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THE RETURN FROM STALAG Z

Robert J. Levin

Almost all the way from Paris, the countryside had stretched away from the railroad track to the horizon, green and unmarred as before. Cows and a few goats and horses, long since accustomed to trains clattering by, lifted their heads momentarily and then returned to their grazing. Michel glanced out the train window and as his eyes drank in the sight of fertile French fields, it was as though he were taking in deep breaths of fresh air. Here was the sameness of things as they were and as he had remembered them: cultivated fields unbroken by roads or even horse trails, living boundary lines of straight cropped beech trees, grassy slopes sprinkled with clusters of "boutons d'or," dwarf trees made incongruous by the graceful swell of the land. But that was not at all what he had expected to see.

For Michel Limare knew what even a single spasmodic battle can do to farmland. That first day, when Stalag Ziegenhain had been overrun by American tanks, the prison camp survivors had poured onto the road and fled dazedly toward Kassel, some of them half-crazy with fear, as though this were a gate that had opened for precious moments and was already starting to swing shut. The Americans, racing forward, had refused to stop to talk to the damn DPs but had pointed backward and occasionally fired a gun in sport to indicate the way and to watch some stragglers stumble on in even greater haste. But when twilight had thickened, Michel and a score of others were near a partly destroyed farmhouse and they had decided to stay there for the night. Michel had gone out searching for any chickens and ducks that might still be around. That was when he had gazed on fields that had been gashed by tank treads, on the black ruins of two farmhouses, on an orchard that had been splintered by artillery. He had thought of France, then.
He had expected to see something like that on his way home from Paris, for he knew Normandy had been hurt. He was grateful that he did not have to see it now. Later, perhaps, he would be equal to facing such destruction. Not now.

That was why he was not sorry that the train had to follow this long route to reach Le Havre, even though he was on his way to his wife and the trip would take five hours instead of two. He could overlook that because here there was an easy familiarity and a serenity that he found soothing. It was not hard to ignore solitary patches of bomb-pocked soil, the reinforced bridge over which the train crept like a cat on a fence, and the battered remains of flatcars and boxcars that stood off on rusty sidings. Sights like these were few.

Besides, he had seen so much that was worse. So had the other three men in the compartment with him. Two of them wore, as he did, the heavy wool uniform of the French Army, and they had knapsacks, while the other, a conscripted worker, wore a shabby blue denim blouse and trousers and had a gunny sack on the floor beside him. They had come from different parts of northwestern Germany but they had seen the same things. The names were different, but that was all. When a man has been in Germany, Michel thought, he has seen Bizerte and Warsaw and Carthage, too.

He himself had seen too much in the last month. He had been caught up in the flood of liberated prisoners and slave laborers, and he had trudged from Kassel through Gotha and Asfeld to Saarbrucken. Once these had been cities but now they were only tangled masses of concrete, iron mesh hand girders, only mounds of rubble and neat piles of salvaged brick. The materials had no nationality and they looked the same in Saarbrucken as they did, he found out later, in Le Havre.

He had been away from home for a time beyond measure, except in the meaningless way of months and years. He had seen his wife, Therese, only once since he had been called up in September of 1939—for three telescoped days in Paris. Suddenly he saw her as she had wanted him to see her and remember her that last night, lying slender and pale-skinned on the bed, her arms held up to him. She had kept her eyes closed, for she wanted him to see all the loveliness of her that was woman but none of the womanly fright in her eyes.

Fingers interlaced, he fought to keep himself from remembering more, from picturing and feeling those moments when they had lain together last. He had struggled that way many times at Stalag Ziegen-
hain with nothing but unyielding wooden boards beneath him as he turned over and pressed into them in torment. He could never stop the remembering, and in those last terrible starving months he could not stop the tears.

At the camp, the men had often spoken of their wives. At first they spoke only of how their wives must be waiting for their return and of how long it would be, but as the years stretched on, there were some who wondered whether the wives were waiting. Aloud, it was always someone else’s wife they wondered about. First it was the Germans and later the Americans, and there were several prisoners—Georges Claudet, for one—who had said they would have preferred the Germans to have remained in their town.

"For," he had said, after excitable Henri Suivet threw up his hands in disgust, "one hates the Germans. I have a young daughter, she must be eighteen now, and though I am sure Jacqueline would not go near a German, I am not sure of these Americans."

Michel knew that Claudet had a pretty wife, too. And when the men had spoken of these things, about faithless wives, Michel had felt sorry for them. If they had married a girl like Therese, they would have had no fears.

None, Michel thought, feeling the sun through the window warm on his face, not even with Americans. And in that instant, in the split-second that it takes a thought to come alive, he saw her on the bed again and not alone. He closed his eyes in a spasm, as though to shake off the picture, and when he had banished it, he cursed.

Would Therese understand what being in prison for five years could do to a man? What he thinks and how he thinks? Could she understand that each day’s existence in Stalag Z had been so much like drowning? There was the same suffocation with wave after wave of blackness, with the mind remaining clear but screaming in the void of the skull, and the same thrashing struggle to reach the surface and to remain afloat—to break past the unknowable end of captivity and to return home.

And who can tell of hunger? Of what it does to a man? The last months the prisoners had been given no substantial food. Once a day they received cans of greasy water that the guards said was soup, and several times a week, with luck, each man was allowed a chunk of black bread. They went that way for eight months. Eight months. Michel wondered whether Therese could ever have any idea of what that
meant. How could she, if he himself could not recall it? For it takes a long time to die of starvation, and a man doesn't die all at once; but parts of his mind die quickly—monotony smothers the power of observation, and then the memory stores up only fantasies of fatigue. What, then, can a man tell of hunger? Except, perhaps, that eventually the will to live succumbs. When a man lost that, as Jacques Moulet had lost it three days before the Americans liberated the camp, he simply closed his eyes and went to sleep and waited. Shaking him and trying to force liquids down his throat did no good. Jacques had opened his mouth but the soup had dribbled out the corners because he would not swallow it.

Could he even tell her, and tell her truthfully, what had happened at Saarbrucken? There, the docile, almost mute group of freed prisoners had been transported to the city by truck. They had arrived about three in the afternoon and they were hungry. They went to an enclosure, to which others had directed them, and they asked the German there for food. This man had been ordered to give from his stock of food to those prisoners who needed it; but he told them it was not yet meal time. They had accepted his decision. They were accustomed to accepting such decisions. But when an American heard of this, he told them they could go demand some food, that now they had the right to demand what they needed of the Germans. They had gone back; and then, as the German, muttering to himself, gave out chunks of stale bread, a tall thin Pole with gaunt face and red-rimmed eyes bent down, seized a stone and flung it in the German's face. Michel remembered the way the German had swayed and then how he went to his knees in the dust, while blood leaked from between his fingers. That much Michel could tell her, but he did not think he could tell of the fierce, animal exultation that possessed him when he saw the German, bleeding and beaten.

He knew that he would be haunted by the same nightmares that clung to him even now, probably by other new ones as well; he knew that he would be driven by his memories of all that had happened to say things, do things that the Michel Limare he had been would never have done. And it was important that Therese should understand him as he now was. If he could only explain to her! Yet he knew that he could not, that if he could speak, the telling of these things might take as long as the living of them had. No one can explain away five years in five minutes. Such is the balance that what takes years to happen
cannot be told in minutes, nor in any single telling, and often cannot
ever be told completely, no matter how desperate the need for under-
standing may be.

The train picked up speed and swayed on a turn. Out in a field,
a group of people shaded their eyes with one hand and waved a greet-
ing with the other. They knew when the Paris to Le Havre train was
due and they always waved to the returning prisoners and workers.
More and more, as the train approached the city, there were people
waving, and Michel began to smile and to return the greetings. The
others in the compartment raised their hands, too, and one of them, a
sunken-eyed, frightened-looking individual, said over and over again:\n"Thank God, oh, thank God."

Michel glanced at him in annoyance but the words kept coming,
and then Michel found them tumbling over one another in his own
head.

The train headed toward a hill and Michel began breathing heav­
ily. Around that hill was Le Havre and in Le Havre was Therese and
it had been six years. Then they were around it. There were the
furnace smokestacks thrusting upward. Over there was the road that
led to Montivilliers. And this was the way home.

Nothing was to be seen but destruction. It was the same here as
it had been in Germany, and anger smouldered in Michel. Not even
the friendly smiles and the waving of the Tricolor by people standing
in the doorways of houses that still remained, could make him feel bet­
ter. The big apartment house on the outskirts of the city was a hol­
lowed-out skeleton, and the roofless homes in these flatlands at the foot
of the hills and all the homes on the hillside itself were the wreckages
of lifetimes past. In several places, only a wall or chimney remained as
evidence of what had been there before, and if this were not there,
Michel thought, or when it is cleared away, it should be easy to forget
that once a family lived there.

In Paris, someone had asked Michel if he were sure that his wife
was still alive in Le Havre, and he had said: "Of course," because that
was the way he wanted it to be. Looking at the shell-torn homes,
Michel repeated the thought to himself: "Of course she is."

"Pardon," said the nervous repatriate, "did you say something?"

"No," said Michel.

"I'm sorry, but I thought you said —"

"No," said Michel, "I said nothing."
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The train pulled into the station, coasting to a stop. Like a tired runner, the British locomotive let off steam with long heaves, and already youngsters wearing armbands were running alongside the coach. Michel's mouth was dry and his hand shook as he reached for his musette bag.

Behind him he heard a cry and he looked up to see the thin-faced worker tremble once, violently, and then push his way through the corridor and out the door. On the platform, the woman who had seen him began to weep and the little girl with her looked on owl-eyed until the man jumped from the train and gathered them both in his arms.

Michel slung his musette bag over one shoulder. Outside, passengers streamed past, some carrying battered valises, others with packs on their backs, a few pushing bicycles or leading children by the hand, while the people standing off to the side searched the face of every man who went by. As Michel stepped off the train, so slowly it seemed as though he were afraid to go where now his feet had to take him, faces turned hopefully toward him, clung to his face for a moment and then cast him off. He drifted along with the other passengers, hardly noticing that all that remained of the once-beautiful Le Havre railroad terminal was a steel-girder skeleton arching overhead, the ribs of what had been the city's proudest civic structure.

It was almost nine o'clock and the April sun had just set. Daylight was ebbing fast, draining warmth and color from the street and seemingly subduing sounds. Michel was walking more quickly, more certainly. Soon he had to hold himself in to keep from running, and when he turned up Rue General Sarrail, he was pale. Three more blocks and he would be there. . . . Two more blocks, and up two flights of stairs and then Therese. Anticipation drew his muscles taut and cut off the air from his lungs. At that instant he caught sight of the house across the street from his. It was roofless.

Almost as though the bar on the corner were the spot he had been heading for, Michel went right in. He dared not think of what was across the way from that bombed-out building, and he felt the need of a drink. His hand trembled and his eyes burned as he picked up the calvados and downed it, and when the plump-faced woman asked him if he wanted another, he nodded. She set it down in front of him and his hand, without the strength to lift itself, slid across the walnut bar. His fingers closed around the thick glass, tightened, but did not pick
it up. He stared vacantly at the picture of General de Gaulle and his mouth hung a bit slack.

"Are you ill, m'sieu?" the woman asked.

He shook his head. Suddenly he was angry with himself for acting the way he was, and he drank the liquor defiantly. Therese was only a few moments from him and he stood here drinking calvados! Taking forty francs from his pocket, he dropped the bills on the bar and was walking out when the woman stopped him.

"M'sieu," she said apologetically, "it is fifty francs, if you please."

He gave her the ten francs, but even as he strode into the street, he was trembling again.

Within the minute he was in front of the house. It had not been damaged; but he had met no one he knew, and he wondered what was wrong. It seemed to him that he was in the wrong place, that he had never lived here but had had a dream in which he had seen this building. Yet there on the doorway were the push buttons and next to one was the name: Limare.

Only then did Michel shudder with the violence of an epileptic and panic seized him that someone, perhaps even Therese, would see him in this state. So he stumbled out into the street and half ran, half walked to the corner. By then he had a grip on himself and he was almost mad with impatience, now that he knew for certain that she was there. He began to run.

He ran to the house and took the steps two at a time, the musette bag bouncing at his side. He wanted to laugh, so familiar was the banister under his hand and the musty odor of the hallway in his nostrils.

His door still had the polished gold-plated namepiece with "Limare" in flourishing script letters, but somehow the doorway seemed small. He pressed the button but there was no sound. He tried again. Apparently the system is out of order, he thought. He would have to attend to that. Hesitant, he knocked softly on the door. There was the sound of footsteps inside and he knocked more forcefully. The footsteps approached the door.

The latch rattled and when the door swung open, Therese stood there. They looked at each other, and her gray eyes widened and she sucked in her breath with a startled gasp while Michel went pale and then flushed but found he could not talk. He feasted his eyes on that oval face, seeing deep lines of weariness that he could not remember. Finally she called his name in a voice like the wind's whisper.
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She carried a child in her arms. Without crossing the threshold or saying a word to her, Michel found himself hypnotized by the baby girl, by the smooth chubby arms that went around Therese's pale and slender neck, by the honey-colored hair so sunny in contrast with the dull black of Therese's hastily combed hair, by bright round eyes that stared at him with almost the same disbelief as his wife's eyes.

Michel stepped into the room and closed the door behind him, never once taking his eyes from the baby. He leaned back against the door, sagging, and he let his musette bag slide slowly to the floor as though it were his heart itself dropping to the ground. His arms hung at his sides, as lifeless as his dull stare, but in brief spasms his fingers twitched feebly, like the legs of a dying insect beating the air.

Watching Michel with a sharpness edged by an uncertain fear, his wife put the little girl down, holding her hand so that she could stand on her chubby bowed legs, and the child responded by trying to walk, toddling in a semi-circle and ending with her face buried in her mother's skirt, gurgling delightedly. The mother's free hand came to rest on the baby's head and stroked the pale yellow hair softly.

Michel noticed the gentle, soothing caress, his wife's hand, roughened by the pumice stone she had had to use for washing, touching the baby's finespun hair with infinite tenderness, and it maddened him. A shudder shot through him. As his fingers tightened into fists, he stood up, swaying slightly, and he looked straight at his wife.

"Michel," she said quietly, "there are things..." Her voice did not die away nor did her glance falter, but she stopped talking. It was a decision: what had to be said in that moment, could not be said in a moment. In silence, gray eyes steady but frightened, Therese waited for Michel to reach her, her hand still stroking the child's hair.

In three strides he was there, his feet coming down heavily on the uncarpeted floor, and when he reached her, his face was as knotted with rage as were his fists. His mouth was twisted in a cruel way that his wife had never seen before, and she drew back. But with a lunge he tore the child's hand from hers, so that the child sat down abruptly, and when Therese straightened up to fight back, he struck her. He used his fist. Her hands flew to her cheek where he had hit her, and her eyes narrowed with pain and panic but she did not cry out. Something in those eyes lashed back at him with a sting no hand could have inflicted, so that when he swung on her the second time, his fist had opened and he slapped her. She stood still, tears running down her
cheeks, silent in her grief, as though she had been hurt by the words he had not uttered, instead of by his blows.

The baby wailed, giving voice to the misery in the room, and Michel saw Therese as though for the first time. He saw her face, white and contorted by her silent sobs, saw the stiff figure, much too thin from lack of food, wearing a shabby black dress that he remembered having bought her many years ago, her legs still painfully crimson from winter winds on bare flesh, the shoes without shape and with wooden soles. His face grew warm, then burned with shame. In the same way a person hears himself after he has said something wrong and has been met with silence, hearing his words shouted out with terrible clarity, so Michel saw himself striking Therese.

Unable to bear the sight of her weeping, he went over to the window and looked down on the two maple trees in the small yard with its carefully tended kitchen gardens, now deep in twilight blues. But he could not be deaf to the cries of the child, and the feeling of guilt rose within him until the sobs beat against his head like clubs. He found himself listening as a guilty prisoner might listen, listening for the sharp screech of guards' whistles and then the brain-piercing scream of a siren and then he would wait for shots.

Instead he heard his wife's voice, soft and even, hushing the baby's cries, soothing it to hiccuping quiet.