The Man He Killed

"Had he and I but met
By some old ancient inn,
We should have sat us down to wet
Right many a nipperkin!

"But ranged as infantry,
And staring face to face,
I shot at him as he at me,
And killed him in his place.

"I shot him dead because —
Because he was my foe,
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That's clear enough; although

"He thought he'd 'list, perhaps,
Off-hand like — just as I —
Was out of work — had sold his traps —
No other reason why.

"Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You'd treat if met where any bar is,
Or help to half-a-crown."

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Superficially a simple, uncomplicated piece, this is, in fact, a very skilful poem heavily laden with irony and making interesting use of colloquialism (writing in the manner of speech). The title is slightly odd, as Hardy uses the third-person pronoun "He", though the poem is narrated in the first person. The "He" of the title (the "I" of the poem) is evidently a soldier attempting to explain and perhaps justify his killing of another man in battle.

In the first stanza the narrator establishes the common ground between himself and his victim: in more favourable circumstances they could have shared hospitality together. This idea is in striking contrast to that in the second stanza: the circumstances in which the men did meet. "Ranged as infantry" suggests that the men are not natural foes but have been "ranged" i.e. set against each other. The phrase "as he at me" indicates the similarity of their situations.

In the third stanza the narrator gives his reason for shooting the supposed enemy. The conversational style of the poem enables Hardy to repeat the word "because", implying hesitation, and therefore doubt, on the part of the narrator. He cannot easily think of a reason, and the reason, when it appears, "because he was my foe" is utterly unconvincing. The speaker has already made clear the sense in which the men were foes: an artificial enmity
created by others. "Of course" and "That's clear enough" are blatantly ironic: the enmity is not a matter of course, and the claim is far from "clear" to the reader, and the pretence of assurance on the narrator's part is destroyed by his admission beginning "although ...".

The real reason for the victim's enlistment in the army, like the narrator's, is far from being connected with patriotic idealism and belief in his country's cause. The soldier's joining was partly whimsical ("Off-hand like") and partly the result of economic necessity: he was unemployed and had already sold off his possessions. He did not enlist for any other reason.

The narrator concludes with a repetition of the contrast between his treatment of the man he killed and how he might have shared hospitality with him in other circumstances, or even been ready to extend charity to him, prefacing this with the statement that war is "quaint and curious", as if to say, a funny old thing. This tends to show war as innocuous and acceptable, but the events narrated in the poem, as well as the reader's general knowledge of war, make it clear that conflict is far from "quaint and curious" and Hardy employs the terms with heavy irony, knowing full well how inaccurate such a description really is.

This is a rather bitter poem showing the stupidity of war, and demolishing belief in the patriotic motives of those who confront one another in battle. The narrator finds no good reason for his action; Hardy implies that there is no good reason. The short lines, simple rhyme scheme, and everyday language make the piece almost nursery-rhyme like in simplicity, again in ironic contrast to its less than pleasant subject.