
39. (The Soldier)

YES. Why do we all, seeing of a soldier, bless him? bless
Our redcoats, our tars? Both these being, the greater part,
But frail clay, nay but foul clay. Here it is: the heart,
Since, proud, it calls the calling manly, gives a guess
That, hopes that, makes believe, the men must be no less;
It fancies, feigns, deems, dears the artist after his art;
And fain will find as sterling all as all is smart,
And scarlet wear the spirit of war there express.

Mark Christ our King. He knows war, served this soldiering through;
He of all can handle a rope best. There he bides in bliss
Now, and seeing somewhere some man do all that man can do,
For love he leans forth, needs his neck must fall on, kiss,
And cry ‘O Christ-done deed! So God-made-flesh does too:
Were I come o’er again’ cries Christ ‘it should be this’.

"The Haystack in the Floods"

William Morris

HAD she come all the way for this,
To part at last without a kiss?
Yea, had she borne the dirt and rain
That her own eyes might see him slain
Beside the haystack in the floods?
Along the dripping leafless woods,
The stirrup touching either shoe,
She rode astride as troopers do;
With kirtle kilted to her knee,
To which the mud splash’d wretchedly;
And the wet dripp’d from every tree
Upon her head and heavy hair,
And on her eyelids broad and fair;
The tears and rain ran down her face.

By fits and starts they rode apace,
And very often was his place
Far off from her; he had to ride
Ahead, to see what might betide
When the roads cross’d; and sometimes, when
There rose a murmuring from his men,
Had to turn back with promises;
Ah me! she had but little ease;
And often for pure doubt and dread
She sobb’d, made giddy in the head
By the swift riding; while, for cold,
Her slender fingers scarce could hold
The wet reins; yea, and scarcely, too,
She felt the foot within her shoe
Against the stirrup: all for this,
To part at last without a kiss
Beside the haystack in the floods.

For when they near'd that old soak'd hay,
They saw across the only way
That Judas, Godmar, and the three.
Red running lions dismally
Grinn'd from his pennon, under which,
In one straight line along the ditch,
They counted thirty heads.

So then,
While Robert turn'd round to his men,
She saw at once the wretched' end,
And, stooping down, tried hard to rend
Her coif the wrong way from her head,
And hid her eyes; while Robert said:
'Nay, love, 'tis scarcely two to one,
At Poictiers where we made them run
So fast-- why, sweet my love, good cheer,
The Gascon frontier is so near,
Nought after this,'
Sir Robert, or I slay you now.'
She laid her hand upon her brow,
Then gazed upon the palm, as though
She thought her forehead bled, and, 'No.'
She said, and turn'd her head away,
As there were nothing else to say,
And everything were settled: red
Grew Godmar's face from chin to head:
'Jehane, on yonder hill there stands
My castle, guarding well my lands:
What hinders me from taking you,
And doing that I list to do
To your fair wilful body, while
Your knight lies dead?'

A wicked smile
Wrinkled her face, her lips grew thin,
A long way out she thrust her chin:
'You know that I should strangle you
While you were sleeping; or bite through
Your throat, by God's help--ah!' she said,
'Lord Jesus, pity your poor maid!
For in such wise they hem me in,
I cannot choose but sin and sin,
Whatever happens: yet I think
They could not make me eat or drink,
And so should I just reach my rest.'
'Nay, if you do not my behest,
O Jehane! though I love you well,'
Said Godmar, 'would I fail to tell
All that I know.' 'Foul lies,' she said.
'Eh? lies my Jehane? by God's head,
At Paris folks would deem them true!
Do you know, Jehane, they cry for you,
"Jehane the brown! Jehane the brown!
Give us Jehane to bum or drown!" --
Eh -- gag me Robert! sweet my friend,
This were indeed a piteous end
For those long fingers, and long feet,
And long neck, and smooth shoulders sweet;
An end that few men would forget
That saw it -- So, an hour yet:
Consider, Jehane, which to take
Of life or death!'

So, scarce awake,
Dismounting, did she leave that place,
And totter some yards: with her face
Turn'd upward to the sky she lay,
Her head on a wet heap of hay,
And fell asleep: and while she slept,
And did not dream, the minutes crept
Round to the twelve again; but she,
Being waked at last, sigh'd quietly,
And strangely childlike came, and said:
'I will not.' Straightway Godmar's head,
As though it hung on strong wires, turn'd
Most sharply round, and his face burn'd.

For Robert, both his eyes were dry,
He could not weep, but gloomily
He seem'd to watch the rain; yea, too,
His lips were firm; he tried once more
To touch her lips; she reach'd out, sore
And vain desire so tortured them,
The poor grey lips, and now the hem
Of his sleeve brush'd them.

With a start Up Godmar rose, thrust them apart;
From Robert's throat he loosed the bands
Of silk and mail; with empty hands
Held out, she stood and gazed, and saw,
The long bright blade without a flaw
Glide out from Godmar's sheath, his hand
In Robert's hair; she saw him bend
Back Robert's head; she saw him send
The thin steel down; the blow told well,
Right backward the knight Robert fell,
And moan'd as dogs do, being half dead,
Unwitting, as I deem: so then
Godmar turn'd grinning to his men,
Who ran, some five or six, and beat
His head to pieces at their feet.

Then Godmar turn'd again and said:
'So, Jehane, the first fitte is read!
Take note, my lady, that your way
Lies backward to the Chatelet!'
She shook her head and gazed awhile
At her cold hands with a rueful smile,
As though this thing had made her mad.

This was the parting that they had
Beside the haystack in the floods.
“Grass”
By Carl Sandburg

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo.
Shovel them under and let me work—
I am the grass; I cover all.

And pile them high at Gettysburg
And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun.
Shovel them under and let me work.
Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the conductor:
What place is this?
Where are we now?

I am the grass.
Let me work.

Naming of Parts
Henry Reed

Today we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
We had daily cleaning. And tomorrow morning,
We shall have what to do after firing. But today,
Today we have naming of parts. Japonica
Glistens like coral in all of the neighboring gardens,
And today we have naming of parts.

This is the lower sling swivel. And this
Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see,
When you are given your slings. And this is the piling swivel,
Which in your case you have not got. The branches
Hold in the gardens their silent, eloquent gestures,
Which in our case we have not got.
This is the safety-catch, which is always released
With an easy flick of the thumb. And please do not let me
See anyone using his finger. You can do it quite easy
If you have any strength in your thumb. The blossoms
Are fragile and motionless, never letting anyone see
Any of them using their finger.

And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this
Is to open the breech, as you can see. We can slide it
Rapidly backwards and forwards: we call this
Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and forwards
The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers:
They call it easing the Spring.
They call it easing the Spring: it is perfectly easy
If you have any strength in your thumb: like the bolt,
And the breech, and the cocking-piece, and the point of balance,
Which in our case we have not got; and the almond-blossom
Silent in all of the gardens and the bees going backwards and forwards,
For today we have naming of parts.

Ted Hughes, "Crow's Account of St. George"

He sees everything in the Universe
Is a track of numbers racing towards an answer.
With delirious joy, with nimble balance
He rides those racing tracks. He makes a silence.
He refrigerates an emptiness,
Decreates all to outer space,
Then unpicks numbers. The great stones fall open.

With the faintest breath
He melts cephalopods and sorts raw numbers
Out of their dregs. With tweezers of number
He picks the gluey heart out of an inaudibly squeaking cell--

He hears something. He turns--
A demon, dripping ordure, is grinning in the doorway.
It vanishes. He concentrates--
With a knife-edge of numbers
He cuts the heart cleanly in two. He shivers--
Looks up. A demon with a face flat as a snail
Or the underface of a shark, is grinning at him
Through the window. It vanishes. Confused,
Shaken, he aims his attention--
Finding the core of the heart is a nest of numbers.
His heart begins to pound, his hand trembles.

Something grabs at his arm. He turns. A bird-head,
Bald, lizard-eyed, the size of a football, on two staggering bird-legs
Gapes at him all the seams and pleats of its throat,
Clutching at the carpet with horny feet,
Threatens. He lifts a chair--fear lifts him--
He smashes the egg-shell object to a blood-rag,
A limping sprawl, he tramples the bubbling mess,
The shark-face is screaming in the doorway
Opening its fangs. The chair again--
He splits that face and beats the chair to pieces
On the writhing unbreakably tough horror
Till it lies still. Now with a shriek
An object four times bigger than the others--
A belly-ball of hair, with crab-legs, eyeless,
Jabs its pincers into his face,
Its belly opens--a horrible oven of fangs,
The claws are clawing to drag him towards it--

He snatches from its mount on the wall a sword,
A ceremonial Japanese decapitator,
And as hacking a path through thicket he scatters
The lopped segments, the opposition collapses.
He stands trousered in blood and log-splits
The lolling body, bifurcates it
Top to bottom, kicks away the entrails--
Steps out of the blood-wallow. Recovers--

Drops the sword and runs dumb-faced from the house
Where his wife and children lie in their blood.

The Man He Killed
By Thomas Hardy

"Had he and I but met
   By some old ancient inn,
We should have sat us down to wet
   Right many a nipperkin!

"But ranged as infantry,
   And staring face to face,
I shot at him as he at me,
   And killed him in his place.

"I shot him dead because —
   Because he was my foe,
Just so: my foe of course he was;
   That's clear enough; although

"He thought he'd 'list, perhaps,
   Off-hand like — just as I —
Was out of work — had sold his traps —
   No other reason why.

"Yes; quaint and curious war is!
   You shoot a fellow down
You'd treat if met where any bar is,
   Or help to half-a-crown."
There Will Come Soft Rains  (War Time)
by Sara Teasdale

There will come soft rains and the smell of the ground,
And swallows circling with their shimmering sound;

And frogs in the pools singing at night,
And wild plum trees in tremulous white,

Robins will wear their feathery fire
Whistling their whims on a low fence-wire;

And not one will know of the war, not one
Will care at last when it is done.

Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree
If mankind perished utterly;

And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn,
Would scarcely know that we were gone.

“The Absolutely Perfect Barricade”

[The following is one of the vignettes interleaved with chapters in Hemingway’s In Our Time. This particular vignette follows the heading for Chapter IV. It also shows up in most editions of the Nick Adams stories. ]

Chapter IV

It was a frightfully hot day. We'd jammed an absolutely perfect barricade across the bridge. It was simply priceless. A big old wrought-iron grating from the front of a house. Too heavy to lift and you could shoot through it and they would have to climb over it. It was absolutely topping. They tried to get over it, and we potted them from forty yards. They rushed it, and officers came out alone and worked on it. It was an absolutely perfect obstacle. Their officers were very fine. We were frightfully put out when we heard the flank had gone, and we had to fall back.