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«Carl»

by Sven Eriksen

«... at the going down of the sun, and in the morning
we shall remember them.»

From 'Gallipoli' by John Masefield.

The pounding of the heavy artillery had kept us awake most of the night, for we knew it was the preparation for the attack which our troops were to make in the morning. It was not yet light, but the heat of another Italian summer day was already in the air as we strapped on our equipment and assembled to receive our final instructions for the assault on the one remaining hill which barred our way to the plains beyond.

Our artillery barrage was slowly lifting and the fire from the enemy guns was less strong as we began our attack. No sooner had we commenced our advance, however, than we were met by a devastating attack from machine gun nests which dotted the hillside. Our advance was slow, a short run forward and then a dive towards the nearest cover. At last we were under the shelter of the rocks at the foot of the hill, and could use our handgrenades. Slowly we crawled upwards, ducking from cover to cover, but the advance was not made without its toll of dead and wounded on both sides. The enemy was now withdrawing and we moved forward more freely. But as I stepped between the rocks my foot slipped and I plunged down into a crevice. I felt a searing pain in my leg and knew that my ankle was broken. Our officer came over, ordered one of the men to tie up my leg and then told me to remain there until the hill was cleared and the stretcher bearers could come and collect me. The sun was beating down mercilessly by this time, so as soon as the position seemed clear, I heaved myself up and looked around. I saw an overhanging rock some ten feet above me to the right, near an enemy machine gun nest we had just destroyed, and crawled up towards it. There appeared to be a small open cave and I dragged myself towards this. As I stepped out of the strong sunlight I was aware of an enemy soldier lying on the ground, covered with a blanket. Automatically I brought my rifle up, and as I did so the soldier said in a weak voice, 'Don't shoot, I cannot harm you.' I went over to him. He was a young man with fair hair and a pleasant face, but his features were drawn and drained of blood, and it was obvious that he was badly hurt. I put my gear down and sat beside him. We started talking. 'I have a broken ankle, I told him, 'so I'll have to stay here until the stretcher bearers arrive. Your troops are withdrawing, so we may not have to wait long. By the way, how is it that you speak our language so well?'

'It is a long story. My father was in the diplomatic service and I spent some years at school in your country. After I returned home I went back several times on holiday to see friends. And then the war came. —' He turned his head away and his voice drifted off. He seemed to have forgotten my presence. 'Oh, Henry, if only I could see you again and tell you that the war has made no difference to my feelings . . . ' When

the young soldier looked at me again I asked him who Henry was, and he stared at me, realizing only at that moment that he had uttered his thoughts aloud.

'Henry was a friend whom I went to school with and whom I used to visit. You see, we were inseparable . . . until the war came. I am afraid you would not understand, but since my end is so near, perhaps I can tell you. You see — we were . . .' He hesitated, and I took his hand and said softly, 'Don't be afraid. You can tell me. You see, I am also — a friend.'

Gratitude shone in his eyes. 'Thank God for that. Perhaps, if you get home safely you can go and see Henry and tell him that I loved him to the end, and that through all these bitter years I have never ceased thinking of him and of the plans we had made for the future. Will you do this for me, an enemy soldier?'

'I will do what you ask, but why talk of dying when help may come any minute?'

'No,' he said, 'it is too late for me.' I saw him indicate the lower part of his body. I lifted the blanket. One leg had been shot off just above the knee and the stump had been crudely tied up. The other leg was also badly smashed, and I could see that he had lost a great deal of blood. As I lowered the blanket, I realized that the end for him was indeed near. I wiped his brow with my handkerchief and unbuttoned his tunic to make him more comfortable. I gave him a drink of water but he was unable to eat anything.

'My time is short, so please let me tell you about Henry and myself. Although we met at school it was not until I stopped one day at the garage his father owned, and saw him working there that I really got to know him. From that time on I often spent my Saturdays helping him at the garage. We became friends but it was only when we went off on a camping trip a year later that we discovered our true feelings for each other.' Carl, for that was the young soldier's name, went on to tell me of how Henry's parents had both died shortly before the outbreak of the war and how Henry had taken over the garage and offered him a partnership. But the war had played havoc with all their plans.

'Outside men are killing each other — for what purpose? Here we are, John, you and I, enemies, supposed to fight and hate each other, and yet we sit and talk of love instead of hatred. I think that people like us form a genuine Brotherhood of Man, as for us no barriers of any kind exist, nor do we concern ourselves with questions of race or creed. We grant all men the right to live their own lives, just as we want to live ourselves in the way we are made and to be allowed to choose our friends wherever we can find them.'

To give Carl some comfort I had put his head in my lap. Thus we sat silently for a while, when in a last desperate effort he raised his head once more and said with a pleading urgency in his near-gone voice, '. . . John, please, promise me . . . Henry . . . see him . . . tell him . . .' Before I could reply his head fell back. He was gone, his brave young spirit had departed. It must have been much later when I lowered him gently down to the ground and folded his hands across his chest. Henry's

address I had found in his wallet. Numbed in body and spirit I crawled to the mouth of the cave, haunted by that young dead face. In the evening the stretcher bearers found me.

'John, are those accounts ready?' I started and looked round to see Henry's face, streaked with oil, smiling at me from the door of the office. He came over and put his hand on my shoulder, when he saw Carl's picture lying in front of me, on top of the accounts I was to have checked. 'John, I sometimes think that you loved Carl as much as I did. He is our common link, for he and I loved each other in life, and you were able to comfort him when he died.'

It was now three years since I had come home and written to Henry telling him of Carl's death. At his invitation I had gone to spend a weekend with him. We talked well into the night after my arrival, and when I left he asked me to come again soon. However, a week had scarcely gone when I received a letter from him asking me to come down for good as his partner, looking after the administrative side of the business.

Those three years have gone in a flash, three years of hard work to build up a flourishing business. We have been successful in our efforts, but above all we have been successful in building up our own personal happiness. Maybe that's what Carl wanted when he realized he was dying. But he is not dead — his spirit abides with us.

A Violinist finds Friendship

Paganini, aged thirty-two, and disgusted by the squalid aftermath of a female entanglement, wrote to his lawyer, the illustrious Signor Luigi Gulielmo Geremi: «the kiss I send you comes from my heart . . . all the sirens in the world may go to the devil. All I care for is the continuance of your friendship». Two years later, after a long separation, he wrote: «Let me soon have the joy of clasping you to my heart . . . Love me as I love you».

At Placentia he met Lipinsky, a polish Violinist of whom he said: «He hardly ever leaves me, he adores me».

From Warsaw, aged forty-eight he wrote to Geremi: «My heart leapt when I saw your writing . . . I am still a bachelor. It is more than two years since I looked at a woman. My only happiness is the knowledge that you are my faithful friend.»

Later on, having received two wreaths at Strasburg, he said: «I shall keep the more elaborate to place on the head of my friend Geremi».

From London he wrote: «Do not cease to love me. I live only for you and for my son.» Back in Italy, he wrote: «Without you I am a body without a soul», and «I hope to have the happiness of embracing you again — a consolation which may almost be compared to the bliss of lovely and genuine music». Even after Geremi's marriage he wrote: «Amico pregiatissimo — carissimo . . . amatissimo . . ., I beseech you to love me».

To the very end of a tragic life Geremi was indeed faithful to his temperamental friend.

Beuno.

(Paganini: Renée de Saussine).