

Der Welt Spiegel



Thursday, December 24th, 1914

MERRY CHRISTMAS- MAJOR X

By Ursula von Wendel

Translated by Matthew Weiss

Major X is a creep; an odious, repellent creep. Always has been, always will be, in peacetime as in war. Some say our men in uniform are all angels in the flesh -- usually those sweet old ladies trying to strike up conversation with every wounded soldier they encounter on the street. But those ladies haven't met Major X, and they probably never will.

No one thinks he's a bigger creep than the Major himself, for some strange reason believing this creepiness also makes him bulletproof. Which is pathetic, of course. But that's what he is: pathetic, which may have gone largely unnoticed in civilian life, but now that he's a commander on the front, the abominable, bitter old man has finally come to the fore. Especially after a particularly brutal day in the field in the hushed, twilight hours during mail call.

It is then, while the others read their letters, opening care packages of mittens and socks, cigars and woolen underwear, that the Major turns away, pulling his coat tight, gazing out over the blasted, ruined landscape with mean, lidded eyes. No one ever writes him. No one ever sends a surprise parcel from home, because there's no one there to do so. He says he doesn't care, grumbling as loudly as he did back at the barracks -- perhaps even more so -- about how whimsy corrupts, sucking the discipline right out of a soldier, leaving him vulnerable to idle folly. Which may or may not be true, but he's still a creep.

Then there's whimsical little Corporal von B, with his pretty girl face, who claims to be incorruptible. He's never even *seen* a barracks, having come straight to the regiment from a privileged life of aristocratic luxury. To assert his noble, warrior-like stature, he often refers to the Major as a subordinate. He says he feels sorry for the old man, and that surely there's nothing wrong with pitying one's superior officers.

"Was he always such a creep?" he asks the young Lieutenant as they sit in the trench making coffee from shiny new tins labelled "Mokka" and "Cream". The Lieutenant is his closest confidant and source of information, having recently exposed such hallowed lies of war as the indispensability of a shaving razor on the front.

OldMagazineArticles.com

MERRY CHRISTMAS- MAJOR X

“Always,” the Lieutenant replies. “People in the Regiment have been saying so for generations.”

“Was he ever stationed anywhere else?” the little one asks, staring thoughtfully into the water that refuses to boil.

“He was in some other division for about six months,” the Lieutenant explains. “But he’s always been in the Corps, from the day he was born. Probably never even had parents.”

But the term “parents” means little to sweet von B. His own father died before his first birthday, so his only real association with *pater familias* was gleaned through the rage-clouded glare in schoolmates’ eyeglasses. His mother, just 18 when he was born, was more like a lively, loving comrade, always ready to frolic and romp, endlessly attentive to his needs but often herself needing to be protected from her own silly antics and opinions. Yet because of her unique status as his mother, he holds her in particularly rare and exalted regard. At heart he’s still her playful little boy, as evidenced by the swirl of raspberry jam (instead of the usual anchovy butter) squeezed from a tube onto a slice of regulation hardtack. “Poor guy,” he says of the Major with bold familiarity. “But I suppose the war must be a blessing for him, allowing him to get out and engage the world a bit.”

This was back in October, when the Major was starting to feel a bit that way himself. For the first time he was beginning to experience a sense of spiritual fulfillment, of truly being *alive*. Which didn’t make him any less creepy. You don’t just shake off a lifetime of repulsiveness in a few short weeks. Which is fortunate, because otherwise the grenadiers under his command would have been *truly* alienated.

Like the Major, many in the ranks had been awarded the Iron Cross. But *unlike* him, each of those scores of wounded or killed had at least one heart pining for them back home, praying they should be spared the bullet. Which was something he *didn’t* have, but also something he stoically felt he didn’t *need*, because he was always spared the bullet regardless. As Little von B so succinctly put it, the Major “could stand ten paces from the opposing trenches and scoff at the idea of ever getting hit. The man’s got some sort of death wish which never fails to work in his favor, inspiring the enemy to believe he’s the devil; invulnerable, unholy. The effect is magnificent, but if anyone tries to emulate that sort of fearlessness themselves, he loses his head, screaming reprimands like a bat out of hell.”

Now, in spite of what might be mistaken as admiration for the Major’s manly prowess, none are fool enough to believe that feisty von B has anything like respect for the man. What they *do* believe is that the reason behind the Major’s

MERRY CHRISTMAS- MAJOR X

hysterical reaction to such risky behavior by their company's youngest member stems from a deathly fear that something might happen to the boy. Which is a fear they all seem to share, to the very last man.

The Major, for whom the war has brought all the good things which peacetime denied, had found in the little Corporal his first real friend. Before that he'd had only acquaintances, even as a cadet. Back then, the Major was so puny there was barely room enough to properly display the shiny buttons on his bright red uniform, yet like other boys he tried to project a bearing of dignified formality. For most, such posturing was unsuccessful, usually resulting in beatings, though on the rare occasion forming a genuine childhood bond. But for the Major, neither was the case. He just became more withdrawn, lonelier with each passing year; at the Academy in Berlin, and in the Regiment thereafter.

There was a time, when he was a young, prosperous, dutiful and very boring Lieutenant, that the Major thought surely there must be some sort of soulmate for him out there. This was back when he'd still venture out to dance every now and again. He didn't like dancing and wasn't very good at it, but he supposed this was the best way to meet women, who certainly seemed plentiful enough. The Major was friendly in his approach, but they always seemed embarrassed by him, barely saying a word, never even really looking at him. Naturally, things never progressed. But one day he met a girl with soft, pretty, enormous eyes and downright beautiful mouth. When they spoke, she looked him directly in the eye, as if theirs were a conversation worth having. They became good friends. He fell in love with her – no, that's too extreme a way to put it, but he cared for her a great deal. Her mother, like all mothers, was nice to him. But what good is the blessing of a mother? It's often an obstacle, and an embarrassing one at that. Then, just when he thought his life was finally coming together, another suitor came along, with a charming laugh, witty and clever, the best storyteller in the Regiment. The world was his oyster, and he married the woman of Major X's dreams.

After that, all he cared about was the service, becoming something of a military pedagogue. He fully realized this, but wouldn't change it for the world. Before the war, he'd genuinely reveled in his feelings of loneliness, of being hated, and now was no different. Were he to fall in battle, he knew many of his colleagues would be overjoyed, his demise the subject of pleasant conversation. But he didn't fall. It was always the other guy. Not that he wanted to fall. Life wasn't exactly kind and gay, but it was life nonetheless and still had a few things to offer, such as the prospect of a Germany so proud it would take one's breath away to realize that even an aging, didactic Major might have contributed to its creation. There could even be a promotion in his

MERRY CHRISTMAS- MAJOR X

future, perhaps to Brigade Commander, brandishing proud red bands on collar and cap. He thought also of the coming rewards for dutiful sacrifice: a cozy bachelor's existence, dogs and horses, leisurely peacetime service. All his to enjoy, because he would never get hit, never fall. Yet if he could trade this useless, comfortable life for an inferior one that would be sorely missed and grieved upon when taken, he'd do it in a heartbeat. He thought he didn't give a fig about the cheerful, hapless rabble, but it still got to him that they were always the ones to succumb in battle. The little Corporal, for example: it was ridiculous to even allow him into combat, because he was bound to fall. If only to break the Major's heart.

It was during those quiet weeks, huddled in the trenches in stalemate against the enemy, that the Major had first met this pure, young soul, filled with sunshine, chatting away. Though he was not interested in what the child had to say, it was still pleasant to have something to listen to. Especially when he spoke of his mother, how she was always losing things, snacking incessantly, and how, whenever she got into any kind of trouble, would write to her son like a hangdog teenager proclaiming she could never hold anything against him, because she was so much worse in every regard. Her love and concern for him shone through every word. The Major knew this because the little idiot Corporal made him read everyone's letters, thinking this would somehow make up for the fact that he never received any of his own. As if the Major needed that kind of consolation! But it was true that now he would perk up when the mail came, convinced the letters meant more to him than to anyone else. Even to the wee Corporal himself, whose bright eyes remained clear and dry whenever he read them. But when the Major happened to look up from the pages in his hand to see the lad gazing out towards the enemy – smiling, carefree, pretty as a picture, oblivious to the desperate fear between the lines of his mother's letters' girlish chatter – that's when it happened. That's when the Major would rub his eyes with the backs of his hands, his knuckles coming away wet with tears. Then he'd snap to and bark at the young whippersnapper with renewed ferocity.

Those were wonderful weeks despite the impatience they felt, those sharp pangs of eagerness to advance the line. Finally, on a hot day in early December, comes the order to storm the opposing trenches, a terrifying charge into relentless enemy fire. Thank Heavens for the Major! "Get down, Major, get down!" those around him cry. But he is deaf to their pleas, more impervious than ever to the Grim Reaper's scythe mowing down everyone in its path. He advances, his grenadiers right on his heels, seized with fever, their death-defying victory cries like a shield clearing a path before them. But woe unto those who grow careless or place themselves in

MERRY CHRISTMAS- MAJOR X

unnecessary danger--!! Their commander's thundering admonishments drown out even their fiercest *Hurras*, his castigations foul-mouthed and vicious, terrifying to behold, filling the men with hitherto unknown respect and admiration.

By the fading light of this short December day, they have taken their objective. Mission accomplished. It is the happiest day of the Major's life. He strolls among the ranks of his exhausted men, now more than friends, more than children. Many are missing. As a light snow begins to fall, the Major retraces their advance over territory won at such terrible, bloody cost. At his side is the young Lieutenant. The medical corps is hard at work all around, but their losses are less than the Major expected. The enemy had panicked, shooting blindly as they fled, inflicting for the most part only surface wounds. But there were a few fatalities regardless, with the little Corporal among them.

The Lieutenant saw him fall. The boy's clear voice had rung out over the din in a joyous *hurrah* as he leapt, then suddenly crumpled and lay still, the others stepping over him to take their prize. Standing over the small, broken body, the Lieutenant now burst into tears. But the Major remained quiet, serene, gazing down at the only person who had ever loved him, whose place he would have gladly taken.

They collect his wallet and personal effects and return to camp. Back in his tent, the Major goes through the little Corporal's items. In the wallet he finds a tiny sprig of evergreen and a page from what must be his mother's most recent letter. "In these desperate times," she wrote, "I wouldn't think it too difficult to express affection directly towards another human being, to show them you care. I very much doubt this would be taken out of context, as some sort of ruse or deception. But if you like, I shall do as you ask and send your 'poor, dear Major' an anonymous Christmas card, then gradually start up a correspondence from a certain 'Anna' so that he should no longer feel so alone. On Christmas Eve, give him this little evergreen branch along with the card I've enclosed. If everyone in your regiment would agree to show the Major a little kindness, he'll certainly get the message."

The Major reads the card, which says: "Christmas greetings to a lonely soul, so he should know that on this Holy Night, he is in the thoughts and prayers of someone at home." He stares at the small green twig in his hand for a very long time. It is the first Christmas tree anyone has ever presented him, a gesture of pure love, which – without death – life would never have revealed. Suddenly he remembers the day the dark-haired boy first joined the regiment. Everybody liked him, everybody talked about him, just as they had about the man who'd come to steal the woman of his dreams. And the

MERRY CHRISTMAS- MAJOR X

Major had said, resentful and unkind: "This kid's a charmer, alright. A real snake."

The Major cups the sprig of pine in his palm. All around him sleep his grenadiers, who'd practically worshipped him earlier in the day. A short distance away, in the makeshift headquarters of the trench, his dream of promotion is being fulfilled, the Brigade he's to command officially selected and ordained.

He thinks of the little dead Corporal and realizes that his sins against the world far outweigh the sins of the world against *him*. Because of this painful epiphany, for the first time in his life, the Major is no longer able to take bitter pride in his loneliness. He reflects upon the coming Christmas Eve and about the woman who would be thinking of him, praying for him. About how they were now *both* alone ... and how, perhaps, in the days of Peace ahead, they might be so no longer.

Der Welt  Spiegel
1914

Matthew Weiss is a German-English translator specializing in historical texts, bringing old language into the present without sacrificing its sense of heritage and with an emphasis on idiom, colloquialism and immediacy. He has worked at the Goethe Institute, Los Angeles, and served as resident translator for the Swiss Documentary Film- and Television production company Mesch & Ugge since 2007.

OldMagazineArticles.com