

Reminiscences

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REMINISCENCES

How I got into the Sergeant's good books By ST.

(Reprinted from a former issue).

For some of the bitterest and most unhappy hours of my pilgrimage through this valley of sorrow, I have to blame my old sergeant, Rösti. (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 had my life 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 Rösti, 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, for instance, gave me such a blow on the top of my *képi* that I was nearly stunned, 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 had 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

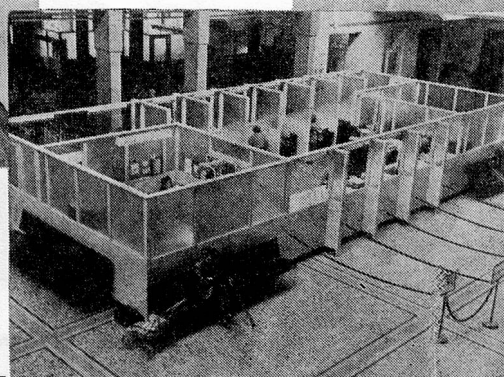


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work. I looked left and right trying to copy them, but somehow my bed showed various *outstanding* features, which were not noticeable with the others. Suddenly the sergeant's eye detected my intended resting place; he called the inmates of the whole 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,
Your 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 Rösti 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 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

Rösti 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 the one hand, he welcomed my offer, on the other, 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 his papers to me, saying, "Let me see what you can make of it." After a few explanations, I set to work and put heart and soul into it. Never before have I racked my brains so much in order to make a good job of it.

Line after line, page after page followed each other, and then, on finishing, I passed it 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 Rösti 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

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was congenial. Anyhow, after much fidgeting and coughing, which betrayed a certain nervousness, which I had never noticed before, he acquainted me with the fact the 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 infrequent disease was apparently the daughter of a well-to-do miller from whom 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 from 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 questions 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 of bringing 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 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; this last fact was important and I made up my mind to rub it in thickly.

After having consumed 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 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 had 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."

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 speak, the opening chapter of life's greatest drama. When that night I showed it 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 aspirations? 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 its stamp too, was stuck 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:—

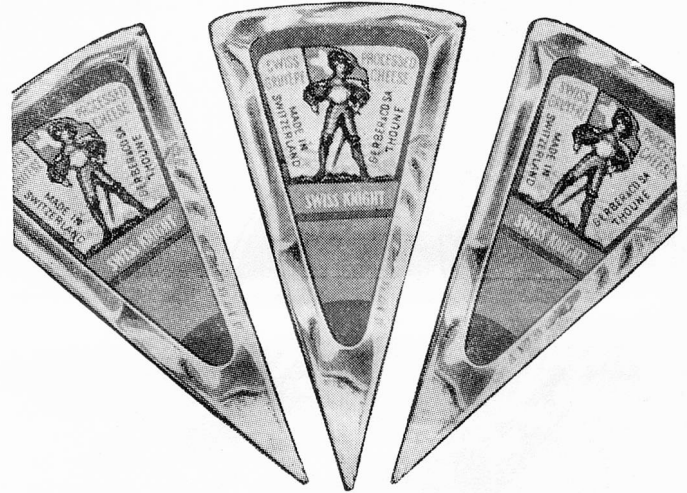
*“Lieblich war die Maiennacht
Silberwölklein flogen.”*

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 auf 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 and chirping throughout the letter; it was simply a feast of loving and tender thoughts, and if dear Rösli had been near me that evening, I would have forgotten myself, Sergeant or no Sergeant. Röstli, 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 might call. Needless to say, 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 had 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 Röstli, and what



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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 Rösti, 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 — onward with heavy loads, and heavy hearts. Here and there a groan, a cough, perhaps even a half-uttered oath, suppressed in order not 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 Rösti belonged. "Is Sergeant Rösti with you?" I enquired of one of the men. "Not Sergeant," he replied, "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 enquired, 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 handshake, a glance, and he was gone; but now a feeling of gladness and of joy overcame me. The darkness of the night was 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.