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The Battle of Sempach

A Story

By

Robert Walser (1878-1956)

Berlin. The Future Press. 1908.

One day, in the middle of high summer, a military expedition was advancing slowly down the dusty country road that led towards a district of Luzern. The bright, actually more than bright, sun dazzled down over swaying armour serving to cover human bodies, over prancing horses, over helmets and parts of faces, over equine heads and tails, over ornaments and plumes and stirrups as big as snowshoes. To the right and to the left of the shining military expedition spread out meadows with thousands of fruit trees in them up as far as hills that, looming up out of the blue-smelling, half-hazy distance, beckoned and had the same effect as light and carefully painted window dressing. It was before noon and the heat was already oppressive. It was a meadowy heat, a heat contained in grass, hay and dust, for thick clouds of dust were being thrown up that sometimes descended like a veil over parts and sections of the army. Sluggishly, ploddingly, carelessly the long cavalcade moved forward. Sometimes it looked like a shimmering and elongated snake, sometimes like a lizard of enormous girth,

sometimes like a large piece of cloth, richly embroidered with figures and colourful shapes and ceremoniously trailed as with ladies, elderly and domineering ones as far as I'm concerned, accustomed to dragging trains behind them. In all this military might's method and way of doing things, in the stamping of feet and the clinking of weapons, in this rough and ready clatter lurked an "as far as I'm concerned" that was uniform, something impudent, full of confidence, something upsetting, slowly pushing to one side. All these knights were conversing, as far as their iron-clad mouths would allow them, in joyful verbal banter with each other. Peals of laughter rang out and this sound was admirably suited to the bright tones emitted by weapons and chains and golden belts. The morning sun still appeared to caress a good deal of brass and finer metal. The sounds of tin whistles flew sunward. Now and again one of the many footmen walking as if on stilts would tender to his mounted lord a delicate titbit, stuck on a silver fork, right up to his swaying saddle. Wine was drunk on the move, poultry consumed and nothing edible spat out, with an easy-going, carefree amiability, for this was no earnest war involving chivalry they were riding to, but more of a punitive expedition, a statutory rape, bloody, scornful, histrionic things. Everybody there thought so and everybody saw already the heap of cut-off heads that would redden the meadow. Among the leaders of the expedition was many a wonderful noble young man splendidly attired, sitting on horseback like a male angel flown down from a blue uncertain heaven. Many a one had taken off his helmet to make things more comfortable for himself and given it to an attendant to carry. By doing so he displayed to the air a peculiarly finely drawn face that was a mixture of innocence and exuberance. They were telling the latest jokes and discussing the most up-to-date stories of courtly women. The serious ones in their company they tolerated as best they could; it seemed today as if a pensive expression was deemed to be improper and unchivalrous. The hair of the young knights who had taken their helmets off, shone and smelt of oil and unguents and sweet-smelling water that they had poured on it as if it had been a matter of riding to visit a coquette to sing her charming love songs. Their hands, from which the iron gauntlets had been taken off, did not look like those of warriors, but manicured and pampered, slender and white like the hands of young girls.

Only one person in the wild procession was serious. Already his outward appearance, armour that was deep black broken up with tender gold, indicated how the person it covered thought. He was the noble Duke Leopold of Austria. This man did not speak a word and seemed completely lost in anxious thoughts. His face looked like that of a person who is being pestered by a fly that is impudently flying round his eye. This fly may well have been a presentiment that something bad was going to happen for a smile that was permanently both contemptuous and sad played over his mouth. He kept his head lowered. The whole world, however cheerful it looked, seemed to him to roll and thunder angrily. Or was it just the thunder of the trampling hooves of horses as the army was now passing over a wooden bridge that spanned the river Reuss? Nevertheless something foreshadowing misfortune hovered horribly around the duke's bodily form.

\* \* \*

The army stopped near the little town of Sempach. It was now about two o'clock in the afternoon. It may have been three o'clock. It was a matter of indifference to the knights what the time might be. As far as they were concerned it could have been eight o'clock at night—they would have found that quite in order. They were already terribly bored and found even the

slightest trace of military discipline laughable. It was a dull moment. It was like a parade ground manoeuvre how they jumped from their saddles to take up a position. No-one wanted to laugh any more. They had already laughed so much. Yawning and exhaustion had set in. Even the horses seemed to understand that all one could do now was yawn. The servants on foot tucked into the remnants of the food and wine, quaffed and scoffed what there was still left to scoff and quaff. How ridiculous this whole expedition appeared to all concerned! This shabby little town that was still holding out: how stupid it all was!

The call of a horn rang out suddenly through the frightful heat and boredom. It left one or two more attentive ears particularly inquisitive as to what it might be. Listen: there it is again. It really did sound out again and it could generally have been believed that it was now ringing out from not so far away. "All good things come in threes," lisped a facetious fop. "Sound one more time, horn!" And time marched on. People had become somewhat pensive—and now, in addition, frightened, as if the thing had grown wings and was riding on fiery monsters in that direction, consumed by flames and shouting, setting up a long cry: We're coming! It was in truth as if a subterranean world had suddenly received a breath of fresh air, breaking in through the hard earth above. The sound was like the opening up of a dark precipice and it seemed as if the sun were shining down now out of a darkened sky even more glowingly, even more harshly, but a light coming down out of hell and not out of heaven. People laughed again—there are moments when man thinks he ought to smile when really what he feels is the icy grip of terror. The mood of a military expedition made up of many men is, at the end of the day, not very different from the mood of a single and solitary individual. The whole of the landscape in its stifling white heat now seemed to be still making a hooting noise. It had turned into the sounds of horns and now there entered without any more ado into the range of horns being blown, as if from an opening, the crowd of men from whom the sound had gone out. Now the landscape was featureless. The sky and the earth in summer came together as something solid. The season disappeared. A geographical location, a tilting yard, a bellicose play area had become a battlefield. Nature plays no part in a battle. Everything depends on luck, the calibre of the weaponry, one crowd of people and another crowd of people.

The rushing forward, to all appearances heated, crowd drew nearer. And the crowd of knights stood firm seeming for once to have knit together. Lads of iron held their lances out in front of them so that you could have driven a coach and four over the resulting bridge so densely packed were the knights and so unsurprisingly lance after lance stuck out, immobile, unmovable, just the thing one might have thought for one of the pushing, pressing, human chests opposite to be spitted by. Here a stupid wall of sharp points, there men in shirts, only half dressed. Here the art of war practised in the most narrow-minded of ways, there men in the grip of inarticulate anger. One after another they ran forward boldly just to put an end to this despicable lack of enthusiasm and threw themselves onto the tip of a lance, crazy, mad, driven by rage and fury. They ended up, of course, falling over one another on the ground without having been able even to inflict a wound with their hand-held weapons on the plumed and helmeted louts of iron opposite. They fell face down into the dusty horse dung left behind on the ground by noble mounts. And so it befell nearly all these men in a state of undress while the lances, already reddened by their blood, seemed to smile at them disdainfully.

\* \* \*

No. That was nothing. One saw oneself compelled to make use of a trick in order to be on the side of humanity. Confronted by art, either art or some lofty thought was called for and that lofty thought, in the shape of a man of lofty face, immediately stepped forward as if pushed there by a supernatural power and addressed his countrymen: "Look after my wife and my children. I'll make a path through for you." And he threw himself forthwith so as not to let cool his desire for self-sacrifice onto four or five lances and pulled down several more, as many as he could force to his chest in the act of dying. It was as if he could not embrace these iron points enough and drag them into himself to be able to die with unlimited resources and to lie on the ground and turn into a bridge for men who then trampled over his body, on the lofty thought that wanted to be trampled on. Nothing will ever again compare with such a thrashing and the way in which those lightly-clad valley and mountain folk smashed that clumsy, despicable wall and tore it and beat it to bits like tigers ripping to pieces a defenceless herd of cows. The knights had become almost totally defenceless since, being hemmed in, they could hardly move to the side. Mounted knights were popped from their horses like paper bags filled with air pop when you clap your hands on them. The herdsman's weapons now proved frightful and their light summer clothing just right. Armour to the knights was that much more burdensome. Heads were stroked by side-swipes, only stroked apparently, and turned out to have been severed. More and more knights were being struck down, horses overturned and the power and rage of the onslaught kept increasing. The duke was killed outright. It would have been a miracle had he not been killed. Those who were raining down blows shouted as they did so, as if it were appropriate, as if just killing were too slight an annihilation, only a half measure.

Heat, steam, the smell of blood, dirt and dust and the shouting and yelling merged in a wild, diabolical turmoil. The dying hardly even felt the onset of their death, they died so quickly. They suffocated in droves in their showy iron armour, those threshing flails. What further comment need be made? Each of them would gladly have given a damn, had they still been able to. Fine noblemen drowned in their hundreds; no, they were drowned in the nearby Lake of Sempach; they were drowned because they were pushed into the water like cats and dogs. They overbalanced and fell over one another in their elegant pointed shoes—it was a real shame. The most splendid armour plating could only vouchsafe to its wearer oblivion and the realisation of this frightening presentiment was not contradicted. What did it matter now that at home, in the Aargau or in Swabia, knights owned land and people, had a beautiful wife, servants, maidservants, fruit trees, fields and woods and collected taxes and enjoyed the finest privileges? That only made dying in these pools of water between the pressing down knee of a crazy herdsman and a piece of earth more bitter and more wretched. The warhorses in their uncontrolled flight naturally stamped on their own masters. Many knights, in the abruptness of their desire to dismount, got caught up in the stirrups with their silly but fashionable footwear and were left hanging from them so that they bumped themselves over the grass bleeding from the backs of their heads. Their shocked eyes in the meantime, before they closed for good, saw the sky burn above them like an angry flame. Herdsmen also died, of course, but for every one bare-breasted and bare-armed combatant who died there were always ten armour-plated and wrapped up ones. The battle of Sempach teaches us, in fact, how dreadfully stupid it is to wrap up well. If only those puppets had been able to move, yes, they would have done. Some did manage to do so, so that they were finally able to free themselves from that totally unbearable thing they were carrying on their body. "I am fighting with slaves. How disgusting!" cried a handsome youth with yellowish hair falling down to his shoulders and sank to the ground, hit

full in his fair face by a vicious blow, where he, fatally wounded, bit the grass with his half-smashed teeth. A few herdsmen, whose deadly weapons had gone missing from their hands, pulled down like wrestlers in a wrestling ring their opponents from below by the scruff of the neck and head or threw themselves, avoiding counter blows, at the throat of a knight and throttled him, strangling him to death.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile it had started to go dark. The dying light still glowed in trees and bushes while the sun went down among the dusky foothills of the Alps like a dead, sad and handsome man. The grim battle was over. The snow-white, pallid Alps let their fine, cold brows hang down and in the background was the world. Burial details gathered up the dead, went around quietly doing this, lifted up the fallen who were lying on the ground and took them to the mass grave that other men had dug. Standards and armour were piled up together till they formed an imposing heap. Money and treasure together. Everything was set down in a certain place. Most of these strong and simple men had grown silent and well-behaved. They were observing the captured valuables not without a melancholic contempt, walking up and down the meadows, looking at the faces of the slain and washing off the blood when it pleased them to see what the sullied facial features looked like. Two youths were found at the foot of some shrubs with young, bright faces, lips still smiling even in death and with their arms around each other as they lay on the ground. One of them had suffered a blow to the chest while the other had had his body ripped open. There was work for them to do till late at night. After that torches were used to find corpses. They came across the body of Arnold von Winkelried and beheld him with reverence. When the men buried him, they sang with deep voices one of their simple songs. There was no more pomp under the circumstances. There were no priests there. What would one have done with priests? Praying and thanking God for the hard-fought victory had to happen quietly without church candles. Then they went home. And after a few days they were scattered back again in their high valleys. They were working, serving, saving, looking after businesses, doing what needed to be done and still spoke occasionally of the battle they had lived through, though not much. They were not hailed as heroes (well, perhaps a little in Luzern on their triumphal entry to that town). No matter. The days glided over it, for the days, with their multiplicity of cares, were harsh and raw even then, in 1386. A great deed does not strike from the calendar the arduous sequence of days. Life does not stand still for long on the day of a battle. History just pauses a short while until it too, forced on by life's imperious demands, has to hasten forward.

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