

The Comrade

Mazo de la
Roche

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THE COMRADE

By Mazo de la Roche

Corporal Phelan of the Irish Guards lay crying in a ditch. He was so lonely, so chilled by the autumn mist, and so peevish with the pain that had goaded him into consciousness, that he rocked himself in the ditch, crying miserably, and thinking of his poor old mother in Fermanagh.

He thought, too, with much bitterness, of the young German officer he had been chasing when he tripped and fell in the ditch. The young officer had turned then, laughing, and fired two shots at him, before he strolled away in leisurely fashion, while Phelan lay gasping and cursing.

Just before he lapsed into unconsciousness he had heard British cheers, so he knew the village was recaptured from the enemy.

“Curses on the long-legged loafer that hit me whin I was down,” muttered Phelan, wiping his eyes, “he put a bad ind to the best day’s fightin’ I’ve had! An’ he’s kilt me so far off from me comrades that I’ll niver git home to thim anny more at all.”

He strained his eyes into the foggy dawn and could just make out the shattered spire of the village church and the yellow blur of its lighted windows.

He gave a loud halloo, which was beaten down by the heavy air. Again and again he shouted.

“It’ll be broad day before they spot me,” he said querulously, “and this ditch gittin’ fuller of me blood every blessed minute!” He groaned heavily.

Then the child cried.

Out of the fog and the dark it came to him, a faint, yet piercing, wail. It had an uncanny sound as of something not yet one with this world.

“Gad!” said Phelan, “if I was one o’ thim Papists, I’d be crossin’ meself fer fair now, an’ callin’ on the Virgin to save me! But as it is, I’m not scairt at all—hardly. Now, what the divil is yon wan holdin’ forth in a ditch at this hour for?”

“Hi!” he called, rather tremulously, “who are ye there, an’ what might be *your* complaint?”

The cry came again, but smothered this time, as though the mouth that uttered it were pressed against some breast.

With a new-found strength Phelan scrambled to his feet and stood dizzily among the fallen leaves. Around him stretched the level fields, broken only by the stately march of poplars beside the road, and the dark bulk of a straw-stack and cattle-shed on a ruined farm. A dog, hidden in the shed, began to bark.

Phelan was very weak from loss of blood, his wound burned horribly; he would have given all he owned for a mouthful of water; yet he was full of joy to discover that he was able to walk despite the pain. He stumbled for a few yards through the ditch, listening intently. Then the cry rose, very near, from a clump of straggling bushes that drooped just beyond him.

Toward these Phelan limped painfully. The dead leaves rustled under his feet, twigs snapped, the dog ceased barking, as though he listened for a returning step.

Suddenly, with an exclamation of pity, Phelan stopped short. He had almost stepped on them.

The woman gazed up at him with wide terror-stricken eyes, her face, white as a flower, against the dusty grass of the bank. She held the child close against her breast.

“Och!” said Phelan, his eyes filling with tears. “The creatures!”

She saw his uniform then, and his kindly, compassionate face, and laying the infant on the ground beside her, she clasped Phelan’s knees in her arms and broke into excited and unintelligible explanations.

“No, no, no, my girl,” said Phelan abashed, “no kneelin’ to me! It’s me that must find a way to git you and yer baby under a roof before ye are starved wid the cowlid.”

“I’ve got to git ye on yer pegs,” he repeated loudly, “this is no place at all for a young baby. Is it the way ye can walk?”

The woman, seeming to understand, began to wrap the child more securely in a flannel petticoat. It came to Phelan then with a pang that the child had been born that night in the ditch, and that the young mother, like a hunted wild thing, had borne her agony unaided.

“And I thought I was hurt,” he groaned, “I thought I was hurt.”

He saw that her dark eyes were filled with pity for him. She touched the blood-soaked shoulder of his tunic and questioned him eagerly in French.

“Sure, I’m wounded,” he replied loudly in English, “but it’s nothing to talk about. It’s you that has to be got out o’ this infernal ditch in short order. I’m surprised at ye, havin’ yer new baby here!” He spoke sternly, but his face quivered with tenderness.

And someway, though the effort hurt him cruelly, he got her to her feet and took the child in his own arms. It moved against his breast. Its face lay, small and pink, upon his khaki sleeve. Phelan was thrilled with the mystery of this new life. The woman clung to him weakly.

Then, in the early twilight, they moved slowly and painfully along the high road toward the village, the young mother, peaceful and confiding, after her great extremity, the soldier racked with pain, yet filled with pride in succouring these dependent ones, and the newborn child staring straight ahead with glazed black eyes.

The dog at the ruined farm began to bark and howl alternately. The village looked very far away.

Phelan thought a bit of a song would help them. He had a high wailing voice that came in gasps. He sang:

“Oh, I wish we all were geese, over here,
So we all could die in peace, over here.”

The woman smiled encouragement, but the child raised his voice dismally.

“He’s got no love fer me singin’,” said Phelan, “and small blame to him, fer I have no more voice than a candle flickerin’ in the draught. Eh, woman, ye should feel him foosterin’ agin the breast av me! Sure, he thinks I’m his mammy.”

After a little Phelan ceased to speak. It required all his strength to repress his groans. His lips were parched. It seemed to him that at any moment his legs might sink under him. The weight of the child grew unsupportable, and every stumbling step of the woman's threatened to drag them both to the ground.

A cold rain began to fall. It became almost dark again. They could no longer see the light in the village church. The woman sobbed as she struggled on. Phelan knew that a little trail of blood marked his passage. The child's face was wet with rain. It slept.

The woman tripped on something in their path and fell. She could not rise. It was the body of a German soldier that lay there.

Phelan put the child on the ground and tried to lift her to her feet. He could not. She lay, a sodden heap, in the rain, moaning piteously. The hands of the dead German youth were clasped as though in prayer. His face was a pallid blur.

Phelan grasped the woman beneath the armpits and dragged her into a sitting posture.

"Non, non," she moaned, "non, non."

The child slept.

Phelan saw then why the hands of the German soldier were clasped in prayer. Towering above them stood a crucifix from which the cross had been almost entirely shot away, and only the tall figure of the Christ remained, with arms outstretched against the sky, as though in a noble gesture of despair.

It was before this shattered shrine that the boy had knelt. The woman now perceived it also. She crossed herself and bent her head submissively.

Phelan stood, tottering, tormented with pain. He looked with bitter scorn at the tall gray figure above them.

"If ye were anny good," he growled, "if ye were anny good at all, ye'd come down off o' that monymint and give a hand to a pore fellah to get yon creatures under a roof!"

A gust of rain beat upon his face, obscuring his vision. The wind whipped the woman's hair about her face. Phelan stooped and picked up the child, muttering angrily.

Then, in a dazed way, he knew that someone was approaching from the direction whence they had come. A rabbit ran from under the shrine where it had been crouching, and sat for a moment on the road, ears erect, listening.

Phelan now saw a man drawing near, a soldier by his walk, though he could not make out the uniform. Something in his bearing suggested an officer, one that was accustomed to command. He stopped beside the little group with an inquiring turn of the head from one to the other. He was unarmed.

“If ye could just give me a lift here, sir,” broke out Phelan eagerly. “I’ll bless ye the rest av me days. I’m clean spent thryin’ to get this pore young woman to them as’ll care fer her, and her bit baby is as wet as a drowned kitten. It come to her last night out yon in the ditch. God pity her, just like some scared animal, tholin’ her pain alone. It’s the saddest thing I’ve run across since the war! Ain’t it quare such things can be?”

“The saddest thing—” repeated the stranger in a low, deep voice, “it is all so sad—so heart-rending to see them hating each other like this! It is hard to pick out the saddest thing.”

“Eh, but think of this pore girl out in the night alone—like this,” urged Phelan.

“Yes, and this poor little boy—who is no longer alone,” said the stranger, gently lifted the body of the German youth from the highway to the grass beside the shrine.

“That’s carrion to me,” muttered Phelan.

“It is wings to me,” the stranger said.

He took the child from Phelan’s arms and bent over it in silence a moment as though in prayer.

“I see you’re a very religious man,” ventured Phelan, rather timidly, for there was something about this stranger that did not invite familiarity.

“Religious?” The word came mockingly. “I know no religion such as you know.”

“Ah, but you *believe*,” persisted Phelan.

“I believe”—the stranger’s face was raised to the eastern sky where a strip of bluish silver marked the approaching day. The rain had ceased. “Yes, I believe,” he repeated, “in the love of all that is.” Then, tenderly, he raised

the half-conscious woman on his arm, held the child close to his breast, and said to Phelan:

“Put your arm about my shoulder, boy, and lean on me.”

“Och, no, no,” said Phelan, “I’ll do no such thing. What wid the woman, an’ the young ’un, ye’ve helf enough fer the strongest man.”

“Lean on me,” commanded the stranger smiling. “It will help rather than hinder me. That is why I came.”

Phelan, too weak to refuse, put his arm around the stranger’s shoulders, and the support he got seemed to put new life into him. A bird skimming over the nearest meadow burst into song. They drew near the village. A little cloud, pink as the branch of an almond-tree in bloom, hovered in the east.

The child lay staring up at the stranger’s face.

“Bedad, he ought to know ye agin, when he meets ye,” said Phelan, and he turned to look himself at the face beside him.

“And would *you* know me again?” asked the stranger.

“Yes, I would,” said Phelan, gazing hard, “un’ yet ye’ve a quare face fer a man. Ye remind me av someone—I can’t rightly think who—but, I believe it’s me pore mother’s face ye’ve a hint of.”

He continued to gaze in the stranger’s face as they walked. He thought he had never seen a face so full of compassion and love.

“God bless ye, sir,” he sobbed, “never, never, shall I forget what ye’ve done fer us this night!”

Phelan pushed open the door of the chapel and staggered inside, supporting the woman with one arm, while the other held the sleeping child. There was a wild light in his eyes.

The Red Cross nurses hastened to meet him with exclamations of pity and amazement. A fire was lighted in a stove in the centre of the building, and around it wounded soldiers lay on heaps of clean straw.

Up beyond the altar-rails half a dozen horses had been stalled, and paused in their crunching of hay to raise their heads and listen. Their forms showed darkly against the bright colouring of the chancel walls.

A doctor came forward, and Phelan was relieved of his burdens. But he pushed the nurses aside when they would have laid him on the straw.

“Why, where is he?” he cried distractedly, “my friend—my good comrade—him that brung us here? I want him—I got to thank him! Keep away, will ye, an’ let me afther him.”

“Poor fellow, he is clean out of his head,” said the doctor. “He’s been under a terrific strain—half carried this woman, heaven knows how far!”

“Sit down, there’s a good boy!” said a nurse, taking his arm. Phelan roughly threw her off.

“Sit down is it?” he stormed, “an’ my friend goin’ off with never a glass of something hot to cheer him? Not Tim Phelan! Not on yer life!”

“Sit down, sit down, Tim!” growled his friend, George Bradey, from his heap of straw. “Divil a sowl but yourself come in wid the woman. You’re dreamin’.”

“There he is! There he is!” shouted Phelan, his eyes starting, “he just now passed up through the chancel yonder, among the horses!” He staggered in a frantic pursuit as far as the rails and clung to them with shaking limbs.

“See!” he cried, “the horses knows! They’re lookin’ afther him. . . . They seen him, too. . . . Good-bye! Good-bye! God bless ye, comrade!” He sank to his knees.

One of the horses put its nose down to Phelan, and sniffed at his blood-stained face; then, with a shake of the bridle, it raised its head and uttered a loud and mournful whinny.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Comrade* by Mazo de la Roche]