ST.

(Continuation)

The following evening, instead of going out, I stayed behind, in order to compose the first letter to the unknown one. It was, what I considered, short and sweet, not too much to the point, and yet intimating that an aching heart was filled with a great longing. It was, so to say, the opening chapter of life's greatest drama. When I showed it that night to Sergeant Röstli, it met with his approval, although he thought that a sign depicting a kiss, or a mark intimating a falling tear might have conveniently been inserted. But I strongly objected to this, as I thought it wiser to play the big guns later on, when the signs of her affection would be more apparent. That letter was copied the same night by the Sergeant on pink paper; the envelope bore a stamp rather crookedly put on, which, according to the sergeant's explanation, meant exactly the one thing which I would not mention in the letter.

These were days of anxiety for both of us. What would happen to me, I argued, should this letter rudely end Sergeant Röstli's love aspiration? Would not his wrath fall on my innocent head? and what would my life be then? Curiously enough I dreamt that night of a soldier's funeral. Was it prophetic? I wondered the next morning on waking up. Then one morning came a blue envelope addressed to the Sergeant. One sharp glance at it revealed to me that the stamp too, was pasted on at an impossible angle, which evoked in me a sigh of relief. With eager eyes, I watched the recipient opening this little *billet-doux*. After perusal he put it in his tunic, with fingers which slightly trembled, and when we were alone a handshake from the Sergeant rewarded me for my labours of love. "She liked it," he said, and two days later a second letter left the barracks, a little longer, a little more tender, containing "one chaste kiss" for the first time. I had again to rule out tears, explaining that a Sergeant should not weep over a thing like this, anyhow, not in the beginning. If it should be necessary later on, we could always hold the letter under the pump.

Again a reply came back, in which Rösli wrote that she never thought that her admirer could write such loving letters. That evening we drank another bottle of Neuchâtel in a far away little inn, lest the Sergeant should be seen in company with the one who had worn a pair of pink pyjamas.

In the meantime, the treatment which was meted out to me by the Sergeant improved considerably, and dark hints were passed round amongst my comrades that I must have bribed him. One fine day I even gave a back answer to Sergeant Röstli, a thing which nobody ever dared to do. The members of my platoon nearly collapsed; they were under the impression that I must have gone suddenly mad, it being a hot day. The Sergeant winced, but did not say a word. From that day I advanced my status in the eyes of my colleagues. There was no more mocking laughter at my awkwardness. It was also whispered around that an uncle of mine was an army-corps commander, a rumour which, when it came to my ears, I did not contradict (much

to my shame) knowing full well that my uncle was only an army chaplain. (O, vain heart).

One evening the Sergeant told me that I could now get a little bolder, as Rösli's replies were very encouraging; he intimated to me that perhaps a little poetry would not be out of place. He thought of inserting a poem which he once learned at school and for the reciting of which he received a prize. It started:—

*Lieblieh war die Maiennacht
Silberwölklein flogen."*

I thought it was a good idea, although perhaps not quite adequate, considering that we were then deep in August!, but when he suggested that this poem should be signed by him as his own product, I energetically protested that it was not fair to Lenau, and if it should be found out, it might undo all the good work which so far had been achieved. I suggested that either he or I should write a verse or two, and after he tried in vain to kindle his poetic flame, I put the following lines down:—

*"Steh ich in finst'rer Nacht
Einsam of kalter Wacht,
Gedenk ich dein,
Herzliebchen mein."*

It only afterwards dawned on me that we were still in the month of August. He thought that was fine (I didn't) and copied it was. That very letter contained a considerable number of kisses, allusions to heavenly eyes, a warm beating heart, sun-kissed locks and dainty hands. Nightingales were singing



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and chirping throughout the letter; it was simply an orgy of loving and tender thoughts, and if dear Rösli would have been near me that evening, I would have forgotten myself, Sergeant or no Sergeant. Rösli, on copying it, actually had a tear in his eye, and dropped it, but I made him use the blotter. Rösli must never, never know that tears disgraced this martial face, the weeping must be left to women.

That letter did it. I was convinced beforehand that it would. I poured into it the feeling of my own lonely heart; it would have softened even a heart of stone. For the first time since our mutual conspiracy, the Sergeant showed me the reply. There it was, in simple, affectionate language. She told him that she loved him, and that she had told her mother all about it, and that he may call. Needless to say that I dined that evening at the canteen, in full view of my comrades, with the Sergeant, and more than one bottle was carried away from the table; and if it would have lasted much longer, I too, would have been carried from the table. Owing to the fact that the Sergeant was now allowed to call, my job as writer came to an end, but many a pleasant evening I spent with Rösli, and what was the subject of our conversation I need hardly mention. When the day of our parting dawned, he told me that I would get that very day my calling up papers for the non-commissioned officer's course, and so it happened. Now to this day, I do not know whether I achieved this with my pen or through the merits of my military achievements. "Good luck!"



I shouted to Sergeant Rösli, when he left the barracks; "and when is the wedding to be?"

*Four years later. November 1914,
On the Route Porrentruy — Bonfol, 11 p.m.*

Tramp — tramp — tramp — through nearly two feet of snow a long column of tired soldiers wended their way towards the frontier. It was a bitter cold night and snowing hard; not a sound could be heard, only in the distance the muffled roar of heavy guns in action. Over there too, columns were marching, marching towards death and destruction, over there war, war to the bitter end. Here — still peace — still hope to see those from whom one parted only a few months ago; but for how long? Perhaps to-morrow the furies of war would be let loose.

Tramp — tramp — tramp — onwards with heavy loads, and heavy hearts. Here and there a groan, a cough, perhaps even a half-uttered oath, suppressed in order to break the awful stillness of the night. An icy cold wind lashed the snow into reddened faces, frozen fingers convulsively gripped the snow-covered rifles. To-morrow perhaps, that weapon might stand in good stead. Suddenly a loud challenge, "Who goes there?"; some sharp commands, our column has come to a standstill. There was some conversation going on in front. Nobody cared — sleep, sleep — is all that is wanted, and yet it must not be. Snow-clad soldiers are passing us now from the opposite direction. No words are exchanged, it looks like a long procession of ghosts. Suddenly they stop, too. I enquire to which unit they belong, and am told that they were the 2nd company of the Battalion 3, being relieved from the frontier outward posts. This was the battalion and company to which my old Sergeant Rösli belonged. "Is Sergeant Rösli with you?" I enquired of one of the men. "Not Sergeant," he replies, "but Sergeant-Major now;" and down the line went a tired whisper of the name of my former Sergeant. Out of the darkness his countenance suddenly appeared. "Here Corporal St." A glance, a handshake, "How is Rösli?" I enquire, half fearing that it might awaken unpleasant memories. "Fine she is, and so are the two boys," "Glad to hear it," I answered. Then a command. Onwards — tramp — tramp — tramp a parting handshape, a glance, and he was gone; but now a feeling of gladness and of joy overcame me. The darkness of the night seemed to me less apparent. There was just a glimmer of light piercing through the wall of heavy snow-flakes. The thought that I had given Rösli to the Sergeant and consequently two strapping boys to my country, made me feel happy. Surely, I reasoned with myself, never before had I taken up my pen for a nobler cause. That day, on snatching a few hours sleep, I dreamed again of Rösli and her bonny boys.

THE END.