

Sword and Fiddle

Paul Alverdes

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ONE Easter, a few years before the War, a party of boys went for a walking tour among the wooded hills which flank the upper waters of the Weser. There were six or seven of them, all of an age between boyhood and youth. They belonged to a club whose rules imposed a Spartan life. They avoided inns, cooked their own meals over camp fires, slept in a tent which they carried with them—or else in the barn of a friendly farmer on a heap of straw on the ground among carts and ploughs, or under the cover of a hay-loft open to the wind.

It was still cold at that time of year. The valleys showed only a sparse green and many a night on the tops there was a fall of snow. Often, at about three in the morning, when—not at this season only—an icy wind is apt to spring up, the cold forced them to jump from their scanty coverings of last year's dry grass and brushwood. Chilled and silent, they made ready to move on, struck their tent and set off in the dark. At this hour the solitude of the still, wintry woods was uncanny, and the hooting and screeching of owls filled them with dread; one of them, perhaps, saw something resembling a large dog prowling round their camp, and the wings of invisible bats fanned their foreheads. Drawing closer together and holding hands, they stumbled on in single file. Their eyes ached with sleep, the cold stung their cheeks; often they tottered on in a dream. All the same there was a horrid joy about it all.

On the eve of Easter Day they were camping on the ridge of the hills. They could see the Easter bonfires burning on every height all round, many quite close. They could smell the smoke and hear the country folk singing and shouting. Others, further off, twinkled red like setting stars. After midnight a snowstorm came up. A sudden gust caught the tent and the cold was intense. So they packed up and began the descent through the woods to the valley, by the light of the lantern which the leader carried. They hoped the weather would improve next day and planned to spend it on the banks of the Weser.

Among them were two who were so strongly contrasted in temperament that they jarred on one another all the time. In fact, their determined enmity would have ended in spoiling the enjoyment of the whole party if things had not taken a happy turn that day. One of the two was nicknamed Sword—for they made it a rule not to be known by the names their masters used at school. He was a boy whose father, a captain in a line regiment, had been killed in a native rising in one of the German colonies in Africa.

Sword's one passion was for soldiering. He was a very good fellow, hardy,

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capable, plucky and self-reliant. The trouble was that he insisted on giving a military stamp to his whole bearing and to every article of his clothing and equipment. He wore a green jacket buttoned to the neck like a tunic, a leather belt with a brass clasp, the black collarslip *[note]* then customary in the Prussian army, and blue riding breeches with leather leggings and heavy nailed boots. He scorned a cap, as they all did, but every morning he carefully combed his wiry, tow-coloured hair and subdued it with pomade. He had special receptacles for his pocket mirror, his stick of pomade and the stiff brush he applied it with. His rucksack was always in scrupulous order and he spent a great deal of time over this at every halt. In it were cases and boxes for all kinds of necessaries—a tin medicine chest, for example, in which there was a fine selection of plasters and bandages, a housewife with needles and threads of various sizes and strengths; likewise an assortment of brushes for his clothing and boots, of which he took the greatest care. Further, he carried his father's field glasses in a much-worn leather case, in the lid of which were fitted a compass and a tiny thermometer. The greatest favour and honour he could accord the rest of them was the permission to look through these glasses; and it was never for more than a moment at a time.

[note] A collarslip is a bib worn under the upright collar of a uniform.

If the troop was quartered for the night with a farmer, he was always the last to leave the barn, and would not go before he had shaken out and turned over the hay they had pulled about, and swept up the floor and left everything tidy. On the march he held himself erect and walked with a soldierly step, a rough oak staff in his hand, carried like a sword with the hilt at the clasp of his belt and the blade over his right shoulder. Sometimes he suspended it from his belt. It was from this that he got the name of Sword, and he delighted in being called by it.

His opposite number was a boy, whose pretty face and delicate build were almost effeminate. He carried a fiddle with him to play as they walked, or to accompany the songs they sang at night round the fire, with the dark woods all round and clouds or stars above. So they called him Fiddle. His nature was enthusiastic and emotional. When he came to a spot which pleased him, he wanted to spend whole days there, singing and dreaming. When the others insisted on going on and were not to be persuaded by the most impassioned harangues into abandoning their programme for the sake of hill and stream, his disgust was unbounded. He had a lively mind, full of odd fancies, and though not really malicious, he had a sharp tongue and an original way of putting things; and he was often tempted to make merciless fun of his more stolid companions. Whether he meant it or not, he inflicted on each one of them wounds which did not quickly heal, and their feeling for him was a strange mixture of wondering admiration and secret irritation.

The enmity between him and Sword began one day very soon after Sword joined the troop. He wished to put a summary veto on the clothes Fiddle wore. Fiddle's luxuriant brown hair was very long at the back, and he wore a sky-blue linen coat, adorned with a wide white collar, brown velvet shorts, thin woollen stockings and shoes. Although Sword did not carry the others with him in his angry protest against this costume, which he said was fit only for a mountebank, he lost no opportunity after this of expressing his contempt. If Fiddle began to sing one of his favourite songs, such as

"Auf dieser Welt hab ich kein Freud
Hab einen Schatz und der ist weit . .

or:

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"Den Ring und den ich hab von dir . . .

Sword overbore him at once with a favourite of his own:

"Brüder, uns ist alles gleich
Ist auch Frankreich em Kaiserreich . . ."

and Fiddle had to play it. If he proposed stealing a lift on a wagon or a barge to lighten the way, Sword met the proposal with a smile of contempt, and remarked that such notions could only occur to an utterly effeminate nature. He also accused him of slovenliness and of shirking every job he could get out of. If it was Fiddle's turn to wash the dishes, he washed them over again after him, and relentlessly forced him to clean his shoes, comb his hair and brush his clothes. Fiddle, who was no match for his muscular opponent, would have been utterly defenceless against him at last, if fortune had not put the deadliest of weapons into his hand.

Sword had stammered ever since he was a child. Often he could not speak without contorting his mouth before each word or sentence, rapidly blinking his eyes, and sometimes he had to begin with a tentative lisping and whispering of a few disconnected syllables. He suffered as unspeakably from this defect as if it had been a shameful deformity; and when he thought that in a few years he would stand as an officer in front of his company, he was at his wits' end how to get the better of it. Nothing that Fiddle could say, when they came to words, about his military bearing, affected him at all. But when, driven to desperation, Fiddle, who was an excellent mimic, screwed up his eyes, contorted his mouth and clucked with his tongue in a way that would have done a comedian the highest credit, Sword went deadly white, and turned away.

The others witnessed this dangerous game with divided feelings. Whether they admitted it or not, the perfection of the imitation gave them secret and unspeakable delight; at the same time, when, a few days before, Sword knocked his tormentor down, none of them raised a finger in his defence. Since this occurrence the two had not exchanged a single word.

To return, then. After the troublesome descent, they hit upon a sheltered camping place close to the river's bank, not far from a small town. It seemed almost warm there after the night wind on the top of the hills. The stars, too, came out again and promised a fine day. Once more they pitched the tent, and lying down close together fell asleep. After a few hours Fiddle woke. He heard the blackbirds singing, and saw a glimmer of daylight through the canvas of the tent. The others were still fast asleep when he crept out into the open.

The sun was up in all its glory, but as yet gave little warmth. Close to the river-bank Sword stood up to his knees in the mist which hung over the meadow grass, naked in the white light, with arms extended. Raising them above his head, he took a shallow dive into the stream. When he reached the further bank Fiddle saw that he had been carried a long way down by the current. The river was scarcely a stone's throw wide, but black and swift, and so cold that it gave off a steam in the sun.

It was not till he reached the bend before the weir that Sword gained the further side. Pummelling his chest and thighs with his fists he climbed up the bank. Then he ran jumping along until he was a good way above the spot where Fiddle stood watching him, and once more plunged into the stream. He made straight for the bank where they were camping, swimming strongly with wide sweeps of his arms. But when he reached the middle of the river he suddenly turned on his back. In a moment he was swept down past Fiddle. His head was thrown back and without uttering a word he looked at Fiddle with calm contempt. He kept himself from sinking by movements of his hands, but the movements grew feebler. Fiddle ran after him along the bank, got in front of him, tore off the few clothes he had on and made a desperate leap into mid-stream. The icy cold of the water closed in a rush over his head and took away his breath. However, he

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emerged again and saw the half-numbered Sword not far away. Somehow—he did not know how—he reached the middle of the river just in time to catch hold of him before he sank, and pushed him in front of him until he felt his knees grating on the shelving rock, and thorns and willows prodding his chest and body, and then with intense relief hung, still grasping Sword, to the scrub at the river's edge. For a long time they lay panting on the low bank; then they rubbed themselves down, clapped their sides and rolled in the coarse grass. At last Sword got up and walked away in silence to the camp. After a few steps, however, he stopped, and without looking at Fiddle or raising his head said that he had asked help of nobody, least of all of *him*. With that he turned and strode off to the tent. Fiddle got his clothes and then crept under his coverings. The rest were still asleep.

Neither, of course, said a word of the occurrence; but it was very soon evident that their enmity had turned to sheer hatred. An hour or two later, while Sword with his looking glass and his pomade stick was getting ready to go to the Easter Day service in the small town, it was decided that two of the others should go with him and buy a few extra supplies from a grocer or an inn for the meal which the rest would get ready in the meantime. They drew lots as usual and Fiddle and the youngest of the party were to go. Sword instantly refused to take Fiddle with him. "I should think not," he said with a glance at the detested jacket and the white clocked stockings which Fiddle had put on in honour of the day. "Do you think I'm going among Christians on Easter Sunday with a Jackanapes?"

Fiddle went white. Tears came to his eyes and he moved away as though in acquiescence. Then he turned back again and with a faultless imitation of Sword's way of speaking remarked that there was no accounting for tastes, but not everybody wanted to have a recruit's outfit on his back. They all laughed, while Sword retorted: "You want another lesson, do you?" He would probably have been content with the threat if Fiddle had not made a wild leap at his throat and flung him to the ground. But while Fiddle knelt over him with raised fists, there was a violent upheaval and he soon lay at the mercy of the foe he had taken off his guard. Beside himself with rage, and grinding his teeth, Fiddle seized the short broad knife which, like the rest, he carried at his belt in a horn-sheath—hoping that it would stave off his chastisement.

"Coward!" Sword bellowed, and bent back Fiddle's wrist. The knife fell gleaming to the grass and Sword picked it up and flung it into the river. The others, who had been looking on in astonishment without attempting to interfere, now expected to see punishment follow and could hardly think it undeserved. But Sword let his hands fall with an awkward laugh, wiped away the blood which flowed from his nose and went back to his brush and comb, leaving his enemy where he lay. He made himself very smart and soon set off. He was going to church, as he had already said, and would get what was wanted himself.

The others spent the morning in very poor spirits. Fiddle lay in the grass by himself where Sword had left him and never stirred, his face on his arms. No one liked to speak to him; nor did they say a word to each other about the unpleasant incident. In silence they scooped a hole for the fire, collected brushwood and broke up sticks and put the pots on the fire.

About midday, when the sun was gloriously warm and a delicious air sparkled over the meadows, Sword came back with a beaming face. He called them fine Christians and said they had missed a rousing sermon, and handed round a large paper bag of very gaudy sweets. As though nothing had happened, he went across to Fiddle and slapped him on the shoulder and held out the bag. Fiddle, blushing all over, sat up and put his hand into the bag without a word. It was now Sword's turn to blush, for while the others gathered round smiling, he took out his knife and begged Fiddle to accept it in place of the one which was now in the river. It was a very choice knife, almost a weapon, and on the polished wooden handle, roughly carved but easily recognisable, were a sword and a fiddle—crossed. The leader of the troop asked, laughing, whether he had used the church pew as a wood carver's bench. Sword admitted he had and they all laughed. At the same time, he said, his occupation had only strengthened his devotions.

From that day a friendship sprang up between Sword and Fiddle which was unbroken until

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their deaths a few years later in front of the English trenches.
