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The Complete Lessons of the War
poems (returning issue incipit)

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THE COMPLETE LESSONS OF THE WAR

by HENRY REED

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BtA

1. Naming of Parts

To-day we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
We had daily cleaning. And to-morrow morning,
We shall have what to do after firing. But to-day,
To-day we have naming of parts. Japonica
Glistens like coral in all of the neighbouring gardens,
And to-day we have naming of parts.

This is the lower sling swivel. And this
Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see,
When you are given your slings. And this is the piling swivel
Which in your case you have not got. The branches
Hold in the gardens their silent, eloquent gestures,
Which in our case we have not got.

This is the safety-catch, which is always released
With an easy flick of the thumb. And please do not let me
See anyone using his finger. You can do it quite easy
If you have any strength in your thumb. The blossoms
Are fragile and motionless, never letting anyone see
Any of them using their finger.

And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this
Is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it
Rapidly backwards and forwards: we call this
Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and forwards
The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers:
They call it easing the spring.

They call it easing the Spring: it is perfectly easy
If you have any strength in your thumb: like the bolt,
And the breech, and the cocking-piece, and the point of balance,
Which in our case we have not got; and the almond-blossom
Silent in all of the gardens and the bees going backwards
and forwards,

For to-day we have naming of parts.

2. Judging Distances

Not only how far away, but the way that you say it
Is very important. Perhaps you may never get
The knack of judging a distance, but at least you know
How to report on a landscape: the central sector,
The right of arc and that, which we had last Tuesday,
And at least you know

That maps are of time, not place, so far as the army
Happens to be concerned - the reason being,
Is one which need not delay us. Again, you know
There are three kinds of tree, three only, the fir and the
poplar,
And those which have bushy tops to; and lastly
That things only seem to be things.

A barn is not called a barn, to put it more plainly,
Or a field in the distance, where sheep may be safely grazing.
You must never be over-sure. You must say, when reporting:
At five o'clock in the central sector is a dozen
Of what appear to be animals; whatever you do,
Don't call the bleeders sheep.

I am sure that's quite clear; and suppose, for the sake of example,
The one at the end, asleep, endeavours to tell us
What he sees over there to the west, and how far away,
After first having come to attention. There to the west
On the fields of summer the sun and the shadows bestow
Vestments of purple and gold.

The still white dwellings are like a mirage in the heat,
And under the swaying elms a man and a woman
Lie gently together. Which is, perhaps, only to say
That there is a row of houses to the left of arc,
And that under some poplars a pair of what appear to be
Humans
Appear to be loving.

Well, that, for an answer, is what we might rightly call
Moderately satisfactory only, the reason being,
Is that two things have been omitted, and those are important.
The human beings, now: in what direction are they
And how far away, would you say? And do not forget
There may be dead ground in between.

There may be dead ground in between; and I may not have got
The knack of judging a distance; I will only venture
a guess that perhaps between me and the apparent lovers,
(Who, incidentally, appear by now to have finished,)
At seven o'clock from the houses, is roughly a distance
Of about one year and a half.

3. Movement of Bodies

Those of you that have got through the rest, I am going to rapidly devote a little time to showing you, those that can master it, a few ideas about tactics which must not be confused with what we call strategy. Tactics is merely the mechanical movement of bodies, and that is what we mean by it. Or perhaps I should say: by them.

Strategy, to be quite frank, you will have no hand in. It is done by those up above, and it merely refers to the larger movements over which we have no control. But tactics are also important, together or single. You must never forget that suddenly, in an engagement, you may find yourself alone.

The brown clay model is a characteristic terrain of a simple and typical kind. Its general character should be taken in at a glance, and its general character you can see at a glance, it is somewhat hilly by nature, with a fair amount of typical vegetation disposed at certain parts.

Here at the top of the tray, which we might call the northwards is a wooded headland, with a crown of bushy-topped trees on; and proceeding downwards or south we take in at a glance a variety of gorges and knolls and plateaus and basins and saddles, somewhat symmetrically put, for easy identification. And here is our point of attack.

But remember of course it will not be a tray you will fight on, nor always by daylight. After a hot day, think of the night cooling the desert down, and you still moving over it: past a ruined tank or a gun, perhaps, or a dead friend, lying about somewhere: it might quite well be that it isn't always a tray.

And even this tray is different to what I had thought.
These models are somehow never always the same; the reason
I do not know how to explain quite. Just as I do not know
Why there is always someone at this particular lesson
Who always starts crying. Now will you kindly
Empty those blinking eyes?

I thank you. I have no wish to seem impatient.
I know it is all very hard, but you would not like,
To take a simple example, to take for example,
This place we have thought of here, you would not like
To find yourself face to face with it, and you not knowing
What there might be inside?

Very well then: suppose this is what you must capture.
It will not be easy, not being very exposed,
Secluded away like it is, and somewhat protected
By a typical formation of what appear to be bushes,
So that you cannot see, as to what is concealed inside,
As to whether it is friend or foe.

And so, a strong feint will be necessary in this connection.
It will not be a tray, remember. It may be a desert stretch
With nothing in sight, to speak of. I have no wish to be inconsiderate.
But I see there are two of you now, commencing to snivel.
I cannot think where such emotional privates can come from.
Try to behave like men.

I thank you. I was saying: a thoughtful deception
Is always somewhat essential in such a case. You can see
That if only the attacker can capture such an emplacement
The rest of the terrain is his: a key-position, and calling
For the most resourceful manoeuvres. But that is what tactics is.
Or should I say rather: are.

Let us begin then and appreciate the situation.

I am thinking especially of the point we have been considering, though in a sense everything in the whole of the terrain must be appreciated. I do not know what I have said to upset so many of you. I know it is a difficult lesson.

Yesterday a man was sick,

But I have never known as many as five in a single intake, unable to cope with this lesson. I think you had better fall out, all five, and sit at the back of the room, being careful not to talk. The rest will close up. Perhaps it was me saying 'a dead friend', earlier on?

Well, some of us live.

And I never know why, whenever we get to tactics, men either laugh or cry, though neither being strictly called for. But perhaps I have started too early with a difficult problem? We will start again, further north, with a simpler assault. Are you ready? Is everyone paying attention?

Very well, then. Here are two hills.

4. Unarmed Combat

In due course of course you will all be issued with
Your proper issue; but until to-morrow,
You can hardly be said to need it; and until that time,
We shall have unarmed combat. I shall teach you.
The various holds and rolls and throws and breakfalls
Which you may sometimes meet.

And the various holds and rolls and throws and breakfalls
Do not depend on any sort of weapon,
But only on what I might coin a phrase and call
The ever-important question of human balance,
And the ever-important need to be in a strong
Position at the start.

There are many kinds of weakness about the body,
Where you would least expect, like the ball of the foot.
But the various holds and rolls and throws and breakfalls
Will always come in useful. And never be frightened
To tackle from behind: it may not be clean to do so,
But this is global war.

So give them all you have, and always give them
As good as you get; it will always get you somewhere.
(You may not know it, but you can tie a Jerry
Up without rope; it is one of the things I shall teach you.)
Nothing will matter if only you are ready for him.
The readiness is all.

The readiness is all. How can I help but feel
I have been here before? But somehow then,
I was the tied-up one. How to get out
Was always then my problem. And even if I had
A piece of rope I was always the sort of person
Who threw the rope aside.

And in my time I have given them all I had,
Which was never as good as I got, and it got me nowhere.
And the various holds and rolls and throws and breakfalls
Somehow or other I always seemed to put
In the wrong place. And as for war, my wars
Were global from the start.

Perhaps I was never in a strong position,
Or the ball of my foot got hurt, or I had some weakness
Where I had least expected. But I think I see your point.
While awaiting a proper issue, we must learn the lesson
Of the ever-important question of human balance.
It is courage that counts.

Things may be the same again; and we must fight
Not in the hope of winning but rather of keeping
Something alive: so that when we meet our end,
It may be said that we tackled wherever we could,
That battle-fit we lived, and though defeated,
Not without glory fought.

5. Returning of Issue

Tomorrow will be your last day here. Someone is speaking:
A familiar voice, speaking against all of us,
While beyond the windows (it is inside now, and autumn)
On a wind growing daily harsher, small things are toward the earth
Turning and whirling, small: you cannot see through the windows
If they are leaves or flowers.

Tomorrow will be your last day here: but not, we hope, for always.
I hope that many of you will insist - yes insist - on coming back to us
Professionally. (Silence, and stupefaction.) And outside,
The coarsening wind, and the things whirling upon it,
Scour that rough stamping-ground where we so long a time
Have spent our substance.

As the trees are spending theirs: How much of mine have I spent?
How sorry we are to lose you I do not have to say,
Since the sergeant-major has said it, and the RSM has said it,
And the colonel has sent over a message to say that he also says
(Everyone, sorry to lose us. And you, once sorry too:
Oh, Father, Father.)

I think I can honestly say you are one and all of you now
Real soldiers: (Silence, and disbelief.) a fact that will stand you
In pretty good stead in the various jobs you go back to.
I wish you the best of luck. Some of you may possibly find
Civvy Street not too bright now. (Silence). If so, you all of you
know

You can think of us here as home.

A home we shall, any of you, welcome you back into. (Silence.)
Most of you, I know, have some sort of work waiting for you.
And the rest of you being by now (thanks to us) fit and able,
Will be bound to find something. I begin to be in want.
Would any citizen in this country send me
Into his fields.

Finally, before I finish: one thing about tomorrow
I must make perfectly clear. Tomorrow is clear already:
I saw myself once, but ever again am forbidden
To see myself so: as the one who went evil ways,
Till he determined in time of famine to seek again
His father's home.

Autumn is later down there: it should now be the time
Of vivacious triumph in the fruitful fields.
As he slowly approached he went over his speeches of sorrow,
Not less of truth for being long-rehearsed,
The last distilment from a long and inward
Discourse of heartbreak. And

The first thing you do (after first thing tomorrow morning),
Will be, those that have not been previously detailed to do so,
Which I think is the case in most cases, is a systematic
Returning of issue. It is all-important
That you should restore to store one of every store issued,
And in the case of two, two.

I shall never again know that moment of fear,
When the small hardworking master of those fields
Looked up and saw me. I trembled. But his heart came out to me,
With a shout of compassion. And the long rehearsals were, only,
in the end,
"Father I have sinned against heaven, and am no more worthy
To be called thy son."

But if I cried it father, you could no longer hear me,
Where now you lie, crumpled in your small grave,
Like any withering dog, Your fields are sold and built on,
The border lanes are filled with husks the swine reject.
I scoop them in my hand: I have earned no more, and more I shall
not inherit.

This too, must be perfectly clear

That a careful check will be made of every such object
That was issued to each personnel originally,
And checked at issue. And let me be quite explicit:
That no accoutrements, impediments, fittings or military garments
May be taken as souvenirs. The one exception is shirts,
And whatever you wear underneath.

These may be kept, those that wish: but the rest of the issue
Must be returned, except by those who intend to rejoin
In regular service. (Silence.) This involves a simple procedure
I will explain in a group to whoever rejoins.
Now how many will that be? (Silence.) No one, No one at all?
I see. Very well, then. I have up to now

Spoken with the utmost mildness. I speak so still, but now from
the depths of my heart;
For it does seem to me a bit of a bloody pity, a bit bloody unkind,
A bit un-bloody feeling after all we have bloody done for you,
That you should all just bloody sit there on your dumb bloody arses,
Just waiting like bloody milksops, till I bloody dismiss you.
(Silence, embarrassed, but silence.)

Is there no bloody man among you? (Silence.) Not one bloody single
one?
(Father, I do not know why: but I know I must break this silence.)
Yes, sergeant, I will stay; and hear the simple procedure
In a group of one. (Father, be proud of ~~me~~).
Magnificent man! One independent spirit! Tell them all,
Why are you doing this?

(Oh, God, why am I doing it? Is it too late to flee?)
Come, speak out, man: - tell them, and shame them all.
"I think I shame no one, sergeant, except myself.
To say I will stay here is simply and only because
I have nowhere else to go. I have no home,
And therefore I will arise"

What do you mean, arise? That I, in your own words, sergeant,
Will get up from my dumb bloody arse and be once more a personnel
(Oh, father, rest, oh rest..... It is goodbye for ever now)
A personnel, and gladly. I have been such a thing before:
It was good, it was simple, and it was all I could do.
I will come submissively back, I will study to learn
More of your careless and uncaring world. (Father, oh father,
Farewell, forever. I will try to forget you). Sergeant,
I will bless and praise them all, I will make them my whole life,
The accoutrements, the impedimenta, the fittings, the military garments,
The harlots, the riotous living.

Spoken with the utmost sincerity. I speak as still, but now from the depths of my heart;

For it does seem to me a bit of a bloody fight, a bit bloody-minded, a bit un-bloody feeling after all we have bloody done for you. That you should sit there on your damp bloody grass, just waiting like bloody rickshaws, till I bloody dismiss you. (Silence, embarrassed, but sincere.)

Is there no bloody man among you? (Silence.) Not one bloody single. (Father, I do not know why, but I know I must break this silence.) Yes, sergeant, I will stay; and mean the simple procedure in a group of one. (Father, no ground of me.) Magnificent man! One independent spirit! Tell them all, why are you doing this?

(Oh, God, why am I doing it? Is it too late to flee?) Gosh, speak out, man! - tell them, and shame them all. "I think I shan't be one, sergeant, except myself. To say I will stay here is simply and only because I have nowhere else to go. I have no home, and therefore I will stay"

That do you mean, sir? That I, in your own words, sergeant, will get up from my damp bloody grass and go more a personal (Oh, father, rest, or rest.... It is goodbye for ever now) A personal, and gladly. I have been such a thing before: it was good, it was simple, and it was all I could do. I will come submissively back, I will study to learn more of your careless and knowing world. (Father, oh father, farewell, forever. I will try to forget you), Sergeant, I will bless and praise them all, I will make them my whole life. The encounters, the impediments, the fittings, the military garments, The harlots, the riotous living.