

THE GERMAN

"I Like to Play at War"



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His name was Anton—the last name was something long and unpronounceable. He was very blond and German, and as he lay there on the litter staring up at me, he was like some fierce hawk, fighting and untamed, though caged. He looked at me and I at him and neither of us spoke.

Rows and rows of litters were waiting there at the train station to be loaded into ambulances and taken to our hospital. It was still dark that early in the morning. A fine misty rain threatened to change into a downpour, then to fog. Searchlights stabbing here and there through the mist were the only lights showing in the blackout other than the dimmed ones of the ambulances. In the cold gray dawn it all looked very bleak and forbidding. It was a dismal crowd of prisoners we loaded that morning, and for that reason Anton was the more outstanding, for he looked neither frightened nor discouraged, only full of fight.

Overhead the signboard with the name of the town was lighted momentarily in the searchlight and he stared at it. The signal we were waiting for was finally given and we lifted our litters and carried them to the ambulances, hurrying along for they were heavy loads. In orderly confusion litters were hastily shoved into place; patients groaned here and there; there were shouts and curses and scraping of hobnails on the concrete pavement. With a heave my litter was in its bracket and strapped into place. Then the door slammed shut. Tires sang on the wet pavement. The red tail light disappeared down the street and Anton was gone and forgotten.

Well, it was a busy day. Our ward was full when I went on duty, and although some of the prisoners were able to help out, things were still disorganized. Much of the extra work fell on ward boys. I had little time to look at the individual patients as I hurried from one errand to another. However, I stopped short in the middle of the difficult job of explaining to a patient by gesture and pantomime just what I wanted done. There sitting up in his cot and watching my every move was Anton, looking very serious indeed but less antagonistic than he had that morning. Perhaps he was surprised at having received such a good breakfast and the fact that so far no one had attempted to slug him into a cooperative frame of mind. Now clean and rested after the hard trip, he was more outstanding than ever among that motley bunch of patients in the ward. He had a lean handsome face tanned by long exposure and even white teeth which flashed when he smiled.

Days later I had still to hear Anton say a word. He just lay there and stared and kept quiet. Once a day the nurse made the rounds dressing wounds, and I assisted her at the dressing cart. Occasionally, we would stop at Anton's bed. He had received a deep ugly gash across his chest which, although painful, was not serious and after being sewed up was healing rapidly. Personally I could not see why he didn't get up more, but he never tried but once and then complained of pain. The other patients waited on him hand and foot, so he had little to do.

TIME passes slowly enough in a hospital. Each day is the same as the day before, and tomorrow holds no promise for something better. Work helps break the monotony—perhaps that was the real reason why the patients were almost eager to be assigned jobs—and we had no trouble getting them

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to help. But for Anton lying there, time must have been a weary thing indeed.

There was a radio in the nurse's office and sometimes through the open door the music could be heard faintly. One day while I was making Anton's bed it played *Tales from the Vienna Woods* and several of the patients knew the tune. I said "Vienna Valse," and he smiled and said "Ja."

In exactly two weeks Anton betrayed his secret. I came in suddenly one morning and found him reading an English novel.

"Look, you!" I said indignantly. "If you can read that book, I know damned well you can speak English."

He laid the book aside and smiled and then answered slowly. "I speak English a little."

Perfect English! That made me madder than ever because for days I had been telling him what to do by gestures and a word or two of German, and all the while he could understand every word I said.

I talked to him a little after that. He was one of Himmler's SS men and was proud of it. He was genuinely surprised that the SS was so unpopular with us. While all the other prisoners were openly defeatist, he only shrugged and said, "The whole story has yet to be told. We are still fighting unbeaten."

Of course he was a Hitler enthusiast and was exceptionally well informed on politics in general and his own in particular. After three years at war he still liked the army. In his own words, "I like to play war." (Somehow I want to think he didn't know the exact meaning of play.) Now at twenty-two he was a Nazi soldier for life—so he said.

He was something of an athlete and had won medals for swimming. He must have been a likeable fellow before all this trouble started. He showed me a bunch of photographs of his girl friends, and all of them were tops. "But," he said, "I shall never marry."

When I asked him why, he smiled. "It isn't necessary."

I urged him to tell the other patients a few essential words of English so they could express themselves better but he shrugged that off, too.

"I am no teacher."

There wasn't much use in talking really. I soon saw that he lived in a different world than mine; we looked at everything in a different way. While I wait for peace, he waits for release and another chance. And there doesn't seem to be much of a chance to get together on anything with a fellow like that.

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HE has gone now. He was soon well and strong again. One morning when I came on duty I found him dressed in his blue-green uniform holding his few personal belongings. He looked tight-lipped and angry. He felt that he was going to be wronged or mistreated. The prisoners fell into rank and as they marched away I said, "Good-bye, Anton." He smiled briefly as he answered "*Wiedersehen*," but he left in the same mood as when he came.

What prison will ever change that feeling? I wonder if he will ever change or whether he will always remain the same—so very German and so full of indignation and fight.

I wonder if "*Wiedersehen*" had a double meaning. I wonder if they will ever change.