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Reminiscences of Spain

Raymond Galstad

April, 1938

It is mid afternoon. We are in a huddle reading a bulletin that has just been posted on the wall. It contains a list of the names of men who are to leave for Paris this evening. Discharges and repatriation papers are in the office ready for distribution. Some read the bulletin and dash down the corridor to the office. Those unable to run just shuffle. There's a brightness in their eyes as though they just gulped a bracing drink. Satisfied smiles stretch across their sun parched faces. Monosyllables of joy snag in their throats. They are the lucky ones. They're going home.

I'm new here. Just arrived from the hospital a few minutes ago. My name is not up yet. I might just as well get used to it here for awhile. I think a tour of inspection of my new headquarters is in order, so I take a gander at the dormitory. My nose sniffs the smell of freshly laundered sheets strongly bleached. The odors are clean and medicinal like the hospital, or maybe my memory of the hospital is playing tricks with me.

Uniformed men sprawled across the beds taking "siestas" with their eyes wide open and their lips moving in conversation that sends up a hum of French, Spanish, and English.

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The Industrial Worker

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Over in a corner a few Frenchmen are making melody with the “Waiting Song”, a tune composed by a wounded British veteran of the international brigade while he waited at Albacete for his discharge papers. The soldiers make up their own words, as soldiers will, when inspiration moves them.

I introduced myself to a group, we start rubbing our memories together, making warm conversation. The Front is still the favorite bone to chew on. We mentally place our bets on the outcome of the next battle. One intelligent face says the best defence is an attack, and nodding heads approve, and that puts the favorite bone back in the cupboard of memory until we become intellectually hungry for the Front again. We just finished and regard each other silently for a while with vacant woolgathering eyes. It’s not an embarrassing silence. It’s just as if we intuitively agreed to dream for a few moments. I call them to attention with a question, and they all start talking at once. I gather there are a bunch of Americans and Canadians waiting here, but they’re doing the town right now, from what I’m told. I thank them for the information and take my leave of them.

I meet another American, and we walk into the mess room together. I put the bum on him for some tobacco. He says he ain’t got none. Says he’s been here four days and the Commissars ain’t putting out, so he hears there’s a whole warehouse bulking with Luckies. He’s been down on the waterfront all day trying to move some butts from the English sailors, but he didn’t have much luck. Wishes to hell his papers were okayed so he could leave for the French border tonight. Even French smokes would be nothing.

We bump into a Canuck who’s been around a lot, and knows Barcelona to a “T”. We learned from him that English smokes can be had from a bootlegger uptown. The stuff is priced, though, at 100 pesetas a pound, about \$2 in American coin, according to him, and my friend’s chin drops like the ‘29 stock market. That’s a lot of money for a buck private,

earning 7 pesetas a day, to have on him all at one time, we agree. But I was paid off this morning, and I'm still holding 47 pesetas, so I suggest we hold a conference on the matter. We decide to ask three others to chip in, and go off to round up the unsuspecting donors.

It isn't hard to persuade the other three to chip in. They want to inhale some smoke as badly as we do, so we collect the necessary money, and detail the Canuck to sally forth to the tobacconists, and make arrangements to meet him in the park across the road from the barracks.

It doesn't take him long to carry out his mission. We see him coming back with a small tin foil package with the evening light glinting off it, like sun-starts off a mirror. He's walking a great deal more leisurely than when he left us to go after the weed. A cigarette is dangling listlessly from a corner of his lips. We run up to him and relieve him of the burden, and nervously began to fashion cigarettes with our fingers.

We stroll back across the road to the park, and our group grows to 11 members. They're attracted by the smell of burning tobacco. The park itself comes under discussion. One young soldier remarks that it's the finest and largest park in Spain. He says he likes the zoo and the museum, and the statues, but best of all he likes the palm trees, and the lime trees, and the orange trees. They give good shade in the daytime, and he likes shade, he says. Another soldier interrupts him and says he talks too much; that he should give others a chance. The youthful one makes excuses for his monopolizing the conversation. He says the doctors told him he would lose his voice anytime now as a result of a shrapnel wound in his throat, and he's determined to hear his voice as much as he can as long as he can.

The mention of his wound invites the others to start talking of their disabilities, like a bevy of old ladies discussing their operations and their miscarriages. The names of the battlefields, Belchite, Guatemala, Bilbao, Saragossa, Cordoba, and Madrid seemed like a checkerboard of blood, becoming more

gloriously gory as they talk about how they lost the leg, and arm, an eye, a hand, or acquired a scar as a precious souvenir of battle. The lad whose voice will go haywire notes pointedly that we didn't get any medals, but he's glad about it, somehow because nobody will mistake him for a commissar with all metals and no scars. We laugh a little at that.

An American West Coast seaman feels like rehashing the story of the part he filled in the Guatemala offensive. He says it was a tough scrap. The Loyalists went up against the German troops and they had machine guns till hell wouldn't have 'em. How the Loyalist took their objective, Christ only knows! The boys were dropping all around him like ripe apples in a gale. He lost his buddy; saw him fall right in front of him, but he kept going. They got within throwing distance of the fascists and let loose with hand grenades. That's what got 'em. When you get close enough to toss the grenades, the fascists either come out of their trenches and meet you face to face, or they retrieved. They hate like hell to be in the dugouts when the grenades start pouring in. They don't want to be in the trenches when you're ready to jump him, either. Not when you got that cold piece of steel, two feet long, sticking on the end of your rifle. That's scary stuff, and plenty hard to take. And when a guy's on top, he's got all the breaks in the world, they know that. Just one good thrust, and you know there's one fascist scab that ain't gonna win the war for Franco...

He keeps talking about the strategies of combat in his tangy voice and the rest of us listened to the familiar details as if they were being carried out before our eyes. With his one arm he turns the air with emphatic gestures, his fist opening and closing like the maw of a sea anemone.

Speaking of battle tactics, a Britisher has something to say about the fight at the Cordoba front. His voice is clear and his language faultless, and he isn't selling H's short like an English Cockney. All his listeners seem enlisted for action as they leaned toward him to learn that the front was very quiet for

few British sailors who want to know more about the war, and we invite them to come down to the beach with us for a swim.

The sand sparkles like X-mas card snow, and the blue waves lapped the shores as gently as a cat stroking its fur with its tongue. Night-time workers in trunks, and children naked, are swimming in the water in playing on the beach. We slip behind a crag and undress, and wade into the water with our shorts. The sailors best us in the swimming. They josh us a bit for splashing like side-paddlers, and offer to teach us the crawl and the sidestroke. But we're hopeless amphibians, the Canuck and I. They think we're okeh, for being revolutionists, though.

The Canuck starts indoctrinating the British Navy with the C.N.T. philosophy, and they don't find it so bad, this 'class war' business. One gob confesses he joined the Navy to escape the slums. Says he was willing to die for British imperialist capitalism; do anything, just so he didn't have to live out his span of life in London's Lower East End. He sees the sense of the class struggle plainly enough. The workers have got to organize and lose their chains and their slums, too. Says when he's through with his hitch in the Navy he'd like to climb into the trenches and help these loyalists. But he'll be scrubbing decks for six more years, and the Canuck says he hopes the workers own the world by then...

several weeks, with no excitement at all, and no signs of war about. Then the rebels came over the top with their right arms in salute, and singing the Internationale. It looked like they were surrendering. But they went into action and dished out hell. It was a furious hand to hand battle. But they were driven back to their trenches. Three days later they came over again with women on the lead. They used the girls as shields. The Loyalists held their fire and were nearly wiped out. Only 50 men returned from the skirmish, and every one of them wounded. The English Brigade lost over 400 that day.

The listeners agree it was a moral victory, and take some comfort in it, even though they regret the loss of Cordoba.

The Canuck was a chauffeur in the ambulance court. He says his job wasn't a snap, either, what with administering first aid before loading the wounded into the ambulance, and driving over the rough roads full of shell holes, unloading at the base hospital, and driving back again ... all the while providing a swell target for fascist bombers. He says it's no fun changing tires out in the battle areas with only a revolver strapped to your belt, and the wounded moaning in the bus, and a plane swooping overhead pouring lead into the ground around your feet. He says that a revolver is about as useful as a bow and arrow against a tank in such situations, and he rolls up his sleeve to display a group of purple scars running from his wrist to his shoulder, just to prove the point.

We passed the tobacco around again, and the six of us who have a vested interest in the weed, walk away from the group, each one of us thinking we're paying too high a price for chinning with their fellow veterans. The Canuck lets them know what we're thinking, and they smile. One says he'd swap a story anytime for a cigarette.

We walk into a nearby bar and order some drinks, and sit there while the town grows dark, waxing discursive again, but not about ourselves. The Asturian miners and their courageous fight in Santander, with only dynamite and mining tools as

weapons, strikes us as an admirable display of guts. We tie up the story with minor struggles everywhere, and tried to prove her theory that minors are a brave lot because they toil under dangerous conditions where death stalks close at hand, and they get used to being brave without knowing how brave they are, and their work develops in them a reckless fatalistic spirit that makes them formidable fighters in battle. We conjured up the battles of the Molly Maguires, Ludlow, Paint Creek, Cripple Creek, Mesabi Range, the Rocky Mountain Fuel Company strike in Colorado in the United States; the sit-downs of the French miners and we feel satisfied that our theory about the minors militancy is adequately supported by history period. Time passes. The yawning hour approaches, and we vote to go back to barracks and to bed.

Shafts of morning sun pierced the barracks windows, and pry open the eyes of sleepy veterans. Some turn their faces into the pillows or pull the covers over their heads to ignore the rude intrusion of the sunlight. Others sit up; rub their eyes; pucker their lips to prime up saliva for their dry tongues, and make wry faces. A few who piled into the sheets late last night, hold their heads and emit Ohhhs of brain-ache. Hairy legs and wrinkled nightgowns change into militarily dressed vertebrates that a woman might look at without horror.

At breakfast the Canuck and I are talking to each other again, formulating our plans for the day. A lazy walking tour of the town seems agreeable to both of us, and we gulped down the food and haste to be off. The steward hollers at us to haul in the dishes, and we're full of blundering apologies, but he doesn't stop scowling at us through his shaggy brows. I can feel his stare itching my back as I stroll with the Canuck out into the streets.

We walk awhile in silence, both feeling a sense of shame for forgetting to carry our dishes to the kitchen. We feel like kids caught with jam on their fingers. Disrupting the spirit

and practice of cooperation is weighing heavily upon our consciences. With no high command running things at the waiting barracks, everything is left to the soldiers initiative and rank-and-file judgment; and in running counter to that judgment, however slightly, we're feeling we betrayed the wishes of our fellow-soldiers. The Canuck looks at me, and we snap out of our conscience-stricken coma. He says we'll carry the dishes back and forth tomorrow just to make it up to the steward, and we laugh, forgetting all about it.

The buzz of industry whirrs in our ears as we pass through the factory district on to Ramblas St, the main thoroughfare, where we board a streetcar. We're used to the idea of riding streetcars without paying any fare. Very reasonable people these transportation workers. The Canuck tells me that before the war there were more people employed counting the money taken in by the streetcar and bus conductors than there were actually operating the vehicles of transportation. They just decided to put the cashier's to doing useful work by abolishing the price system in the transportation industry. The fair now is to look like a fighter, a worker, or a child. In other industries where the C.N.T.-F.A.I. have control, he is telling me, a modified wage system is still the economic vogue, and will be for some time if the workers desire greater productive capacity. If they wish to build greater industries, they must necessarily pile up surpluses. The thing that's amazing about all this, in spite of the fact that workers still receive wages, is that they democratically decide what their wages shall be; the profit-seeking owning class is out of the picture, and the aggregation of lands and machinery are socially owned and controlled. And he is saying that if that ain't some things to fight for, he'll eat his shirt; and a very unpalatable shirt it is that a soldier wears.

We step off the car and walk down to the quays. French and British gunboats are tide up to the docks. We start talking to a