

DEADLOCK 1917

by

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Characters

CORPORAL

LIEUTENANT

A battlefield. The battle is raging (sounds and lights).

A hole in the ground, deep and wide.

The CORPORAL and the LIEUTENANT, who belong to the two opposite sides, and thus are coming from opposite directions, jump into the hole looking for some shelter.

After a beat of bewilderment, they both raise and point their guns.

CORPORAL: Don't move!

LIEUTENANT: Don't move!

CORPORAL: You are my prisoner!

LIEUTENANT: You are my prisoner!

CORPORAL: I am taking you prisoner!

LIEUTENANT: You wish!

Gunshots very close by.

CORPORAL: Down!

They both sit down in the hole, keeping the guns pointed at each other (the guns will be pointed until the end).

LIEUTENANT: Don't move!

CORPORAL: Don't move!

Lights out.

LIEUTENANT: What are you waiting for? Shoot!

CORPORAL: What about you?

LIEUTENANT: You think you'll make it (in time)?

CORPORAL: Certainly!

LIEUTENANT: The muzzle of my gun is pointing right between your eyes, exactly at the bridge of your nose.

CORPORAL: The contraction of your index finger, the little puff of smoke... as soon as the bullet leaves the barrel of your gun, my brain will send the impulse that orders my index finger to contract ... and bang! bang! ... we're dead. With a nice little hole between the eyes.

LIEUTENANT: And if you shoot ... bang! bang! as well.

CORPORAL: Indeed.

LIEUTENANT: Indeed.

Lights out.

CORPORAL: So, have you made up your mind yet?!

LIEUTENANT: One shan't shoot prisoners.

CORPORAL: I am not your prisoner!

LIEUTENANT: Of course you are.

CORPORAL: And you are mine!

LIEUTENANT: I'll shoot you only if you move or try to call for help.

CORPORAL: Or if I shoot first.

Again gunshots very close by.

LIEUTENANT: What now?

CORPORAL: We can't stay here!

LIEUTENANT: Suggestions welcome.

CORPORAL: I don't know!

LIEUTENANT: And neither do I.

Lights out.

The CORPORAL has taken out a portable field telegraph from the backpack that he was carrying. Using the hand that does not hold the gun, he tries to communicate with command. He speaks out, almost spells out, each word he sends:

CORPORAL: Command do you copy?

LIEUTENANT: Is that one of those new contraptions?

CORPORAL: Command do you copy?

LIEUTENANT: Of course it is. A wireless telegraph. And a portable one at that!

CORPORAL: Command?!

LIEUTENANT: I heard about them, but I have never seen one before.

CORPORAL: Anybody?!

LIEUTENANT: Tough luck it's broken.

CORPORAL: It's working fine, thanks!

LIEUTENANT: But nobody's listening.

CORPORAL: It's not funny.

LIEUTENANT: May I try?

CORPORAL: Use yours!

LIEUTENANT: As I was saying, we don't....

CORPORAL: Tough luck!

Lights out.

LIEUTENANT: Are you a corporal?

CORPORAL: You know very well, lieutenant, sir!

LIEUTENANT: Yes, I know.

CORPORAL: You want to make me feel inferior?! Make me feel the weight of your rank?! I don't give a damn about your rank!

LIEUTENANT: There's no reason to get wound up!

CORPORAL: Who's getting wound up?!

LIEUTENANT: Apparently you do feel the weight of the rank.

CORPORAL: Don't provoke me!

LIEUTENANT: I was just thinking. Out loud.

CORPORAL: Think in silence!

LIEUTENANT: We do have different ranks.

CORPORAL: A really deep thought.

LIEUTENANT: And that's not enough.

CORPORAL: Enlighten me.

LIEUTENANT: This is almost a duel, isn't?

CORPORAL: "This" what?

LIEUTENANT: This. The moment I saw you, I drew out my gun. To shoot, not for fun or on a whim. And so did you. It is almost a duel.

CORPORAL: In a duel you don't draw to shoot and then instead begin thinking. In a duel you draw and you shoot. That's all.

LIEUTENANT: Precisely. I said "it is almost a duel". Wouldn't you agree?

CORPORAL: It is almost a duel.

LIEUTENANT: But we have different ranks ...

CORPORAL: Get to the point!

LIEUTENANT: There was a time when, if two soldiers had different ranks... but, are you in a hurry?

CORPORAL: Yes, I am in a hurry.

LIEUTENANT: Why?

CORPORAL: I have to make up my mind whether you are boring me or not.

LIEUTENANT: And how have I been doing so far?

CORPORAL: You haven't been doing any good.

LIEUTENANT: And if I do end up boring you, what will happen?

CORPORAL: There was a time when, if two soldiers had different ranks...?

LIEUTENANT: Two soldiers of the same army could fight a duel only if they had the same rank.

CORPORAL: That's it?

LIEUTENANT: That was the law.

CORPORAL: The law.

LIEUTENANT: Unwritten law. A code. The code.

CORPORAL: And if those two didn't give a damn about the code?

LIEUTENANT: It's a matter of honor.

CORPORAL: I understand, but, if they wanted to, why not?

LIEUTENANT: Well, anyway, we don't belong to the same army. Moreover, this is "almost" a duel.

CORPORAL: You left out the most important thing. We are not soldiers of that time.

LIEUTENANT: Besides, we did our duty. You are my prisoner.

CORPORAL: And you mine.

LIEUTENANT: If you try to run or call for help, I'll kill you.

CORPORAL: And I'll kill you. We can't do any more.

LIEUTENANT: Sooner or later somebody of my battalion will come.

CORPORAL: Or of my battalion. My battalion will come.

LIEUTENANT: They will come.

CORPORAL: They will come.

LIEUTENANT: They will.

Light out.

CORPORAL: My hand is cramping up.

LIEUTENANT: Mine too.

CORPORAL: Change of hands? But don't get ideas.

LIEUTENANT: Wait! On the count of three.

CORPORAL: No tricks.

LIEUTENANT: No tricks.

CORPORAL: No tricks.

LIEUTENANT: One ... two ... three.

They both shift the gun in the other hand, keeping the gun pointed at the other.

CORPORAL: Is it worth it?

LIEUTENANT: I am a soldier.

CORPORAL: I too am a soldier. Is it worth it?

LIEUTENANT: We are soldiers.

CORPORAL: I asked you a question, and this is not an answer! Is it worth it or not?

LIEUTENANT: In what sense?

CORPORAL: In every sense! In this sense!

LIEUTENANT: What do you say?

CORPORAL: I don't know.

Lights out.

The battle is over. Silence.

LIEUTENANT: About time!

CORPORAL: I wonder who won.

LIEUTENANT: We did!

CORPORAL: How do you know?

LIEUTENANT: It has to be.

CORPORAL: Sure?

LIEUTENANT: Shall we have a look?

CORPORAL: One ... two ...

The LIEUTENANT stands up before three.

CORPORAL: Hey! The next time I'll shoot!

The CORPORAL stands up as well. Each of them looks over the shoulders of the other.

LIEUTENANT: I couldn't sit still any longer.

CORPORAL: Can you see anything?

LIEUTENANT: No, you?

CORPORAL: Nobody who's moving.

LIEUTENANT: I need to ...

CORPORAL: Me too.

LIEUTENANT: Do we have to do it in our pants?

CORPORAL: What do you propose? I am listening.

LIEUTENANT: Truce? One minute?

Lights out.

The CORPORAL is trying again to get in contact with command, but no answer.

CORPORAL: Is anybody listening? Come in! Is anybody listening?!

LIEUTENANT: Are you sure it's not broken?

CORPORAL: You hear the tic-tac, don't you?! If it were broken, it would not go tic-tac!

LIEUTENANT: Makes sense.

The CORPORAL puts down the wireless telegraph.

CORPORAL: Have you got anything to eat?

LIEUTENANT: Are you going to let me use your telegraph?

CORPORAL: Have you got anything to eat?

Silence. They do not move.

LIEUTENANT: No, I don't have anything to eat.

CORPORAL: You don't need to apologize.

LIEUTENANT: I wasn't apologizing. I tossed away my backpack to be lighter.

CORPORAL: Makes sense.

The LIEUTENANT takes out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter from one of the pockets of his uniform. He offers a cigarette to the CORPORAL.

LIEUTENANT: Cigarette?

CORPORAL: I have mine!

The LIEUTENANT lights a cigarette, while the CORPORAL, after having taken out his cigarettes, searches his pockets for his lighter: unsuccessfully. The LIEUTENANT offers his lighter to the CORPORAL.

LIEUTENANT: To calm down the hunger.

The CORPORAL accepts the offer and lights up a cigarette.

CORPORAL: You're doing better.

Lights out.

After having drunk from it, the LIEUTENANT gives back a small canteen to the CORPORAL.

LIEUTENANT: I needed it.

CORPORAL: Are you married?

LIEUTENANT: I am a soldier.

CORPORAL: Family?

LIEUTENANT: My father.

CORPORAL: An old retired general?

LIEUTENANT: A retired teacher.

CORPORAL: College teacher?

LIEUTENANT: Primary school. And you?

CORPORAL: A wife and a daughter. But let us spare ourselves the pathetic ritual of
“let me see the picture”!

LIEUTENANT: But I would like... (to see it).

CORPORAL: It's a woman and a little girl.

LIEUTENANT: Let me see the picture!

CORPORAL: I knew it!

LIEUTENANT: I want to see it. Please.

The CORPORAL takes out an old picture from one of his uniform's pockets and hands it to the LIEUTENANT.

CORPORAL: And now you will tell me how beautiful they look, and that the little one has her mother's eyes, but the mouth, the mouth is mine.

LIEUTENANT: No, I have nothing to say. To tell you the truth, I am just a little envious.

Light out.

Night. The CORPORAL is again trying to use the telegraph.

CORPORAL: I imagine that as usual there's nobody listening but I don't give a damn and keep on speaking until I bust my chops. Aaaand that's it! I just busted them! Actually, no. Actually, no! I keep on, I keep on, I keep on. Command, do you copy? Command?! Is there anybody out there?!

While the CORPORAL is pressing the lever of the wireless telegraph, the LIEUTENANT starts imitating the sound and the rhythm, which are the ones of “Adeste Fideles”.

LIEUTENANT: Tic, tac tac tac tac, tac. Tic tac tic tac tic tac.

CORPORAL: Command, do you copy? Command?! Anybody?!...

LIEUTENANT: (*With increasing conviction*) Tic, tac tac tac tac, tac. Tic tac tic tac tic tac.

CORPORAL: Command, do you copy? Command?! Anybody?!...

LIEUTENANT: (*And now singing quietly*) Adeste fideles, laeti triumphantes.

CORPORAL: (*Suddenly almost paying more attention to the LIEUTENANT than to what he is doing with the telegraph*) Command, do you copy? Command?! Anybody?!...

LIEUTENANT: (*Singing, with more self-confidence, and with an increasingly loud voice*) Adeste fideles, laeti triumphantes. Venite, venite in Bethlehem.

CORPORAL: I know this. I know it.

In unison, one singing one transmitting:

LIEUTENANT: Adeste fideles, laeti triumphantes.

CORPORAL: Command, do you copy? Command?! Anybody?!...

LIEUTENANT: Venite, venite in Bethlehem.

CORPORAL: Nothing. What if the war has ended?

LIEUTENANT: Yes, and peace has broken out!

CORPORAL: I'm tired.

LIEUTENANT: Me too, so what?

CORPORAL: Change of hands at three?

LIEUTENANT: Maybe we could sleep a bit. Or at least lie down.

The CORPORAL points to the guns.

CORPORAL: And what do we do with these?

LIEUTENANT: And what if you kill me in my sleep? Or if I kill you?

CORPORAL: The first one to fall asleep loses.

LIEUTENANT: It was just an idea.

CORPORAL: But we could indeed lie down for a while.

LIEUTENANT: You stretch your feet towards me, and I towards you. And we lean back to keep our heads up.

The CORPORAL gets into the position suggested by the LIEUTENANT.

CORPORAL: Like this?

The LIEUTENANT also gets into the suggested position.

LIEUTENANT: I could sleep for days.

Silence, and then, almost whispering:

CORPORAL: Adeste fideles...

Lights out.

Night. The CORPORAL and the LIEUTENANT are still lying down.

LIEUTENANT: Sooner or later someone will come.

CORPORAL: Maybe tomorrow. Definitely tomorrow!

Silence.

LIEUTENANT: Tell me something.

CORPORAL: Huh?

LIEUTENANT: Tell me something, or I'll fall asleep.

CORPORAL: What do you want me to tell you?

LIEUTENANT: Whatever you wish.

CORPORAL: *(Ironically)* A fairytale like to my daughter?

LIEUTENANT: *(Not ironically)* A fairytale, yes! Tell me how you met your wife.

CORPORAL: Nothing of detail.

LIEUTENANT: Tell me anyway.

CORPORAL: Well, it so happened that once I finished school I moved to town for work. And there I found her. The end.

LIEUTENANT: I don't believe it.

CORPORAL: I swear.

LIEUTENANT: This can't be all. Give me the details.

CORPORAL: Do you really want to know everything?

LIEUTENANT: We have time, haven't we?

CORPORAL: I finish school, pack the big bag, and there, but for the grace of God, go I. To town to look for a job. And I find it. The pay was decent, but it was strange to be in a place different from the one I had grown up in. I did not know anybody and spent all my evenings locked up at in my rented room. At most a walk along the river. I was in pain, I wasn't happy, but there were no alternatives. What should I have done? Go back to my village with my tail between my legs? Seven months go by, maybe eight, I don't remember well, but it doesn't matter. Well, a few months have gone by, and my life is the same, day after day after day. Then, one morning, I meet her. At the entrance of the firm. At one of those revolving doors made to keep in the heat and keep out the cold. She greeted me, a perfectly regular "good

morning”, but with that smile! That smile! I had met her before but, I don’t know, that morning it was as if I saw her for the very first time. I think I fell in love rightaway. So, I found out in which office she was sitting, and I began to show up by chance. “There is a file to be delivered.” “I’ll go! Sure, I’d be happy to.” And if there was no reason, I went anyway, ready to invent each time a new excuse to justify my presence. Then, one day, I took my courage in both hands, and put my heart on top of it for good measure, and asked her out. She accepted! I would have danced on the ceiling! But then that same evening, like a gunshot, “my fiancée and I...”, “my fiancée...”, “my fiancée...”. The curtain dropped right in front of my eyes. But then, hope! They were engaged to marry, sure, but who knows when? Not all was lost. But what to do? I had never been in such a situation, but it was a fight worth fighting! And I began to fight. I noticed that day after day, slowly, but surely, I was gaining ground. It was tough! When final victory came, I almost could not believe it. One way or the other, I had conquered her. After a long and strenuous siege, the stronghold had fallen. She was mine! Mine! And nobody else’s!

Light out.

It is still night, nothing has changed.

LIEUTENANT: Have you ever tried to count the stars?

CORPORAL: Of course. As a kid.

LIEUTENANT: Most of them will still be shining when we won’t be here anymore.

They will shine while our bones slowly turn to dust.

CORPORAL: It’s life. It’s death.

LIEUTENANT: Sometimes, at night, when I am not on duty, I get out of the barracks and go to the meadow a few miles down the road. It is close by, but far enough for the darkness to be almost total. I lie down on the grass between the dandelions and gaze at the sky. The stars. I like to think that there is one among them that was born with me, and that with me will go out. It’s impossible, I know. But it doesn’t matter. I do have my star, I just need to find it in the midst of the other ones. She’s there, somewhere, in the sky. I look at her, and she surely looks at me, and together we wait.

Lights out.

Nothing has changed. The LIEUTENANT beats time with an imaginary conductor's baton, and the two soldiers sing together:

CORPORAL and LIEUTENANT: Adeste fideles,
Laeti triumphantes.
Venite, venite in Bethlehem.
Natum videte,
Regem angelorum:
Venite adoremus,
Venite adoremus,
Venite adoremus,
Dominum.

Suddenly, the CORPORAL stops singing and lowers his gun.

CORPORAL: Enough!

LIEUTENANT: I don't understand.

CORPORAL: My gun is empty.

LIEUTENANT: Mine isn't.

CORPORAL: Aren't you going to shoot me?

LIEUTENANT: I don't know yet.

CORPORAL: I couldn't go on like this anymore.

The LIEUTENANT lowers his gun as well.

They both smile.

Suddenly, the trill of a whistle.

LIEUTENANT: Who's that?!

CORPORAL: I don't know! One of yours?

LIEUTENANT: Or of yours?

CORPORAL: I don't know. I don't know.

Another trill, from the other side. And then one more. And one more. Whistles trilling from both sides. The LIEUTENANT and the CORPORAL leap up on their feet, scared to death. The trills get louder and louder, and are joined by the sound of the attack from both sides.

LIEUTENANT: Here they are!

CORPORAL: They are coming!

LIEUTENANT: They are coming! They are coming!

The end.