

The Man Who Knew Too Much



I first met Private Quelch at the training depot. A man is liable to acquire in his first week of Army life - together with his uniform, rifle and equipment -- a nickname. Anyone who saw Private Quelch, lanky, stooping, frowning through horn-rimmed spectacles, understood why he was known as the Professor. Those who had any doubts on the subject lost them after five minutes' conversation with him.

I remember the first lesson we had in musketry. We stood in an attentive circle while a sergeant, a man as dark and sun-dried as raisins, wearing North-West frontier ribbons, described the mechanism of a service rifle.

'The muzzle velocity or speed at which the bullet leaves the rifle', he told you, 'is well over two thousand feet per second.' A voice interrupted. 'Two thousand, four hundred and forty feet per second.' It was the Professor.

'That's right', the sergeant said without enthusiasm and went on lecturing. When he had finished, he put questions to us; and, perhaps in the hope of revenge, he turned with his questions again and again to the Professor. The only result was to enhance the Professor's glory. Technical definitions, the parts of the rifle, its use and care, he had them all by heart.

The sergeant asked, 'You had any training before?'

The Professor answered with a phrase that was to become familiar to all of us. 'No, sergeant. It's all a matter of intelligent reading.'

That was our introduction to him. We soon learned more about him. He saw to that. He meant to get on, he told us. He had brains. He was sure to get a commission, before long. As a first step, he meant to get a stripe.

In pursuit of his ambition he worked hard. We had to give him credit for that. He borrowed training manuals and stayed up late at night reading them. He badgered the instructors with questions. He drilled with enthusiasm and on route marches, he was not only miraculously tireless but infuriated us all with his horrible heartiness. 'What about a song, chaps?' is not greeted politely at the end of thirty miles. His salute at the pay table was a model to behold. When officers were in sight he would swing his skinny arms and march to the canteen like a Guards man.

And day in and day out, he lectured to us in his droning, remorseless voice on every aspect of human knowledge. At first we had a certain respect for him but soon we lived in terror of his approach. We tried to hit back at him with clumsy sarcasms and practical jokes. The Professor scarcely noticed; he was too busy working for his stripe.

Each time one of us made a mistake the Professor would publicly correct him. Whenever one of us shone, the Professor outshone him. When, after a hard morning's work cleaning out our hut, we listened in silence to the Orderly Officer's praise the Professor would break out with a ringing, dutifully beaming 'Thank you, sir !' And how superior, how condescending he was ! It was always, 'Let me show you, old fellow', or 'No, you'll ruin your rifle that way, old man'.

We used to pride ourselves on aircraft recognition. Once, out for a walk, we heard the drone of a plane flying high overhead. None of us could even see it in the glare of the sun. Without even a glance upward the Professor announced, 'That, of course, is a North American Harvard Trainer. It can be unmistakably identified by the harsh engine note, due to the high tip speed of the airscrew.'

What could a gang of louts like us do with a man like that ?

None of us will ever forget the drowsy summer afternoon which was such a turning point in the Professor's life.

We were sprawling contentedly on the warm grass while Corporal Turnbull was taking a lesson on the hand grenade.

Corporal Turnbull was a young man, but he was not a man to be trifled with. He had come back from Dunkirk with all his equipment correct and accounted for and his pet kitten in his pocket. He was our hero and we used to tell each other that he was so tough that you could hammer nails into him without his noticing it.

'The outside of a grenade, as you can see', Corporal Turnbull was saying, 'is divided up into a large number of fragments to assist segmentation...'

'Forty four.'

'What's that ?' The corporal looked over his shoulder.

'Forty-four segments.' The Professor beamed at him.

The corporal said nothing, but his brow tightened. He opened his mouth to resume.

'And by the way, corporal.' We were all thunderstruck. The Professor was speaking again. 'Shouldn't you have started off with the five characteristics of the grenade ? Our instructor at the other camp always used to, you know.'

In the silence that followed, a dark flush stained the tan of the corporal's face. 'Here', he said at last, 'You give this lecture.' As if afraid to say any more, he tossed the grenade to the Professor. Quite unabashed, Private Quelch climbed to his feet and with the air of a man coming into his birthright gave us an unexceptionable lecture on the grenade.

The squad listened in a cowed, horrified kind of silence. Corporal Turnbull stood and watched, impassive except for a searching intentness of gaze. When the lecture was

finished he said, 'Thank you, Private Quelch. Fall in with others now.' He did not speak again until we had fallen in and were waiting to be dismissed. Then he addressed us.

'As some of you may have heard', he began deliberately, 'the platoon officer has asked me to nominate one of you for...' He paused and looked lingeringly up and down the ranks as if seeking final confirmation of a decision.

So this was the great moment ! Most of us could not help glancing at Private Quelch, who stood rigidly to attention and stared straight in front of him with an expression of self-conscious innocence.

'...for permanent cookhouse duties. I've decided that Private Quelch is just the man for the job.'

Of course, it was a joke for days afterwards; a joke and a joy to all of us.

I remember, though.....

My friend Trower and I were talking about it a few days later. We were returning from the canteen to our own hut. 'Well', Trower remarked as we passed the cookhouse. 'I reckon that geezer's had his gob stopped for a bit, eh ?'

I did not answer, but took his arm and pointed to the cookhouse. Through the open door we could see the three cooks standing against the wall as if at bay; and from within came the monotonous beat of a familiar voice.

'Really, I must protest against this abominably unscientific and unhygienic method of peeling potatoes. I need only draw your attention to the sheer waste of vitamin values....'

We fled.

- ALEXANDER BARON

About the Author :

Alexander Baron (1917-1999) was a British author and screen writer. Baron's first book entitled 'From the City, From the Plough' (1948) was a war novel. 'The Man who Knew Too Much' is included in his collection 'The Human Kind' (1953).

About the Story :

Private Quelch a trainee soldier, was a man with great ambition and remarkable skills. The narrator and his colleagues nicknamed him - 'Professor' owing to his enormous knowledge in every sphere of human activities. Quelch always questioned his instructors, corrected his trainers and sermonized his fellow soldiers. Hence inviting criticism from every quarter. Once he corrected one of his instructors, Corporal Turnbull, who avenged his humiliation by appointing Quelch as the permanent cookhouse in-charge.

Glossary :

Private	-	an ordinary soldier
lanky	-	tall and thin
stooping	-	bending the top half of the body
sergeant	-	military man below the rank of lieutenant
muzzle	-	the open end of a gun
badgered	-	asked to do something repeatedly and annoyingly
condescending	-	showing oneself as better than the others
Harvard Trainer-		a kind of aircraft used for training
Louts	-	an ill mannered and aggressive person
Dunkirk	-	a town in Northern France
corporal	-	a military man below the rank of sergeant
abominably	-	badly, in an unpleasant manner

COMPREHENSION

(A) Tick the correct alternative :

- Private Quelch was nicknamed _____.
(a) Sergeant (b) Trainee
(c) Professor (d) Corporal
- The Sergeant was delivering a lecture regarding the handling of a service _____.
(a) grenade (b) aircraft
(c) pistol (d) rifle

3. According to Quelch, the exact number of fragments outside a grenade is :
 (a) forty four (b) forty two
 (c) fifty four (d) forty
4. Private Quelch was later found imparting a lecture on the vitamin values of :
 (a) potatoes (b) raisins
 (c) tomatoes (d) eggs

(B) State whether the statements given below are True (T) or False (F) :

1. Private Quelch possessed great knowledge in every sphere of human activity. []
2. Private Quelch was able to recognize a fighter plane without even looking up at it. []
3. The Sergeant favoured Quelch for his unique talent. []
4. Corporal Turnbull was impressed with Private Quelch's knowledge. []
5. Private Quelch became quiet after becoming the cookhouse in-charge. []

(C) Answer the following questions in 20-25 words each :

1. Where did the narrator first meet Private Quelch ?
2. What was the Sergeant describing to the young trainees ?
3. Name the aircraft which Private Quelch identified.
4. What was the topic of the lecture given by Corporal Turnbull ?
5. Did Private Quelch finally get a promotion ?

(D) Answer the following questions in 30-40 words each :

1. How did Private Quelch come to be known as 'the Professor' ?
2. How did Quelch identify a North American Harvard Trainer ?
3. Did Private Quelch really know 'too much' ?
4. Why was Private Quelch liked by no one ?

(E) Answer the following questions in 60-80 words each -

1. How was the Sergeant cornered by Private Quelch ?
2. Write a brief character sketch of Corporal Turnbull.
3. Why did Corporal Turnbull make Quelch the permanent cookhouse in-charge ?

ACTIVITY :

“Private Quelch spoke more than what was required. Do you think sometimes silence has got its own advantages. Have you faced a similar situation in your own life ? Share your views in your class.
