

THE TWO SWORDS AT WAR: GILLETTE VS WILKINSON

My father was only five years old.

The family lived in a mountain village overlooking the plain below. From the stone houses, the world seemed distant, yet every event eventually climbed the mountain.

They had bought a goat from a trade union man. The animal had once produced income, but the owner had decided to sell it.

Every morning my grandmother tried to milk it.

There was never enough.

My father wanted breakfast, like all children do. So a cup appeared on the table: stale bread, a little goat's milk, and mountain water added to make it last one day longer.

That was war before anyone called it war.

At dawn he would walk a short distance from the house to a small square and look toward the sky.

From there he watched the conflict as if it were a game.

Aircraft crossed the horizon. Sirens echoed from the plain. Bombs fell on airfields and military installations. The adults spoke in whispers, but the children looked upward.

The Second World War had begun.

It involved everyone.

Yet two events, separated by thousands of miles, would eventually meet in a razor blade.

The Germans responded to British attacks by bombing London and other major cities. Factories slowed production. Supplies became scarce. Even the famous Wilkinson Sword blades began to disappear from the shelves.

At the same time, British forces were fighting in Africa.

There they captured thousands of prisoners.

An army can tolerate hunger.

An army can tolerate heat.

What it cannot tolerate is disease.

The first ritual imposed on many prisoners was not a speech, a parade, or even a vaccination.

It was a shave.

A clean face meant fewer parasites, fewer infections, and greater control.

In the early months everyone looked for the Swords.

The Swords were not there.

London could not supply enough of them.

Then America stepped in.

Ships crossed the oceans carrying food, fuel, equipment, and, among countless other things, razor blades.

Inside the prison camps a subtle transformation occurred.

Men stopped asking for the Swords.

They started asking for a Gillette.

As the First World War had helped make Wilkinson Sword famous, the Second World War helped turn Gillette into a common word.

A brand had become a language.

Years later, when prisoners, soldiers, and workers returned home to Italy, France, Egypt, Greece, or wherever fate had taken them, they walked into the nearest shop and did not ask for a razor blade.

They said:

"Give me a Gillette."

That was the battle that mattered.

And the Two Swords lost it.

Ferdinando Frega