

The Prussian Officer

by
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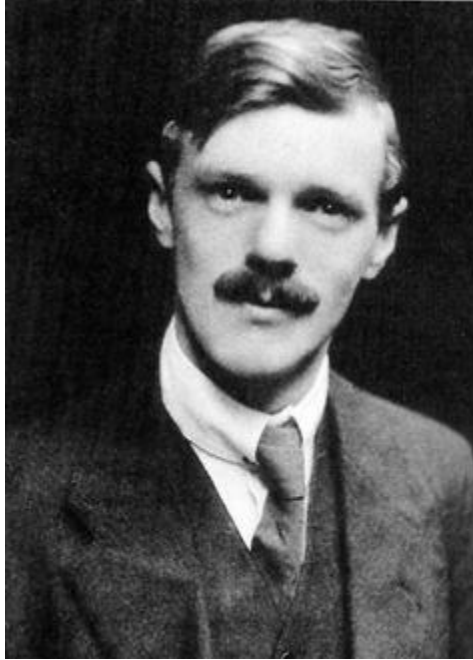
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THOUGHTAUDIO



THE PRUSSIAN OFFICER



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THE PRUSSIAN OFFICER

PART I

They had marched more than thirty kilometers since dawn, along the white, hot road where occasional thickets of trees threw a moment of shade, then out into the glare again. On either hand, the valley, wide and shallow, glittered with heat; dark green patches of rye, pale young corn, fallow and meadow and black pine woods, spread in a dull, hot diagram under a glistening sky. Right in front the mountains ranged across, pale blue and very still snow gleaming gently out of the deep atmosphere. Towards the mountains, on and on, the regiment marched between the rye fields and the meadows, between the scraggy fruit trees set regularly on either side the high road. The burnished, dark green rye threw on a suffocating heat; the mountains drew gradually nearer and more distinct.

While the feet of the soldiers grew hotter, sweat ran through their hair under their helmets, and their knapsacks could burn no more in contact with their shoulders, but seemed instead to give off a cold, prickly sensation.



He walked on and on in silence, staring at the mountains ahead that rose sheer out of the land, and stood fold behind fold, half earth, half heaven, the heaven, the banner with slits of soft snow, in the pale, bluish peaks.

He could now walk almost without pain. At the start, he had determined not to limp. It had made him sick to take the first steps. During the first mile or so, he had compressed his breath, and the cold drops of sweat had stood on his forehead. He had walked it off. What were they after all but bruises!

He had looked at them as he was getting up — deep bruises on the backs of his thighs. Since he had made his first step in the morning, he had been conscious of them, till now he had a tight, hot place in his chest, with suppressing the pain, and holding himself in. There seemed no air when he breathed. He walked almost lightly.



The Captain's hand had trembled at taking his coffee at dawn — his orderly saw it again. He saw the fine figure of the Captain wheeling on horseback at the farmhouse ahead, a handsome figure in pale blue uniform with facings of scarlet, and the metal gleaming on the black helmet and the sword-scabard, and dark streaks of sweat coming on the silky bay horse.

The orderly felt connected with that figure moving so suddenly on horseback — he followed it like a shadow, mute, inevitable, and damned by it. The officer was always aware of the tramp of the company behind, the march of his orderly among the men.

The Captain was a tall man of about forty, grey at the temples. He had a handsome, finely knit figure, and was one of the best horsemen in the West. His orderly, having to rub him down, admired the amazing riding-muscles of his loins.

For the rest, the orderly scarcely noticed the officer any more than he noticed himself. It was rarely he saw his master's face — he did not look at it. The Captain had reddish-brown, stilt hair that he wore short upon his skull. His moustache was cut short and bristly over a full, brutal mouth. His face was rather rugged, the cheeks thin. Perhaps the man was the more handsome for the deep lines in his face, the irritable tension of his brow, which gave him the look of a man who fights with life. His fair eyebrows stood bushy over light blue eyes that were always flashing with cold fire.

He was a Prussian aristocrat, haughty and overbearing. His mother had been a Polish Countess. Having made too many gambling debts when he was young, he had ruined his prospects in the Army, and remained an infantry captain. He had never married — his position did not allow of it, and no woman had ever moved him to it. His time he spent riding — occasionally he rode one of his own horses at the races or at the officers club.

Now and then, he took himself a mistress. After such an event, he returned to duty with his brow still more tense, his eyes still more hostile and irritable. With the men, however, he was merely impersonal, though a devil when roused; so that, on the whole, they feared him, but had no great aversion from him. They accepted him as the inevitable.



To his orderly he was at first cold and just and indifferent — he did not fuss over trifles. So that his servant knew practically nothing about him, except just what orders he would give, and how he wanted them obeyed. That was quite simple. Then the change gradually came.

The orderly was a youth of about twenty-two, of medium height, and well built. He had strong, heavy limbs, was swarthy, with a soft, black, young moustache. There was something altogether warm and dynamic about him. He had firmly marked eyebrows over dark, expressionless eyes, that seemed never to have thought, only to receive life direct through his senses, and acted straight from instinct.

Gradually, the officer had become aware of his servant's young, vigorous, unconscious presence about him. He could not get away from the sense of the youth's person while he was in attendance. It was like a warm flame upon the older man's tense, rigid body that had become almost un-living, fixed. There was something so free and un-contained about

him, and something in the orderly's enlivened movement that made the officer aware of him.

This irritated the Prussian. He did not choose to be roused to life by his servant. He might easily have changed his self-demeanor, but he did not. Now he very rarely looked directly at his orderly, but kept his face averted, as if to avoid seeing him. Yet as the young soldier moved, not thinking about his surroundings, the elder watched him, and would notice the movement of his strong forceful shoulders under the blue cloth, the bend of his neck. It annoyed him to see the soldier's determined tanned hands grasp the loaf of bread or the wine-bottle. It sent a flash of hate and anger through the elder man's blood. It was not that the youth was clumsy — it was the blind, instinctive sureness of movement of an unhampered vigorous animal that irritated the officer to such a degree.

Once, when a bottle of wine had gone over, and the red gushed out on to the tablecloth, the officer had stood up with an oath, and his eyes, blue like fire, held those of the confused youth for a moment. It was a shock for the young soldier. He felt something sink deeper, deeper into his soul, where nothing had ever gone before. It left him rather blank and wondering. Some of his natural completeness was gone; a little uneasiness took its place. From that time on, an undiscovered feeling remained between the two men.

Henceforward, the orderly was afraid of truly engaging his master. He sub-consciously remembered those steely blue eyes and the harsh brows, and did not intend to meet them again. He always stared past his master, and avoided him. He anxiously waited for the three months to pass when his time would be up. He began to feel a constraint in the Captain's presence and the soldier wanted to be left alone in his neutrality as servant.

He had served the Captain for more than a year, and knew his duty. This he performed easily, as if it were natural to him. The officer and his commands he took for granted, as he took the sun and the rain, and he served as a matter of course. It did not implicate him

personally. If he were going to be forced into a personal interchange with his master, he would be as a wild animal snared in a trap. He felt he must get away.

The influence of the young soldier's being had penetrated through the officer's stiffened discipline, and perturbed the man in him. He, however, was a gentleman, with long, fine hands and cultivated movements, and was not going to allow the stirring of his innate self. He was a man of passionate temper, who had always kept himself suppressed. Occasionally, there had been a duel, or an outburst before the soldiers. He knew himself to be always on the point of breaking out. He kept himself focused hard on the idea of the Service. Whereas, the young soldier seemed to live out his warm, full nature, to give it off in his very movements, which had a certain zest, such as wild animals have in free movement. This irritated the officer more and more.

In spite of himself, the Captain could not regain his neutrality of feeling towards his orderly. Nor could he leave the man alone. In spite of himself, he watched him, gave him sharp orders, tried to take up as much of his time as possible. Sometimes he flew into a rage with the young soldier, and bullied him. Then the orderly shut himself off, as it were out of earshot, and waited with sullen, flushed face for the end of the noise. The words never pierced to his intelligence, he made himself protectively impervious to the feelings of his master.



He had a scar on his left thumb, a deep seam going across the knuckle. The officer had long agonized over it, and wanted to do something to it. Still it was there, ugly and brutal on the young, sculptured hand. At last, the Captain's reserve gave way. One day, as the orderly was smoothing out the tablecloth, the officer pinned down his thumb with a pencil, asking, "How did you come by that?"

The young man winced and drew back at attention.

"A wood-axe, Herr Hauptmann," he answered.

The officer waited for further explanation. None came. The orderly went about his duties. The elder man was sullenly angry. His servant avoided him. The next day, he had to use all his willpower to avoid seeing the scarred thumb. He wanted to get hold of it — a hot flame ran in his blood.

He knew his servant would soon be free, and would be glad. As yet, the soldier held himself off from the elder man. The Captain grew madly irritable. He could not rest when the soldier was away, and when he was present, he glared at him with tormented eyes. He hated those fine, black brows over tired unmeaning, dark eyes. He was infuriated by the free movement of the handsome limbs, which no military discipline could stiffen. He became harsh and cruelly bullying, using contempt and satire. The young soldier only grew more mute and expressionless.

What cattle were you bred by, that you cannot keep your eyes straight? Look me in the eyes when I speak to you.

The soldier turned his dark eyes to the officer's face, but there was no sight in them — he stared with the slightest possible cast, holding back his sight, perceiving the blue of his master's eyes, but receiving no look from them. The elder man went pale, and his reddish eyebrows twitched. He gave his order, barrenly.

Once he flung a heavy military glove into the young soldier's face. Then he had the satisfaction of seeing the black eyes flare up into his own, like a blaze when straw is thrown on a fire. He laughed with a little tremor and a sneer.



There were only two months more. The youth instinctively tried to keep himself intact. He tried to serve the officer as if the latter were an abstract authority and not a man. All his instinct was to avoid personal contact and the officer's hate. In spite of himself, the hate grew, responsive to the officer's passion. However, he put it in the background. He longed for the day when he would leave the Army — he could dare acknowledge it.

By nature, he was active, and had many friends. He thought what amazing good fellows they were. Yet, without completely understanding why, he felt utterly alone. Now, this solitary feeling was intensified. He feared it would follow him through his term. The officer seemed to be going irritably insane, and the youth was deeply frightened.



The soldier had a sweetheart, a girl from the mountains, independent and primitive. The two walked together, rather silently. He went with her, not to talk, but to have his arm round her, and for the physical contact. This eased him, made it easier for him to ignore the Captain. He could rest with her held fast against his chest. She, in some unspoken fashion, was there for him. They loved each other.

The Captain perceived it, and was mad with irritation. He kept the young orderly engaged every evening, and took pleasure in the dark look that came on his face. Occasionally, the eyes of the two men met those of the younger sullen and dark, doggedly unalterable, those of the elder sneering with restless contempt.

The officer tried hard not to admit the passion that had got hold of him. He would not acknowledge to himself that his feeling for his orderly was anything but that of a man incensed by his stupid, perverse servant. Keeping quite justified and conventional in his

consciousness, he let his feelings toward his orderly run on. His nerves, however, were suffering as a result.

At last, he slung the end of a belt in his servant's face. When he saw the youth jump back with painful tears in his eyes and blood on his mouth, he felt at once a thrill of deep pleasure and of shame. This, he acknowledged to himself, was a thing he had never done before. The fellow was too exasperating. His own nerves must be going to pieces. He went away for some days with a woman.

It was a mockery of pleasure. He simply did not want the woman. He stayed on for his time. At the end of it, he came back in an agony of irritation, torment, and misery. He rode all evening, and then came straight into supper. His orderly was out. The officer sat with his long, fine hands lying on the table, perfectly still, and all his blood seemed to be corroding.

At last, his servant entered. He watched the strong, easy young figure, the fine eyebrows, and the thick black hair. In a week's time, the youth had got back his old well-being. The hands of the officer twitched and seemed to be full of mad flame. The young man stood at attention, unmoving, shut out. The meal went in silence. The orderly seemed eager. He made a clatter with the dishes.

"Are you in a hurry?" asked the officer, watching the intent, warm face of his servant. The other did not reply.

"Will you answer my question?" said the Captain.

"Yes, sir," replied the orderly, standing with his pile of deep Army plates.

The Captain waited, looked at him, and then asked again, "Are you in a hurry?"

"Yes, sir," came the answer, that sent a flash through the listener.

"For what?"

"I was going out, sir."

"I want you this evening." There was a moment's hesitation. The officer had a curious stiffness of countenance.

"Yes, sir," replied the servant, in his throat.

"I want you tomorrow evening also — in fact, you may consider your evenings occupied, unless I give you leave."

The mouth with the young moustache tightened with an inner rage that he could not show.

"Yes, sir," answered the orderly, loosening his lips for a moment. He again turned to the door.

"Why do you have a piece of pencil in your ear?"

The orderly hesitated, and then continued on his way without answering. He set the plates in a pile outside the door, took the stump of pencil from his ear, and put it in his pocket. He had been copying a verse for his sweetheart's birthday card. He returned to finish clearing the table. The officer's eyes were dancing, he had a little, eager smile.

"Why have you a piece of pencil in your ear?" he asked.

The orderly's hands were full of dishes. His master was standing near a large green stove, a little smile on his face, his chin thrust forward. When the young soldier saw him, his heart suddenly ran hot. He felt blind. Instead of answering, he turned dazedly to the door. As he was crouching to set down the dishes, he was pitched forward by a kick from behind. The pots went in a stream down the stairs; he clung to the pillar of the banisters. As he was rising, he was kicked heavily again, and again, so that he clung sickly to the post for some moments. His master had gone swiftly into the room and closed the door. The maidservant downstairs looked up the staircase and made a mocking face at the crockery disaster.

The officer's heart was plunging. He poured himself a glass of wine, part of which he spilled on the floor, and gulped the remainder, leaning against the cool, green stove. He heard the orderly collecting the dishes from the stairs. Pale, as if intoxicated, he waited. The servant entered again. The Captain's heart gave a pang, as of pleasure, seeing the young fellow bewildered and uncertain on his feet with pain.

"Schöner!" he said.

The soldier was a little slower in coming to attention.

"Yes, sir!" The youth stood before him, with a pathetic young moustache, and fine eyebrows very distinct on his forehead of dark marble.

"I asked you a question."

"Yes, sir."

The officer's tone bit like acid. "Why had you a pencil in your ear?"

Again, the servant's heart ran hot, and he could not breathe. With dark, strained eyes, he looked at the officer, as if fascinated. He stood there sturdily planted, unconscious. A withering smile came into the Captain's frenzied eyes as he lifted his foot threatening to kick the orderly again.

"I forgot it sir," panted the soldier, his dark eyes fixed on the other man's dancing blue ones.

"What was it doing there?"

He saw the young man's breast heaving as he made an effort for words.

"I had been writing."

"Writing what?"

Again, the officer looked him up and down. He could hear the orderly panting. A smile came into his blue eyes. The orderly slogged at his dry throat, but could not speak. Suddenly, a blustery smile came over the officer's face, and a kick thrashed heavily against the orderly's thigh. The youth moved a pace sideways. His face went dead, with two black, staring eyes.

"Well?" said the officer.

The orderly's mouth had gone dry, and his tongue clung to the roof of his mouth. His throat began straining once again. The officer raised his foot. The orderly's body mindlessly became rigid and stiff.

"Some poetry, sir," came the sound from the crackling, unrecognizable sound of his voice.

"Poetry, what poetry?" asked the Captain, with a sickly smile.

Again, the orderly strained his throat.

The Captain's suddenly became downhearted, and stood there placid, sick, and tired.

"For my girl, sir," he heard the dry, inhuman sounding response.

"Oh!" he said, turning away. "Clear the table."

"Click!" went the soldier's throat; then again, "click!" and then the hail-articulate, "Yes, sir."

The young soldier was gone, looking old, and walking heavily.

The officer, left alone, held himself rigid to prevent himself from thinking. His instinct warned him that he must not think. Deep inside him was the intense gratification of his passion, still working powerfully. Then there was a counter action, a horrible breaking down of something inside him, a whole agony of reaction. He stood there for an hour motionless, a chaos of sensations, but rigid with a will to keep blank his consciousness, to prevent his mind from grasping the significance of what just occurred. He held himself still until the worst of the stress had passed and then began to drink. He drank himself to intoxication until he fell asleep obliterated.



When the officer woke in the morning, he was shaken to the base of his nature. He had fought off the realization of what he had done. He had prevented his mind from taking the events in and suppressed it along with his instincts. The conscious man inside himself had nothing to do with it. He felt only as after a bout of intoxication, weak, but the affair itself all dim and not to be recovered. Of the drunkenness of his passion, he successfully refused remembrance.

When his orderly appeared with coffee, the officer assumed the same strict countenance he had the morning before. He refused the event of the past night — he denied it had ever been — and was successful in his denial. He had not done any such thing — not he himself. Whatever wrong there might be lay at the door of a stupid, insubordinate servant.



The orderly had gone about in a stupor all evening. He drank some beer because he was parched, but not much, the alcohol made his feeling come back, and he could not bear it. He was dulled, as if nine-tenths of the ordinary man in him were inert. He crawled about disfigured. Still, when he thought of the kicks, he got sick, when he thought of the threat of more kicking in the room afterwards, his heart went hot and faint, and he panted, remembering the brutal kicks. He had been forced to say, "For my girl." He was much too incensed even to cry. His mouth hung slightly open, like an idiot. He felt vacant, and wasted. He wandered at his work, painfully, and very slowly and clumsily, fumbling blindly with the brushes, and finding it difficult when he sat down to summon the energy to move again. His limbs, his jaw, were slack and nerveless. He was very tired. He got to bed at last and slept inert, relaxed, in a sleep that was more stupor than slumber. A dead night of stupefaction shot through with gleams of anguish.

In the morning were the maneuvers. He woke even before the bugle sounded. The painful ache in his chest, the dryness of his throat, the awful steady feeling of misery made his eyes come awake and dreary at once. He knew without thinking what had happened. He knew that the day had come again, when he must go on with his round. The last bit of darkness was fleeting out of the room. He would have to move his inert body and go on. He was so young, and had known so little trouble, that he was bewildered. He only wished it would stay night, so that he could lie still, covered up by the darkness. Yet nothing would prevent the day from coming, nothing would save him from having to get up and saddle the Captain's horse and make the Captain's coffee. It was there, inevitable. Then, he thought, it was impossible. Yet they would not let him free of his duty. He must go and take the coffee to the Captain. He was too stunned to understand it. He only knew it was inevitable — inevitable, however long he lay inert.

At last, after heaving at himself, for he seemed to be a mass of inertia, he got up. He had to force every one of his movements from behind with his will. He felt lost, dazed, and helpless. Then he clutched hold of the bed, the pain was so keen. Looking at his thighs, he saw the dark bruises on his flesh and he knew that if he pressed one of his fingers on one of the bruises, he would faint. He did not want to faint — he did not want anybody to know. No one should ever know. It was between him and the Captain. There were only the two people in the world now — himself and the Captain.

Slowly, economically, he got dressed and forced himself to walk. Everything was obscure, except what he could feel in front of him with his hands. He managed to get through his work. The very pain revived his dull senses. The worst yet remained. He took the tray and went up to the Captain's room. The officer, pale and heavy, sat at the table. The orderly, as he saluted, felt himself put out of existence. He stood still for a moment submitting to his own nullification, and then attempted to gather himself. For a moment,

the orderly seemed to regain his composure. Then the Captain began to grow vague, unreal, and the younger soldier's heart began to race. He clung to the situation that the Captain did not exist — so that he might live.

When he saw his officer's hand tremble as he took the coffee, he felt everything falling shattered on the ground. He went away, feeling as if he himself were coming to pieces, disintegrated. When the Captain was there on horseback giving orders, while he himself stood with rifle and knapsack, sick with pain, he felt as if he must shut his eyes — as if he must shut his eyes on everything. It was only the long agony of marching with a parched throat that filled him with one single, sleep-heavy intention — to save himself.

PART II

He was even getting used to his parched throat. That the snowy peaks were radiant among the sky, that the white-green glacier-river twisted through its pale shoals in the valley below, seemed almost supernatural. He was going mad with fever and thirst. He plodded on uncomplaining. He did not want to speak, not to anybody. There were two gulls, like flakes of water and snow, over the river. The scent of green rye soaked in sunshine came like a sickness. The march continued monotonously, almost like a bad sleep.

At the next farmhouse, which stood low and broad near the high road, tubs of water had been put out. The soldiers clustered round to drink. They took off their helmets, and steam evaporated from their wet hair. The Captain sat on horseback watching. He needed to see his orderly. His helmet threw a dark shadow over his light, fierce eyes, but his moustache and mouth and chin were distinct in the sunshine.

The orderly must move under the presence of the figure of the horseman. It was not that he was afraid or cowed. It was as if he was disemboweled, made empty, like an empty shell. He felt himself as nothing, a shadow creeping under the sunshine. Thirsty as he was, he could scarcely drink, feeling the Captain near him. He would not take off his helmet to wipe his wet hair. He wanted to stay in shadow, not forced into consciousness. Staring ahead into the distance, he saw the light heel of the officer prick the belly of the horse as the Captain cantered away. Finally, he could relapse into vacancy and find a brief respite from his torment and agony rushing through his being. .

Nothing, however, could give him back his living place in the hot, bright morning. He felt like a gap among it all. Whereas the Captain was prouder, overriding. A hot flash went through the young servant's body. The Captain was firmer and prouder with life; he

himself was empty as a shadow. Again, the flash went through him, dazing him out. His heart ran a little firmer.

The company turned up the hill, to make a loop for the return. Below, from among the trees, the farm-bell clanged. He saw the laborers, mowing barefoot at the thick grass, leave off their work and go downhill, their scythes hanging over their shoulders, like long, bright claws curving down behind them. They seemed like dream-people, as if they had no relationship to him. He felt as in a blackish dream — as if all the other things were there and had form, but he was only a consciousness, a gap that could barely think and perceive.

The soldiers were tramping silently up the glaring hillside. Gradually his head began to revolve, slowly, rhythmically. Sometimes it was dark before his eyes, as if he saw this world through a smoked glass, frail shadows and unreal. It gave him a pain in his head to walk.

The air was too scented, it gave no breath. All the lush green-stuff seemed to be issuing its sap, till the air was deathly, sickly with the smell of greenness. There was the perfume of clover, like pure honey and bees. Then there grew a faint acrid tang — they were near the beeches; and then a queer clattering noise, and a suffocating, hideous smell. They were passing a flock of sheep, a shepherd in a black smock, holding his crook. Why should the sheep huddle together under this fierce sun? He felt that the shepherd would not see him, though he could see the shepherd.

At last, there was the halt. They stacked rifles in a conical stack, put down their kit in a scattered circle around it, and dispersed a little, sitting on a small knoll high on the hillside. The chatter began. The soldiers steamed with heat, but were lively. He sat still, watching the blue mountains rising upon the land, twenty kilometers away.

There was a blue fold in the ranges, then out of that, at the foot, the broad, pale bed of the river, stretches of white-green water between pinkish-grey shoals among the dark pinewoods. There it was, spread out a long way off. It seemed to come downhill, the river. There was a raft being steered a mile away. It was a strange country. Nearer, a red-roofed, broad farm with white base and square dots of windows crouched beside the wall of beech foliage on the wood's edge. There were long strips of rye and clover and pale green corn. Just at his feet, below the knoll, was a darkish bog, where globe-flowers stood breathless still on their slim stalks. Some of the pale gold bubbles were burst, and a broken fragment hung in the air. He thought he was going to sleep.

Suddenly something moved into this colored mirage before his eyes. The Captain, a small, light-blue and scarlet figure, was trotting evenly between the strips of corn, along the level brow of the hill. The man making flag-signals was approaching. Proud and sure moved the horseman's figure, the quick, bright thing, in which was concentrated all the light of this morning, which for the rest lay a fragile, shining shadow. Submissive, apathetic, the young soldier sat and stared. As the horse slowed to a walk coming up the last steep path, a great flash flared over the body and soul of the orderly.

He sat waiting. The back of his head felt as if it were weighted with a heavy piece of fire. He did not want to eat. His hands trembled slightly as he moved them. Meanwhile, the officer on horseback was approaching slowly and proudly. The tension grew in the orderly's soul. Then again, seeing the Captain ease himself on the saddle, an uncontrollable flash blazed through him once more.

The Captain looked at the patch of light blue and scarlet, and the dark heads of the soldiers clustered closely together on the hillside. It pleased him. The command pleased him. He was feeling proud. His orderly was among them in common subjection. The officer rose a little on his stirrups to look. The young soldier sat with averted, dumb face.

The Captain relaxed on his seat. His slim-legged, beautiful horse, brown as a beechnut, walked proudly uphill.

The Captain passed into the zone of the company's atmosphere — a hot smell of men, of sweat, of leather. He knew it very well. After a word with the lieutenant, he went a few paces higher and sat there, a dominant figure, his sweat-marked horse swishing its tail, while he looked down on his men, on his orderly, a nonentity among the crowd.

The young soldier's heart was like fire in his chest, and he breathed with difficulty. The officer, looking downhill, saw three of the young soldiers, two pails of water between them, staggering across a sunny green field. A table had been set up under a tree, and there the slim lieutenant stood, importantly busy. Then the Captain summoned himself to an act of courage. He called his orderly.

The name leapt into the young soldier's throat as he heard the command. He rose blindly, stifled. He saluted, standing below the officer. He did not look up. There was a flicker in the Captain's voice.

"Go to the inn and fetch me mug of ale." The officer gave his commands. "Quick!" he added.

As the orderly heard the bellowing order, his heart leapt with a flash, and he felt an overpowering strength come over his body. He turned in mechanical obedience and set on at a heavy run downhill, looking almost like a bear, his trousers bagging over his military boots. The officer watched this blind, plunging run all the way.

Only the outside of the orderly's body obeyed the commands so humbly and mechanically. Inside had gradually accumulated a core into which all the energy of his young life was compact and concentrated. He executed his commission, and plodded

quickly back uphill. There was a pain in his head as he walked that made him twist his features unknowingly. Hard there in the center of his chest was himself, himself, firm, and not to be plucked to pieces.

The captain had gone up into the wood. The orderly plodded through the hot, powerfully smelling zone of the company's atmosphere. He had a curious mass of energy inside him now. The Captain was less real than himself. He approached the green entrance to the wood. There, in the half-shade, he saw the horse standing, the sunshine, and the tuckering shadow of leaves dancing over his brown body. There was a clearing where timber had lately been felled. Here, in the gold-green shade beside the brilliant cup of sunshine, stood two figures, blue and pink, the bits of pink showing out plainly. The Captain was talking to his lieutenant.

The orderly stood on the edge of the bright clearing, where great trunks of trees, stripped and glistening, lay stretched like naked, brown-skinned bodies. Chips of wood littered the trampled floor, like splashed light, and the bases of the felled trees stood here and there, with their raw, level tops. Beyond was the brilliant, sunlit green of a beech.

"Then I will ride forward," the orderly heard his Captain say. The lieutenant saluted and strode away. He himself went forward. A hot flash passed through his belly, as he tramped towards his officer.

The Captain watched the rather heavy figure of the young soldier stumble forward, and his veins, too, ran hot. This was to be man to man between them. He yielded before the solid, stumbling figure with bent head. The orderly stooped and put the food on a level-sawn tree-base. The Captain watched the glistening, sun-inflamed, naked hands. He wanted to speak to the young soldier, but could not. The servant propped a bottle against his thigh, pressed open the cork, and poured out the beer into the mug. He kept his head bent. The Captain accepted the mug.

"Hot!" he said, as if amiably.

The flame sprang out of the orderly's heart, nearly suffocating him.

"Yes, sir," he replied, between shut teeth.

He heard the sound of the Captain's drinking, and he clenched his fists, such a strong torment came into his wrists. Then came the faint clang of the closing of the pot-lid. He looked up. The Captain was watching him. He glanced swiftly away. Then he saw the officer stoop and take a piece of bread from the tree-base. Again, a flash of flame went through the young soldier, seeing the stiff body stoop beneath him, and his hands jerked. He looked away. He could feel the officer was nervous. The bread fell as it was being broken. The officer ate the other piece. The two men stood tense and still, the master laboriously chewing his bread, the servant staring with averted face, his fist clenched.

Then the young soldier stood up. The officer had pressed open the lid of the mug again. The orderly watched the lid of the mug, and the white hand that clenched the handle, as if he were fascinated. The youth followed it with his eyes. Then he saw the thin, strong throat of the elder man moving up and down as he drank, the strong jaw working. The instinct that had been pulling at the young man's wrists suddenly broke free. Suddenly, he jumped, feeling as if his essence were split in two by a strong flame.

The spur of the officer caught in a tree-root, he went down backwards with a crash, the middle of his back thudding sickeningly against a sharp-edged tree-base, the pot flying away. In a second, the orderly, with serious, earnest young face, and under-lip between his teeth, pushed his knees into the officer's chest. He pressed the Captain's chin backward over the farther edge of the tree-stump, pressing with all his might and the passion that had simmered in his heart. The tension of his wrists around the neck of the

Captain released his anguish and provided a quiet sense of relief. With the base of his palms, he shoved at the officer's chin with all his might. The orderly felt it was pleasant to have that chin, that hard jaw already slightly rough with beard, in his hands.

He did not relax one hair's breadth, with the force of all his blood exulting in his thrust. He shoved back the head of the Captain, till there was a little clunk and a crunching sensation. Then he felt as if his head went to vapor. Heavy convulsions shook the body of the officer, frightening and horrifying the young soldier. Yet it pleased him, too, to repress them. It pleased him to keep his hands pressing back the chin, to feel the chest of the officer yield in expiration to the weight of his strong, young knees. He felt the trembling convulsions of the Captain's prostrate body rumble through his whole frame, which was pressed down on it.

The Captain's body went still. The orderly could look into the nostrils of the officer, the eyes he could scarcely see. How curiously the mouth pouted outward, exaggerating the full lips, and the moustache bristling up from them. Then, with a startled gasp, he noticed the nostrils gradually filled with blood. The red brimmed, hesitated, ran over, and went in a thin trickle down the face to the eyes.

It shocked and distressed him. Slowly, he got up. The Captain's body twitched and sprawled there, inert. He stood and looked at it in silence. It was a pity it was broken. It represented more than the thing that had kicked and bullied him. He was afraid to look at the eyes. They were hideous now, only the whites showing, and the blood running to them. The face of the orderly was drawn with horror at the sight.

Will, it was so. In his heart, the orderly was satisfied. He had hated the face of the Captain. It was extinguished now. The Captain lay there dead. There was a heavy relief in the orderly's soul. That was as it should be. He could not bear to see the long, military

body lying broken over the tree-base, the fine fingers tightly curled. He wanted to hide it away.

Quickly, busily, he gathered it up and pushed it under the felled tree-trunks, which rested their beautiful, smooth length either end on logs. The face was horrible with blood. He covered it with the helmet. Then he pushed the limbs straight and decent, and brushed the dead leaves off the fine cloth of the uniform. It lay quite still in the shadow under there. A little strip of sunshine ran along the breast from a chink between the logs. The orderly sat by it for a few moments. Here his life also ended.

Then, through his daze, he heard the lieutenant, in a loud voice, explaining to the men outside the wood, that they were to suppose the enemy held the bridge on the river below. Now they were to march to the attack in such and such a manner. The lieutenant had no gift of expression. The orderly, listening from habit, got muddled. When the lieutenant began it all again, he ceased to hear. He knew he must go. He stood up. It surprised him that the leaves were glittering in the sun, and the chips of wood reflecting white from the ground. For him, a change had come over the world. For the rest it had not — all seemed the same. Only he had left it. He could not go back. It was his duty to return with the beer-pot and the bottle. He could not. He had left all that. The lieutenant was still hoarsely explaining. He must go, or they would overtake him. He could not bear contact with anyone now.

He drew his fingers over his eyes, trying to find out where he was. Then he turned away. He saw the horse standing in the path. He went up to it and mounted. It hurt him to sit in the saddle. The pain of keeping his seat occupied him as they cantered through the wood. He would not have minded anything, but he could not get away from the sense of being divided from the others. The path led out of the trees. On the edge of the wood, he pulled up and stood watching. There in the spacious sunshine of the valley, soldiers were moving in a little swarm. Every now and then, a man harrowing on a strip of fallow,

shouted to his oxen at the turn. The village and the white-towered church were small in the sunshine.

He no longer belonged to this world — he sat there, a stranger, like a man outside in the dark. He had gone out from everyday life into the unknown, and he could not go back — no, he did not want to go back.

Turning from the sun-blazing valley, he rode deep into the wood. Tree-trunks, like people standing grey and still, took no notice as he went. A doe, herself a moving bit of sunshine and shadow, went running through the flecked shade. There were bright green breaks in the foliage. Then it was all pinewood, dark and cool. He was sick with pain, he had an intolerable great pulse in his head, and he was sick. He had never been ill in his life. He felt lost, quite dazed with all of this.

Trying to get down from the horse, he fell, astonished at the pain and his lack of balance. The horse shifted uneasily. He jerked its bridle and sent it cantering away. It was his last connection with the rest of things.

He only wanted to lie down and not be disturbed. Stumbling through the trees, he came upon a quiet place where beeches and pine trees grew on a slope. Immediately he had lain down and closed his eyes, his consciousness went racing on without him. A big pulse of sickness beat in him as if it throbbed through the whole earth. He was burning with dry heat. He was too busy, too teary in the incoherent race of delirium to observe.

PART III

He came to with a stop. His mouth was dry and hard, his heart beat heavily, but he had not the energy to get up. His heart beat heavily. Where was he — the barrack — at home? There was something knocking. Making an effort, he looked round — trees, and litter of greenery, and reddish, night, still pieces of sunshine on the floor. He did not believe he was himself, he did not believe what he saw. Something was knocking. He made a struggle towards consciousness, but relapsed. Then he struggled again. Gradually his surroundings fell into relationship with himself. He knew, and a great pang of fear went through his heart. Somebody was knocking. He could see the heavy, black rags of a fir tree overhead.

Then everything went black. Yet he did not believe he had closed his eyes. He had not. Out of the blackness sight slowly emerged again. Someone was knocking. Suddenly, he saw the blood-disfigured face of his Captain, ghost-like, in front of eyes, and his hate for him flared. He held himself still with horror. Yet, deep inside him, he knew that it was so, the Captain should be dead. The physical delirium got hold of him. Someone was knocking. He lay perfectly still, as if dead with fear. He went unconscious.

When he opened his eyes again, he stood up, seeing something creeping swiftly up a tree-trunk. It was a little bird. The bird was whistling overhead. Tap-tap-tap — it was a small, bird rapidly rapping the tree-trunk with its beak, as if its head were a little round hammer. He watched it curiously. It shifted sharply in its creeping fashion. Then, like a mouse, it slid down the bare trunk. Its swift creeping sent a flash of revulsion through him. He raised his head. It felt a great weight.

Then, a little bird ran out of the shadow across a still patch of sunshine, its little head bobbing swiftly, its white legs twinkling brightly for a moment. How neat it was in its build, so compact, with pieces of white on its wings. There were several of them. They were so pretty — but they crept like swift, erratic mice, running here and there among the beech mast.

He lay down again exhausted, and his consciousness lapsed. He had a horror of the little creeping birds. All his blood seemed to be darting and creeping in his head. Yet he could not move.



He came to with a further ache of exhaustion. There was the pain in his head, and the horrible sickness, and his inability to move. He had never been ill in his life. He did not know where he was or what he was. Probably he had gotten sunstroke. What else could it be? He had silenced the Captain forever some time ago — oh, a long time ago. There had been blood on his face, and his eyes had turned upwards. It was all right, somehow. The orderly was at peace with himself. Then unexpectedly he realized he had got beyond his being, his essence.

He had never been here before. Was it life, or not life? He was by himself. They were in a big, bright place, those others, and he was outside. The town, all the country, a big bright place of light — and he was outside, here, in the darkened open beyond, where each thing existed alone. They would all have to come out to the beyond sometime, those others. Insignificant, and left behind him, they all were. There had been father and mother, and sweetheart. What did they all matter here and now? His existence had suddenly become a surreal and barren desert.

He sat up. Something scuffled. It was a little, brown squirrel running in lovely, undulating bounds over the floor, its red tail completing the undulation of its body — and then, as it sat up, furling and unfurling. He watched it, pleased. It ran on friskily, enjoying itself. It flew wildly at another squirrel. They were chasing each other, and making little scolding, chattering noises. The soldier wanted to speak to them. Yet, when he tried to speak, only a hoarse sound came out of his throat. The squirrels burst away — they flew up the trees.

Then he saw one peeping round at him halfway up a tree-trunk. A pang of fear went through him, though, in so far as he was conscious, he was amused. It still stayed, its little, keen face staring at him halfway up the tree-trunk, its little ears pricked up, its claw-like little hands clinging to the bark, its white breast reared. He jumped back from it in panic.

Struggling to his feet, he lurched away. He went on walking, walking, looking for something to a drink. His brain felt hot and inflamed for want of water. He stumbled on. Then his mind went completely blank. He went unconscious as he walked. Yet he stumbled on, his mouth open.



When, to his dumb wonder, he opened his eyes on the world again, he no longer tried to remember what it was. There was thick, golden light behind golden-green glittering, and tall, grey-purple shafts, and darkness's further off, surrounding him, growing deeper. He was conscious of a sense of arrival. He was amid the reality, on the real, dark bottom of human existence. There was the thirst burning in his brain. He felt lighter, not so heavy. He supposed it was newness. The air was muttering with thunder. He thought he was walking wonderfully swiftly and was coming straight to relief — or was it to water.

Suddenly he stood still with fear. There was a tremendous flare of gold, immense — just a few dark trunks like bars between him and it. All the young level wheat was burnished gold glaring on its silky green. A woman, full-skirted, a black cloth on her head for headdress, was passing like a block of shadow through the glistening, green corn, into the full glare. There was a farm, too, pale blue in shadow, and the timber black.

There was a church spire, nearly fused away in the gold. The woman moved on, away from him. He had no language with which to speak to her. She was the bright, solid unreality. She would make a noise of words that would confuse him, and her eyes would look at him without seeing him. She was crossing there to the other side. He stood against a tree.

When at last he turned, looking down the long, bare grove whose flatbed was already filling dark, he saw the mountains in a wonder-light, not far away, and radiant. Behind the soft, grey ridge of the nearest range, the further mountains stood golden and pale grey, the snow radiating like pure, soft gold. So still, gleaming in the sky, fashioned pure out of the ore of the sky, they shone in their silence. He stood and looked at them, his face illuminated. Like the golden, lustrous gleaming of the snow, he felt his own thirst gnawing at him. He stood and gazed, leaning against a tree. Then everything slid away into space.



During the night, the lightning fluttered perpetually, making the whole sky white. He must have walked again. The world hung livid round him for moments, fields a level sheen of grey-green light, trees in dark bulk, and the range of clouds black across a white sky. Then the darkness fell like a shutter, and the night was whole, a faint mutter of a half-revealed world that could not quite leap out of the darkness!

Then there again stood a sweep of pallor for the land, dark shapes looming, and a range of clouds hanging overhead. The world was a ghostly shadow, thrown for a moment upon the pure darkness, which returned ever whole and complete.

The mere delirium of sickness and fever reeled inside him — his brain opening and shutting like the night — then sometimes convulsions of terror from something with great eyes that stared round a tree — then the long agony of the march, and the sun decomposing his blood — then the pang of hate for the Captain, followed by a pang of tenderness and ease. Everything was distorted, born from a deep ache, and resolving into pain.



In the morning, he became definitely awake. Then his brain flamed with the sole horror of thirstiness! The sun was on his face, the dew was steaming from his wet clothes. Like one possessed, he got up. There, straight in front of him, blue, cool, and tender, the mountains ranged across the pale edge of the morning sky. He wanted them — he wanted them alone — he wanted to leave himself and be identified with them. They did not move, they were still and soft, with white, gentle markings of snow. He stood still, mad with suffering, his hands gripping and clutching. Then he was twisting in a paroxysm on the grass.

He lay still, in a kind of dream of anguish. His thirst seemed to have separated itself from him, and to stand apart, a single demand. Then the pain he felt was another single self. Then there was the clog of his body, another separate thing. He was divided among all kinds of separate beings. There was some strange, agonized connection between them, but they were drawing further apart. Then they would all split. The sun, drilling down on him, was drilling through the bond.

Then they would all fall — fall through the everlasting lapse of space. Then again — his consciousness reasserted itself. He roused on to his elbow and stared at the gleaming mountains. There they ranked, all still and wonderful between earth and heaven. He stared until his eyes went black. The mountains, as they stood in their beauty, so clean and cool, seemed to have it, that which was lost in him.

Part IV

When the soldiers found him, three hours later, he was lying with his face over his arm, his black hair giving off heat under the sun. He was still alive. Seeing the open, black mouth, the young soldiers dropped him in horror.

He died in the hospital at night, without having seen again.

The doctors saw the bruises on his legs and were silent.

The bodies of the two men lay together, side by side, in the mortuary, the one white and slender, but laid rigidly at rest, the other, so young and unused, looking as if every moment it must rouse to life again from a slumber.

THE END