

Son

by Bill Lapham

An old man in a tweed coat, khaki pants and loafers with no socks was sitting out in the open in a lawn chair. He wore a faded baseball cap with a dirty white old-English 'D'. He had a trim gray beard and round wire-rimmed glasses. His right leg was crossed over his left. He had a pen in his hand and a ledger book on his lap and he looked like he was keeping score at a baseball game, but this was no baseball game.

Soldiers were shooting each other with machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades and the ground concussed from the explosions of artillery shells. Yet there he sat, calm as can be.

Trenches coated with man-gruel laced the earth. There were craters and broken tree trunks and barbed wire and men shouting for other men to get down, or get up. Other men were yelling for medics, or corpsmen, and morphine and tourniquets. Havoc squinted its onyx eyes, bared its rotten teeth, and howled at a bloodied sun, while the old man took notes and checked his time piece and kept score.

The soldiers had no idea how he could be surviving. It seemed to the Major that somebody would have taken a shot at him just to prove a point. If someone *had* taken a shot at him, they had missed, or the guy was a visitor from a planet where bodies were impervious to bullets. As the battle wore on, the old man never stood to stretch, never took a drink of water, never ate any food.

He wrote.

Tracer rounds made luminescent tracks in the cooling air after sunset and muzzle fires from cannon placed in the rear looked like lightning flashing over the horizon. Searchlights scanned the night sky to expose dirigibles and observations balloons. The Major lost track of the old man and forgot about him. Toward morning the fighting faded as the soldiers on both sides took their rest. The Major stuck his head above the rim of his trench for an instant, and got away with it. He squatted in his trench with his eyes closed

trying to pick out the details of the fractional film he had just seen.

He saw the red sun rising, smoke and fog and bone-exposed pain. Arms pointing to the sky as if pleading for mercy from some mysterious force nobody could see but everybody could feel. Helmets strapped to heads, and acres of dirt with no living plants or animals, or insects. The old man was sitting in his chair with his legs crossed writing in his ledger, noting the passing of a thousand of young men. The old man turned his head, and made eye-contact with the Major for the briefest flicker of time. Now, crouching down in the trench and recalling the scene above the rim, The Major thought the old man looked familiar, like his father, and he had tears in his eyes. He began the motions that would have lifted his arm to wave, and saw him mouth the word "Son?" just before a cloud of smoke rushed in to cover the scene.

The Major didn't dare lift his head to take another look. Instead, he yelled, "Gas! Gas!" The men in the trenched scrambled to don their rubber masks. His battalion would go over the top at the sound of his whistle. As he watched the second-hand made its inexorable sweep from the bottom of the minute to the top, he tried in vain to summon moisture in his mouth. When the second hand clicked into twelve, he blew the whistle to set in motion a force to meet force, but he couldn't move himself. His muscles locked him in place.

Above rose a swell of sound: the machine guns' staccato rhythm, the heavy bass of mortars and grenades thumping the ground, men screaming, yelling for help, yelling for God, crying for their mothers. And he heard the old man's voice cut through it all, "Son. Son. Son?" he called.

