

Dead Man's Holiday

Paul Alverdes

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A FEW years after the war, Jacob Köbes, labourer on a farm in the Kaiserswerther district on the lower Rhine, found himself once again in the company of many of the dead. It happened between Christmas and Epiphany. Köbes was a good, hard-working fellow, but he was almost always in low spirits and sometimes could not bring himself to do a hand's turn. On these occasions he sat on the ground in the barn or on a stone in the fields wagging his head from side to side, and if anyone asked what ailed him he would answer: "I'm worried. I'm like that, you see."

And then in the middle of the night he was wakened by a great joy. First he sat up for a while in his bed in the loft over the byre and laughed and talked to himself out loud and waved his arms about. "Up with you, you old lout," he said. "Up. To-day is Dead Man's holiday." Then he got quickly on to his feet and pulled on his clothes the worn breeches with leather knee strapping and the old tunic and baggy field-boots he had worn at the front slung his overcoat on top and felt his way down into the yard. The night was bright with stars and above the coping of the byre it grew brighter still as though the moon came up behind it. And the livestock was unnaturally alert. The pigeons were on the wing, wheeling and swerving over the yard like a clapping, rattling cloud, and the yard dog was standing on the roof of his kennel with a knowing turn of his head, gently wagging his tail, because he heard something that greatly pleased him. Köbes was not surprised either when he saw that the grey Belgian mare which was usually so lazy, and a bit spiteful too, was standing in the snow at the open gate, blowing steam from her nostrils as she looked at him with sparkling eyes. He caught hold of her mane and hoisted himself on to her broad back. She swung round once in a circle with a loud neigh and stretched herself. Then she set off at a pace that made the wind sing in his ears. She made for the wood in front of the river, and now Köbes saw that the brightness in the sky was over the Rhine, up stream and down as far as he could see. Great beacon fires, apparently, were alight along the banks, for the sky quivered with a fitful gleam and now and then he saw swathes of smoke rise and roll over the tree-tops and showers of sparks eddy and whirl far aloft. But when he came nearer he saw that it was Very lights, climbing up like stars and slowly falling, light after light of all colours, as they

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used to do at the front. But this time Köbes felt no alarm. He seemed, too, to hear bugles blowing andbing up like stars and slowly falling, light after light of all colours, as they used to do at the front. But this time Köbes felt no alarm. He seemed, too, to hear bugles blowing and the beating of kettledrums.

Soon after, not far from the ferry where the alders grew, a tall man in outlandish apparel with long, uncovered hair and over his shoulders a coachman's cloak with many small capes, strode into the middle of the road and requested Köbes to dismount. He was the last they were waiting for, he told him. Köbes swung himself off at once, gave the grey mare a blow on the hindquarters and followed the man through the trees to the water's edge.

The ferry boat was already crowded. Those who sat in it were all men, young and old, as far as he could tell, and many of them were in strange clothing and masked up to the eyes. Köbes knew none of them, but he sat down without fear between two of them who silently made room. The tall man in the cloak took the rudder, and the boat, stemming the current on a slanting course, glided swiftly over the water through floating ice. Now they all turned their heads with great eagerness towards the further bank. Some even stood up and, swaying to the motion of the boat, gazed fixedly across over the heads and shoulders of the others. Köbes now heard, more and more clearly, singing and the rattle of wheels and the clatter of thousands of horses' hooves, and through it all voices rang out, calling and laughing. Nothing of all this, however, could be seen, for it was all on the road beyond the river bank. As soon as the ferry boat touched land, they all jumped out in great impatience and rushed up the bank as though racing one another, and Köbes ran with them.

But when he had surmounted the bank, he suddenly found himself entirely alone again. The sky, too, quickly grew dark, as though the fires had all been instantly extinguished, and no more Very lights went up; but after a while the stars came through and were reflected in the frozen puddles of the road.

But Köbes had not sat long on the bank above the road, when once more and louder and louder came a confused roar and the trampling of feet and the rattling of iron and leather, mixed with shouted orders and loud calls and the answering calls dying away far into the distance. And this went on a long time before some of them came marching along the road beneath him; but he did not see them because they did not show themselves to him. But he was not afraid all the same. In fact he stood up now and then and stepped boldly to the edge of the bank above the road and called out the name of his old regiment down into the darkness and "Ninth Company here!"

But there was no answer, and so after a while he fell silent and felt more and more sad and began to be ashamed. But when, in utter dejection, he was about to climb down to the river's edge to keep a look-out for the ferry boat, there at last in the distance he saw the gleam of lights or torches just where the road left the wood, and now at last he saw something.

He saw many men marching along in overcoats and helmets, and there they all were, all the ones he knew and had never forgotten, all dear and all dead, but he had never known before how dear they were. They knew him at once and called out his name and waved their rifles like flag staffs; and he ran up to them and danced about on the road beside them and shouted their names, and they answered at the top of their voices.

Finally he fell in where there was a gap, and picked up the step. And then he

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saw that the sergeant, who was the last man in the last year he had helped to bury, marched beside his section. But now his wound was gone and all the other dead men, too, were uninjured and their faces were calm.

Then Köbes became happier than he had ever been in his life. He asked no questions, and why should he? And the others, too, spoke no more; but whenever they began to sing his voice rang out with theirs. But in the villages and towns through which they passed with incredible speed, nobody heard them or saw them, only now and then a man sprang with long strides from a house or down from the footpath and silently joined the ranks, and at once he was transformed into their likeness.

But towards morning when they were close to the Siebengebirge in a large wood the sergeant beckoned to Jacob to leave the ranks and raised the stable-lantern which he was carrying and shone the light for a long time on Jacob's face: "You see, Köbes?" he then said, "We're all safe and sound. What do you worry for?" With this he gave him the lantern. It went out at once. Day was now dawning and Köbes stood alone in the distant forest.

It took him two days to get back to his farm, though he was a good walker. Then he told them what had happened to him, but the farmer and the rest of them in the village did not believe him—not even when he showed them the lantern he had brought back with him. Nevertheless, its light never failed, no matter how often he lit it. Many a time Köbes sits alone in his loft looking into the flame and waiting for Dead Man's Holiday to come round again, and he worries no more.