

Chautonville

BY WILL LEVINGTON COMFORT

From *The Masses*

They said that the Russian line was a hundred miles long. I know nothing about that, but I know that it extended as far as the eye could reach to the east and west, and that this had been so for many weeks. But *time*, as it is known in the outer world, had stopped for us. It was now November, and we had been without mails since late in August. Three days of hideous cold had come without warning, and before the snows, so that there was a foot of iron frost in the ground. This had to be bitten through in all our trench-making, and though we were on the southern slopes of the Carpathians, timber was scarce. At each of our recent meetings with the Austrian enemy, we had expected to feel the new strike--the different resistance of German reinforcement.

A queer sense had come to us from the Austrians. I had thought of it many times and others had spoken the same: that it didn't matter greatly to them. They gave us fierce fighting, but always when we were exhausted and insane with our dead--they fell away before us. This had happened so often that we came to expect it, our chief puzzle being just how long they would hold out in each battle. Especially when our brigade was engaged, and we had entered into an intensity that was all the human could endure, I would almost stop breathing in the expectancy of the release of tension before us. When it did not come, I invariably found afterward that I was out of perspective with the mainline, on account of the fierceness of our immediate struggle. We were but one snapping loop of the fighting--too localized to affect the main front. The Austrians gave all in a piece, when they drew back.

Days were the same, a steady suffering. I did not know before what men could stand. We had weeks of life that formerly I would have considered fatal to adventure with through one night or day--exposure, fatigue, famine--and over all the passion for home, that slow lasting fire. I began to understand how the field-mice winter--how the northern birds live through, and what a storm, on top of a storm, means to all creatures of the north country that are forced to take what

comes, when the earth tilts up into the bleak and icy gray. We forget this as men, until a war comes.

But all measuring of the world had ceased for our eyes. A man must have emotions for this, and we thought our emotions dead. I wonder if it can be understood--this being shaken down to the end, this facing of life and death without a personal relation?... Crawling out of the blanket in the morning, I have met the cold--such a shock throughout, that it centered like a long pin driven in the heart. I have seen my friends go, right and left on the field--those who helped tend the fire the night before--and met their end and my own peril without a quickened pulse. Of course, I knew something was changed for me, because I had not been this way. I had even lost the love of courage--that quality of field-work that used to raise my hair, so high and pure did it seem to my eyes.... But the night came, when I heard a little man mumbling over the fire to the effect that he hated it all--that the Little Father was making monkeys of us all--and a thrill shot over me, so that I knew I was alive. Yes, there was something to that.

"Sh-shh--" said I. Two others drew near, as if a bottle had been opened. And Firthus, my closest friend, gripped my arm, leaving a blue welt where his thumb had pressed.

"It's as bad to say 'sh-sh--' as to say what he said," Firthus whispered.

Yes, even in the coldness, there was a thrill to that. Perhaps we thrill at the first breath of that which is to come and change us over.

... For three days they had given our part of the line a different and extraordinary resistance, so that for three nights we camped in the same place. A valley was before us, and the infantry had tried to cross again and again, always meeting at a certain place in the hollows an enfilading fire from the forward low hills. We could not get enough men across to charge the emplacements.... We were mid-west of the west wing, it was said; and word came the third day that we were holding up the whole line; that the east was ready to drive through, in fact, was bending forward; that the west was marking time on our account--and here we were keeping the whole Russian invasion from spending the holidays in Budapest.

On that third day I was dispatching from brigade-headquarters to the trenches. The General and his staff stood in a shepherd's house in the midst of a circle of rocks. Waiting there I began to understand that they were having difficulty in forcing the men forward in the later charges. The lines could see their dead of former advances, black and countless upon the valley snow. This was not good for the trenches.

... Now I realized that they were talking of Chautonville, the singer, the master of our folk-songs. We had heard of him along the line--how he had come running home to us out of Germany at the last moment in July--literally pelted forth, changed from an idol into an enemy and losing a priceless engagement-series on the Continent. He had not been the least bewildered, as the story went, rather enjoying it all.... They had monopolized him at the central headquarters, so that we had not heard him sing, but the gossip of it fired the whole line--a baritone voice like a thick starry dusk, having to do with magnolias and the south, and singing of the Russia that was to mean the world. Somehow he had made us gossip to that extent. So I was interested now to hear the name of Chautonville, and that he was coming.

He was to sing us forward again. There was a pang in that, as I craned forward to look at the valley. It was not for our entertainment, but to make us forget our dead, to make us charge the valley again over our dead--it being planned that a remnant might make the crossing and charge the emplacements.... He came--a short barrel of a man and fat. They had kept him well at the Center. He was valuable in the hospitals, it was said.

The least soldierly kind of a man I had seen in many days, save the Brigadier--so white and fat was Chautonville, the top of his head small, his legs short and thick, hands fat and white and tapering, a huge neck and chin with folds of white fat under it--a sort of a perfect bird dressed for present to the Emperor. Chautonville was big-eyed with all this--large, innocent brown eyes--innocent to me, but it was the superb health of the creature, his softness, clearness of skin and eye, that gave the impression to us, so lean and stringy. For his eyes were not innocent--something in them spoiled that. We were worn to buckskin and ivory, while here was a parlor kind of health--so clean in his linen, white folds of linen, about his collar and wrists. His chest was a marvel to look at--here in the field after weeks in the Carpathians. We were all range and angles, but this was a round barrel

of a man, as thick as bread, his lips plump and soft, while we for weeks had licked a dry faded line, our faces strange with bone and teeth.

"What is it?" he asked the General.

I thought of a little doctor, called by others after consultation--an extra bit of dexterity required, this being the high-priced man. There was that indoor look of a barber about him, too.

The General explained that a new charge was to be ordered--that three had failed--that the men (while not exactly rebellious) faltered before the valley a fourth time this day--that the failures were costly in men--in short, that the inspiration of Chautonville was required now to sing them and the reserves across.... The Austrians would quickly give way, if the valley were passed.... Then the thousands would flood up the slopes and--Budapest and holidays.

"You want me to sing to them for courage--as it were?" Chautonville questioned.

I had marked his voice. I saw now that he needed all the thickness of throat and bust--that he used it all. I hoped they would not send me away with a message....

"You want me to walk up and down the trenches?"

"Yes, singing."

He puffed his cheeks and blew out a long breath--as if enjoying the effect of the steam in the icy light.

"Are they under fire?" he asked.

"You see them from here--how silent they are! The enemy does not fire until we reach the valley."

So he made no bones about his fears. Nothing of the charge would be required of him. He could withdraw after his inspiration.... Hate was growing within me. God, how I came to hate him--not for his cowardice--that was a novelty, and so freely acknowledged, but

because he would sing the men to their death. This was the tame elephant that they use to subdue the wild ones--this the decoy--the little white bastard.

"Very well, I will walk up and down the trenches, singing--" He said it a bit cockily.

I was in no way a revolutionist, yet I vowed some time to get him, alone.... I seemed to see myself in a crowded city street at night--some city full of lights, as far as heaven from now--going in with the crowd under the lights--to hear him sing. There I could get him.... Not a revolutionist, at all; no man in the enlisted ranks more trusted than I; attached for dispatch-work at brigade-headquarters; in all likelihood of appearance so stupid, as to be accepted as a good soldier and nothing more.... Now I remembered how far I was from the lights of any city and crowded streets--here in the desperate winter fighting, our world crazed with punishment, and planning for real fighting in the Spring. The dead of the valley arose before my eyes.... Perhaps within an hour *my* room would be ready. Still I should be sorry to pass, and leave Chautonville living on.

They beckoned me to his escort. I followed, hoping to see him die presently. This new hope was to watch him die--and not do it with my hands. Yes, I *trusted* that Chautonville would not come back from the trenches.

The pits stretched out in either direction--bitten into the ground by the most miserable men the light of day uncovered--bitten through the snow and then through a thick floor of frost as hard as cement. I heard their voices--men of my own country--voices as from swooning men--lost to all mercy, ready to die, not as men, but preying, cornered animals--forgotten of God, it seemed, though that was illusion; forgotten of home which was worse to their hearts, and illusion, too. For we could not hold the fact of home. It had proved too hard for us. The bond had snapped. Only death seemed sure.

Chautonville opened his mouth.

It was like sitting by a fire, and falling into a dream.... He sang of our fathers and our boyhood; the good fathers who taught us all they knew, and whipped us with patience and the fear of God. He sang of

the savory kitchen and the red fire-lit windows (bins full of corn and boxes high with wood); of the gray winter and the children of our house, the smell of wood-smoke and the low singing of the tea-kettle on the hearth.

And the officers followed him along the trenches, crying to us, "*Prepare to charge!*"

He sang of the ice breaking in the rivers--the groan of ice rotting in the lakes under the softness of the new life--of the frost coming up out of the fallows, leaving them wet-black and gleaming-rich. He sang of Spring, the spring-plowing, the heaviness of our labor, with spring lust in our veins, and the crude love in our hearts which we could only articulate in kisses and passion.

A roar from us at that--for the forgotten world was rushing home--the world of our maidens and our women.... He sang of the churches--sang of Poland, sang of Finland--of the churches and the long Sabbaths, the ministry of the gentle, irresistible Christ, of the Mary who mothered Him and mothered us all.

We were roaring like school-boys now behind him--the officer-men shouting to us to stand in our places and prepare to charge.

... He was singing of the Spring again--of the warm breath that comes up over the hills and plains--even to *our* little fields. On he went singing, and I followed like a dog or a child--hundreds of others following--the menacing voices just stabbing in through the song of open weather and the smell of the ground.... My father had sung it to me--the song of the soil, the song *from* the soil. And the smell of the stables came home, and the ruminating cattle at evening, the warm smell of the milking and the red that shot the dusk.... My mother taking the pails in the purple evening.

And this about us was the soldiery of Russia--the reek of powder, the iron frost, and the dead that moved for our eyes in the dip of the white valley. And each of us saw *our* field, our low earth-thatched barns, and each of us saw our mothers, and every man's father sang.... We cried to him, when he halted a moment--and our hearts, they were burning in his steps--burning, and not with hatred.

Now he sang of the Springtime--and, my God--of our maidens! On the road from her house, I had sung it--coming home in the night from her house--when, in that great happiness which a man knows but once, I had leaped in the softness of the night, my heart traveling up the moon-ray in the driven flame of her kiss. (She did not sleep that night, nor I, for the husk of the world had been torn away.) ... He sang our maidens back to us--to each man, his maiden--their breasts near, and shaken with weeping. They held out our babes, to lure us home--crying "*Come back!*" to us....

And some had not seen the latest babe at *her* breast; and some of us only longed for that which we knew--the little hands and the wondering eyes at her skirts--hands that had helped us over the first rough mysteries of fatherhood.

And now I glimpsed the face of Chautonville in the mass--the open mouth. It was not the face that I had seen. For he had lied to me, as he had lied to the officers, and this was the face of an angel, and so happy. Long had he dreamed and long had he waited for this moment--and happy, he was, as a child on a great white horse. He was not singing us across the red-white valley. He was singing us home.

Then I heard the firing, and saw the officers trying to reach him, but we were there. We laughed and called to him, "Sing us the maidens again!" ... "*For I have a maiden--*" a man said.... "Sing us the good Christ." ... "*For I was called to the ministry--*" another cried.... "Sing of the Spring and the mothers at the milking--" for we all had our mothers who do not die.... He was singing of our homes in the north country--singing as if he would sing the Austrians home--and the Germans--and would to God that he had!

Then his voice came through to us--not in the great dusky baritone of song, but like a command of the Father: "*Come on, men, we are going home!*"

... But I could not go. A pistol stopped me. So I lay on my elbow watching them turn back--a little circle of hundreds eager to die for him. All who had heard the singing turned homeward. And the lines came in from the east and from the west and deluged them.... Propped on my elbow, I saw them go down in the deluge of the obedient--watched until the blood went out and blurred the picture. But I saw

enough in that darkening--that there was fine sanity in their dying. I wished that I could die with them. It was not slaughter, but martyrdom. It called me through the darkness--and I knew that some man's song would reach *all* the armies--all men turning home together--each with his vision and unafraid.