

What Makes

by Glendon Swarthout

OVER THE FIELD telephone the battle-hollow voice of a commander would inform us that one of his men had done in action a thing which seemed to him deserving of the Medal of Honor and he would describe briefly the dead.

The soldier might have lain with an exploding grenade to save the lives of his comrades.

Both legs torn off at the knee by bullets, he might have manned a machine gun to cover a withdrawal until loss of blood overtook him.

To advance his unit, he might have gone unscathed through a prolonged killing of the enemy which amounted to little less than slaughter.

If our judgment concurred with the commander's the apparatus by means of which a nation recognizes its most phenomenal military heroes was unlimbered.

When the man survived, he was delivered at once to the relative safety of headquarters. Statements from eye-witnesses were taken, a citation written, and the various documents forwarded for endorsement from division to corps to army to the Pentagon and finally to the pertinent Congressional committee. Following the cable of approval, the soldier was flown to the States, his combat done, his life spared, paradoxically, by his very willingness to yield it.

This was Europe, this was the second of the World Wars.

Of all man's curiosities none has been more constant than that in the absolutes. Courage, deity, love, death, power, cowardice, beauty, evil; these are a few of the planets toward which he beams his impulses, his queries, and waits till answering signals rebound to him across the silences. My concern with courage dated from the days in

a Man a Hero

Italy and France spent with soldiers, dead and alive, who waited upon the coin-toss which would determine their rank in gallantry.

In them I could discern no common chemistry. They were young or middleaged and ebullient or reclusive and ingenuous or complex. In all cases their acts had been performed beyond what are considered to be the limits of human conduct. In all cases there had been time for conscious decisions. Nothing in their demeanor pointed to a death-wish.

FREQUENTLY what they had achieved terrified them in the recollecting. It was as though some instinct not yet named, sacrificial, stronger by far than any other, had stripped them of self, armored them to pain and crippling, and driven them at last to their deeds, transforming them, for minutes at least, into heroes. I stood in awe of them. Their mystery obsessed me. I resolved one day to write a book about them. At its center would be a man almost mortally motivated to seek the meaning of courage.

He would be granted a unique, an unprecedented opportunity to lay bare the heart of the mystery. He would live with heroes. His would be the choice which would sanctify them forever to anonymity. He would be eternal questioner. He would know himself a coward. His name would be Thomas Thorn.

Twelve years were required to hit upon the time and place for him. The present seemed unsuitable. Needed was the perspective lent by the past, even the recent past, which is often more remote. Nor should he be swallowed up by the leviathan of a world conflict. Let him have, for a large quest, a small theatre; give him for a major drama a minor action; provide him with a stage upon which he must stand almost alone, a landscape stark and empty against which he might loom. Finally, no matter how much narrative might be in literary disrepute, afford his search a sure, simple vein of story.

For these purposes no year answered better than 1916, no place than the sere plateaus of Chihuahua, Mexico, so close to

us yet far, and few episodes in American military records were more incidental than the Pershing "Punitive Expedition" dispatched to Mexico by Woodrow Wilson in vain chase of Pancho Villa. On his campaign our cavalry, doomed to mechanization within months, enjoyed the luxury of a last mounted charge against an enemy at a ranch known as Ojos Azules, or Blue Eyes. I was intrigued by the irony of the task: to fit within a forgotten historical event Thomas Thorn's attempt to define an abstraction so crucial to his kind that they have immemorially been unable to ignore it.

The planning of and research for the book, which I called "They Came to Cordura," were completed in another year, the writing of it in ten months. Its method is Platonic. The subject of courage is turned this way and that, inquiries are made and responded to, significances offered and withdrawn, although the dialectic is perhaps more of deed than of word.

MANY OF THE most central questions Thomas Thorn puts to himself. Is courage plasmal, something sent on from father to son? Is it a product of environment and training? Is it separable from other qualities? Is it possible that a man may be at once treacherous and brave, shiftless and brave, vicious and

brave, dishonest and brave? Or the converse, be faithful, conscientious, gentle, innocent and cowardly?

Does not behavior in battle which passes understanding prove the human race is human after all? Is there not latent in man an urge more compulsive than that of self-preservation, nobler than that toward martyrdom? Does an isolated act by its spectacle and eloquence outshining the mute grandeur of a lifetime?

When one publishes a novel which demands yet does not appear to reply, seems to offer yet denies, which involves rather than resolves, he must expect challenge by his readers. Question: What is Cordura? Answer: A town in Chihuahua. Question: Can it be found on a map? Answer: No. Question: What does it mean? Answer: Literally, in Spanish, wisdom. Question: And figuratively? Answer: Whatever you wish. Question: What does it mean to you? Answer: To this day I am not certain. If I could choose I should prefer to think of Cordura not as a place but as a situation, as state moral as well as physical, a conjoining of circumstances which would force upon man at peace a course of conduct in relation to his fellows and to his world equivalent in selflessness to that of those we honor in war.

For lack of an exact term, let us call it the instinct to magnificence. It lies deep, I have believed since Italy and France, in most of us. The single requirement is that we create in our affairs the conditions in which it must manifest itself. What I am saying, then, as un cryptically as possible, is that somewhere, beyond the rawest mountains of our animal natures, Cordura exists, and that we may all come to it.

DURING THE period of preparation for the novel I traveled in person to Mexico, engaged a car, and went on a journey west from the city of Chi-

huahua across the plateaus. The road ends. The gaunt grasslands reach. In the great distance waits the somber Cordillera of the Sierra Madre. The hacienda known as Ojos Azules stands today. The adobe walls of the cuartel are bullet-pitted from the cavalry charge forty-three years ago. Over them still call the clouds of crows.

I suppose it is inevitable that the writer find his symbols where he puts them. To me the small craters in hard clay represented man's desperate effort, including mine, to chip away at truth, to dig out of his own concepts a meaning which he may each day use.

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Or Else!

A HUMOROUS STORY of strained relations is told about Joseph Addison, English author and statesman. A friend, to whom he had lent money, found it impossible to talk with him on equal terms. Instead, the friend yielded tamely to whatever his creditor had to say. One day, exasperated by the man's agreeing with him on some controversial subject, Addison exclaimed, "Either contradict me, sir, or pay me my money!"

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