

“Kemmerich’s Boots” from *All Quiet on the Western Front*

Erich Maria Remarque



“How goes it, Franz?” asks Kropp.

Kemmerich’s head sinks.

“Not so bad...but I have such a damned pain in my foot.”

We look at his bed covering. His leg lies under a wire basket. The bed covering arches over it. I kick Muller on the shin, for he is just about to tell Kemmerich what the orderlies told us outside: that Kemmerich has lost his foot. The leg is amputated. He looks ghastly, yellow and wan. In his face there are already the strained lines that we know so well, we have seen them now hundreds of times. They are not so much lines as marks. Under the skin the life no longer pulses, it has already pressed out the boundaries of the body. Death is working through from within. It already has command in the eyes. Here lies our comrade, Kemmerich, who a little while ago was roasting horse flesh with us and squatting in the shell-holes. He is still and yet it is not he any longer. His features have become uncertain and faint, like a photographic plate from which two pictures have been taken. Even his voice sounds like ashes...

“Now you will soon be going home,” says Kropp. “You would have had to wait at least three or four months for your leave.”

Kemmerich nods...

Muller leans over. “We have brought your things, Franz.”

Kemmerich signs with his hands. “Put them under the bed.”

Muller does so...[he] reappears with a pair of airman’s boots. They are fine English boots of soft, yellow leather which reach to the knees and lace up all the way--they are things to be coveted.

We all three have the same thought; even if he should get better, he would be able to us only one—they are no use to him. But as things are now it is a pity that they should stay here; the orderlies will of course grab them as soon as he is dead.

“Won’t you leave them with us?” Muller repeats.

Kemmerich doesn’t want to. They are his most prized possession...

Though Muller would be delighted to have Kemmerich’s boots, he is really quite as sympathetic as another who could not bear to think of such a thing for grief. He merely sees things clearly. Were Kemmerich able to make any use of the boots, then Muller would rather go bare-foot over barbed wire than scheme how to get hold of them. But as it is the boots are quite inappropriate to Kemmerich’s circumstances, whereas Muller can make good use of them. Kemmerich will die; it is immaterial who gets them. Why, then, should Muller not succeed to them? He has more right than a hospital orderly. When Kemmerich is dead it will be too late. Therefore Muller is already on the watch.

We have lost all sense of other considerations, because they are artificial. Only the facts are real and important for us. And good boots are scarce...

I sit by Kemmerich's bed. He is sinking steadily. Around us is great commotion. A hospital train has arrived and the wounded fit to be moved are being selected. The doctor passes by Kemmerich's bed without once looking at him.

"Next time, Franz," I say.

He raises himself on the pillow with his elbows. "They have amputated my leg."

He knows it too then. I nod and answer: "You must be thankful you've come off with that."

He is silent.

I resume: "It might have been both legs, Franz. Wegeler has lost his right arm. That's much worse. Besides, you will be going home."

He looks at me. "Do you think so?"

"Of course."

"Do you think so?" he repeats.

"Sure, Franz. Once you've got over the operation."

He beckons me to bend down. I stoop over him and he whispers: "I don't think so."

...He turns away. After a pause he says slowly: "I wanted to become a head-forester once."

"So you may still," I assure him. "There are splendid artificial limbs now, you'd hardly know there was anything missing. They are fixed on to the muscles. You can move the fingers and work and even write with an artificial hand. And besides, they will always be making new improvements."

For a while he lies still. Then he says: "You can take my lace-up boots with you for Muller."

I nod and wonder what to say to encourage him. His lips have fallen away, his mouth has become larger, his teeth stick out and look as though they were made of chalk. The flesh melts, the forehead bulges more prominently, the cheekbones protrude. The skeleton is working itself through. The eyes are already sunken in. In a couple of hours it will be over. He is not the first that I have seen thus; but we grew up together and that always makes it a bit different...

I lean down over his face which lies in the shadow. He still breathes, lightly. His face is wet, he is crying. What a fine mess I have made it with my foolish talk!

"But Franz" – I put my arm round his shoulder and put my face against his. "Will you sleep now?"

He does not answer. The tears run down his cheeks. I would like to wipe them away but my handkerchief is too dirty.

An hour passes. I sit tensely and watch his every movement in case he may perhaps say something. What if he were to open his mouth and cry out! But he only weeps, his head turned aside. He does not speak of his mother or his brothers and sisters. He says nothing; all that lies behind him; he is entirely alone now with his little life of nineteen years, and cries because it leaves him...

Suddenly Kemmerich groans and begins to gurgle.

I jump up, stumble outside and demand: "Where is the doctor? Where is the doctor?"

As I catch sight of the white apron I seize hold of it: "Come quick, Franz Kemmerich is dying."

He frees himself and asks an orderly standing by: "Which will that be?"

He says: "Bed 26, amputated thigh."

He sniffs: "How should I know anything about it, I've amputated five legs to-day"; he shoves me away, says to the hospital-orderly "You see to it," and hurries off to the operating room.

I tremble with rage as I go along with the orderly. The man looks at me and says: "One operation after another since five o'clock this morning. You know, to-day alone there have been sixteen deaths—yours is the seventeenth. There will probably be twenty altogether—"

I become faint, all at once I cannot do anymore. I won't revile any more, it is senseless, I could drop down and never rise up again.

We are by Kemmerich's bed. He is dead. The face is still wet from the tears. The eyes are half open and yellow like old horn buttons. The orderly pokes me in the ribs, "Are you taking his things with you?" I nod.

He goes on: "We must take him away at once, we want the bed. Outside they are lying on the floor."

I collect Kemmerich's things...behind me they are already hauling Franz on to a waterproof sheet.

Outside the door I am aware of the darkness and the wind as a deliverance...my feet begin to move forward in my boots, I go quicker, I run. Soldiers pass by me, I hear them without understanding...

Muller stands in front of the hut waiting for me. I give him the boots. We go in and he tries them on. They fit well.

Remarque, Erich Maria. All Quiet On the Western Front. 1st Ballantine Books ed. New York: Ballantine Books, 1982.