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A Battery Shelled (1919), Percy Wyndham Lewis

Homecoming

By *Sonia Vlatkovic*

The pounding of bombshells became the crashing of thunder.

The bullets became fireworks; the screams became howling winds, tearing through Berlin's narrow streets.

I concentrated harder, my eyelashes damp against my skin as my tears and hysteria threatened to spill free. If I remained willingly blind and equally deaf, then perhaps the bone-deep weariness curving my shoulders and hunching my back would disappear; never mind that for the past four years, this had not worked. But perhaps it would today.

"General!"

My head snapped up. A soldier stood before me, his face grimy and his mouth twisted downwards in a grimace of terror.

"It is time," the soldier said, a tremor rippling through his reedy voice.

"Excellent!" I said, my voice painfully bright. In this small room, the roof seemed too small, my uniform too heavy, my collar too tight. The smell of artillery smoke still clung to the walls, conjuring memories of hazy darkness and utter hopelessness. Clearing my throat, I added, "Gather the others."

With a sharp nod of his head, the soldier's footsteps joined the aimless percussion of bullets and bombshells. I watched his departure before averting my gaze to the puckered telegram lying nearby. Its creases and folds showed how many times I had desperately clutched it, rendering the message nearly illegible. One section, however, always seemed to remain bold against the paper.

The Americans have arrived.

It was truly remarkable how a single sentence could evoke so many emotions; relief, terror, hope and despair warred within me. I gripped the telegram once more, treating it like a lifeline as I recalled how proud I once was at the prospect of fighting for Germany. Now, after enduring endless artillery attacks in smoky darkness, after watching my soldiers die and die and die... I simply wanted the war to end.

I tucked the telegram into my pocket, clasp my hands to hide the trembling as I strode through the trench. The muddy ground underfoot imitated the battlefield, and the smoky air warned of the cold enemy machines lying in wait; both helped me assume my mask of confidence. *You are just a man*, I told myself.

I could feel the weight of my soldiers' gazes as I approached. Swallowing, I kept my eyes carefully downcast. I had stopped looking into their eyes long ago. They were always so empty, wretched; drained of hope and longing for defeat. I feared that if I looked into their eyes, then I would see myself reflected.

"Soldiers!" I said, my voice ringing with feigned confidence. Although countless soldiers stood before me, blankly awaiting their orders, I had never felt more alone. "Commence the offensive!"

A hollow silence followed my order, punctuated by wails, gunfire and booming artillery as my men began their advance. They had stopped cheering long ago – even before they had lost the will to desert and rebel against German rule. Their emptiness seemed to be its own mutiny, screaming for an end to the fighting.

I stood, watching, as the orchestra of war played its song. My army had been reduced to puppets. If they were puppets, then I was the puppeteer, controlling their desperate, fatalistic movements as I led the German Army to its doom. In this cruel battlefield, devoid of mercy and hope, I was playing God, destined to die twice after condemning so many to such sinful fates.

Yes, I thought. Sometimes, during the long weeks spent shielding from enemy artillery bombing, I felt as though the entire war was some feverish dream. But what kind of dream stank of death and machine smoke? What kind of dream made me feel so isolated from my heart and morals?

Perhaps this was why I always felt so alone; I was the inhuman among our ranks, not my soldiers.

Sudden despair overwhelmed me. The sharp smell of artillery smoke flooded my senses as I fumbled for the telegram in my pocket. I was a man. A man, not a monster.

I said that, yet it was far too easy to look at the enemy trenches and see monsters. They were generals and soldiers much like us, perhaps sharing the same sentiment for the war to conclude. *Or, I thought wryly, for Germany to surrender.*

It was just as easy to look at guns, machine guns and mortars and only see the desolate face of destruction. These were the weapons that had propelled Germany in the arms race against Britain, and now these were the same weapons propelling Germany towards its doom.

Screams of artillery echoed all around me. I turned, my boot twisting into the mud as I wavered: watch my men or turn away once more? I already knew what I would see. Craters slashing the earth, turning the landscape into a shapeless mass grave; uniforms of those who were Allied and those who were Central, dotted amongst the barbed wires and muddy mounds; dead trees, reaching towards the sky in a bid for freedom; machine guns and mortars spraying the air, demonstrating the industrial might of both armies.

I hesitated. Removing my clammy glove, I allowed my hand to brush the telegram once more. *It is almost over*, I thought, finally turning towards the battlefield. *Home is near*. Grey artillery fog veiled the land, engulfing corpses and hiding the sky as it crept towards our trenches. I would never be able to scrub the stench of smoke and death from my skin.

Home is near.

