

## **A Covenant With Death**

**Private Thomas Laycock and the Second battle of Ypres 1915**

**By John Sadler**

*We have made a covenant with death  
And with hell are we at agreement*

ISAIAH xxviii 15

*This one is for Rosie.*

## Chapter One – That August

It seemed looking back, to him as to so many others, that the summer had been perfect; rounding off a golden age, before the world became mad. Probably it was no better or worse than other summers but it was the last for peace, for the innocence which had enfolded them. It would be a place to which he could never return, other than in the exile's sad reflection.

A time of faith, of belief that there was order in the world and that 'Britishness' and the British Empire represented everything in it that was both solid and decent. Later he would reflect that he had, consciously or unconsciously, shared a belief that his generation was somehow marked, the culmination of a century of achievement, assured, honourable, invincible. Upon him and the others rested the burden of civilisation; one they hastened to pick up, a task which seemed ordained, to which they had, through their young lives, aspired and striven; they would not be found wanting.

He was reclining in drowsy heat and shirtsleeves upon a Welsh hillside, air heavy with the scent and quiet hum of summer. Past his hob-nailed soles the fields swept downhill in a chequer-board of small, stone girt enclosures, studded with the blurred outlines of fat, wool-laden sheep, yet unshorn. Above, past the peaked cap shading his eyes, the land soared toward a riot of scree-covered hilltops. In the distant valley bottom, past the stolid gaggle of grey-walled houses, a tented city had arisen, temporary home to Tom and the rest of 8<sup>th</sup> battalion.

Neville was propped against ravaged stump of ancient tree, its fanatic roots still clinging to the landscape from which it had sprung. He was reading the *Times* newspaper of the day before; even this remote corner of North Wales was not immune from the urgent press of world affairs delivered by rail. 'Christ', he said. This profanity uncommon in itself, coming from Neville, seemed to merit some form of response.

'Haven't lost another Archduke have we?'

'One's enough for any season,' came the reply, 'if the silly sod knew what he was starting when he got himself and his missus shot, he might have been more careful.'

Tom liked to think he was reasonably abreast of the status quo in Europe but, like most, he was rather baffled by the consequences of minor gunfire in a far off place.

'Who's exactly fallen out with whom?'

'I thought you knew all that.'

'Mostly, but you're the clever bugger that went to university, us peasants don't have your advantages, and right, I don't quite see why the shooting of a fat Austrian somewhere you've never heard of has every army in Europe looking so bloody hard at their railway timetables.'

‘Franz Ferdinand wasn’t just any Austrian.’ Despite his seeming modesty and reticence in front of the platoon, Neville relished the odd chance to demonstrate some evidence of his extensive learning. ‘He was the heir to their imperial throne; so they were very annoyed when someone bumped him off. Worse by far it was a Serb, or Serb-inspired assassin that happened to be having a quiet cup of tee when his arch highness’ motor car took a wrong turn past the café.’

‘Alright,’ Tom confessed, ‘I’ve really no idea about Serbia, looked it up in the atlas once but I still couldn’t see what all the fuss was about.’

‘Ah’, Neville enthused, warming to his subject and safe from ribbing by the more educationally challenged members of B platoon. ‘Serbians are Slavs...’ Tom raised an eyebrow, ‘means they don’t get on with Germans as a rule.’

‘Can’t say I blame ‘em – fat sausage eating bastards your Huns.’

‘Serbia is sort of allied to Russia – pan-Slavic brotherhood and all that; Austria has been edging Johnny Turk out of the Balkans for the last couple of centuries and don’t take too kindly to little Serbia getting in on the act. Your Serbs mind you, aren’t that civilised, murdered their royal family a while ago, ruled by the generals and they turn a blind eye to what some of their hot-heads are up to, arming various dissidents in odd bits of the Balkans, that sort of thing. It all gets very nasty when one of these local Fenians’ guns down the imperial heir and his wife whilst they’re on a sight-seeing tour. The lad himself was Bosnian but the smoking gun points clear at Belgrade.’

‘Alright, next question; what the fuck has any of this got to do with us?’

‘Serbia takes fright at the Austrian demands, the sausage-eaters are spoiling for a fight, have been for a while, this is their perfect excuse.’

‘Well worth the loss of the odd archduke and duchess?’

‘Guess they’ve got plenty, but Serbia is on the telephone to Big Brother Russia, saying come and save us from these nasty Teutons. The Czar warns Von whatever his name is and says, lay off Serbia or we’ll come and sort you out. Now, the Emperor, old Franz, rings up his mate Kaiser Bill and asks if he’s got to take on Ivan as well will Germany back him. Certainly will, replies Bill, who is then on the line to cousin Nicky in Moscow, lay off my mates or you will have me to answer too. Bloody hell thinks Czar Nick, that’s gone and done it; quick as a flash he’s on the blower to the Champs Elysee; if the squareheads start on us will you back me. *Bien sur mon ami* says Froggie. God’s galoshes exclaims Old Kaiser Bill, we’re in the mire alright, better look at those timetables.’

‘At the risk of being tedious, why should we care if this lot get their collective knickers in a twist and can’t they sort it out before everyone starts shooting at everybody else.’

‘Not that easy, my handsome son of the proletariat; once the big boys start to mobilise and remember they haven’t got piddling little armies like ours, it all gets very serious; calling up their reservists and mobilising conscripts takes time, moving ‘em about,

horse, foot and guns takes time, building up your stocks, food and shells takes more time and nobody wants to be left behind in this particular race. Trains are the key, that's how you get your men to the field, wherever the fight may be; I read it takes thirty odd trains a day just to keep a single army corps fed an' watered, more if you've got cavalry.'

'Remember you're talking to a mindless prole, who wasn't born with a silver spoon and don't talk proper but why don't we just let 'em get on with it, who cares if Froggie beats Fritz or Fritz hammers Froggie, like he usually does?'

'Isn't that simple; since the last big bash Germany has got very strong indeed, she can about rival us in industry, she's the first nation since old Boney to try building a fleet that can take on the RN and Kaiser Bill keeps wanting his place in the sun, which, as he came late, means one as belongs to someone else. If Bill does the same trick as last time, Froggie will be on his knees in a month or so and suddenly we've got new neighbours in the Channel ports and they're all having liverworst for tea.'

'I thought it was Ivan we were afraid of, got their nasty squinty eyes on India and other places they shouldn't have?'

'True enough but we've been friends with the French for the last ten years, an' that's a record; Froggie helped us shake hands with Ivan, so there you are. And then there's Belgium'

'Christ, who asked them to join in, bit out their league aren't they?'

'Strictly neutral, but if Germany marches in then we're in too, we're Belgium's big brother, be our job to sort the whole bleeding mess.'

'Just as well we got dressed up then.'

Much as he usually enjoyed his friend's company Tom had rather hoped for a measure of solitude. As he'd been about to leave his lodgings in Newcastle for camp a letter had arrived, it bore the unmistakable handwriting of Neville's sister Eleanor and the unread missive had been glowing warm against his breast, ever since. No opportunity had arisen during the long transit south and west and he'd be damned if he'd afford his comrades the luxury of watching him unfold such a longed for treasure. By now he was with child to read what the young woman had to say to the extent he disingenuously excused himself on the pretext of an urgent natural function.

Now, with his back against the lichen encrusted stone of a solid Welsh dyke he tenderly, though not without some foreboding, slit the envelope with his pocket knife. The paper, as might be expected of county gentry or certainly of recent trade aspiring to be gentry, was stiff and of good quality, thick, creamy vellum, bearing the family crest, at least the one they'd purchased and the address 'Killhope Hall, Weardale, County Durham'. The air was warm and still, the head of the dale sheltered and surrounded by a rim of hills, high grass crisp and verdant, only the trill of birdsong, rippling in the pervading quiet.

*My dearest Tom – she began, well enough, he could scarcely expect a more passionate greeting in the circumstances. We have had a fine summer here, and I hope you are not too much distracted by your studies to think of us. It must be very exciting, but lonely too I suppose, alone in the ‘big city’ as we call Newcastle. I hope you’ve spared a thought for us and for me, I can imagine all those smart city girls making eyes at you, don’t let them turn your head!*

*Everyone talks of nothing but war and as if it was no more than a cricket match; it’s perfectly horrible and I fear so much for you and Neville if it should actually come. I thought how dashing you both looked in your uniforms but it’s not a game of course and I don’t think it will be over very quickly or certainly not so quickly as they say.*

*I have to be a bit careful as father doesn’t know I’m writing to you. Things at the mines are as hard as ever, more and more men bring paid off; they do say that if war does come demand for lead will rocket and the mines may be busy again, I don’t know it seems madness to hope for catastrophe to get men back into work.*

*It’s over a year since Emily Davison died, though I expect our women’s rights will all be happily forgotten with all this drum-beating and talk of war, but if all you men go off to fight who’s going to be left to do the work. Mary Richardson slashing that Velazquez painting in the National Gallery created a bit of a stir but there’s still some women on hunger strike, despite the Cat and Mouse Act.*

*I hope you get leave soon, do please come and see me Tom, don’t forget your childhood sweetheart.*

*I miss you so.*

His heart leapt at this last and he felt himself grow hot, though amused at Eleanor’s suffragist prattling, imagining her writing at the oak bureau in the smaller day room at the hall, bent, frowning over the page, pen poised in mid sentence, pausing just to sweep back the auburn curtain of her hair. His heart ached as he did so.

Neville eyed him good-naturedly as he returned.

‘Satisfying’, he enquired?

‘Perfectly agreeable,’ Tom responded.

‘So what does my sister have to say?’

Tom must have looked nonplussed. ‘I wouldn’t have to have read much of Mr. Conan Doyle’s writing to guess that’s what’s been burning a figurative hole in your pocket since we left the north. You’re like a dog with two willies, unless that is, I’m completely wrong and you’re now mad on someone else.’

He felt slightly crushed; he had few secrets with Neville but the dangerously ambivalent nature of the relationship with his friend’s sister, was a potential minefield.

‘Look, you know I don’t give a toss what the old man thinks, miserable bastard. Just because you’re a jumped up oik on the make doesn’t worry me, you can at least read and write, if not necessarily well, you’re embarked on what some might call a respectable profession and there’s some would say you’re not bad-looking, for a prole that is.’

‘I didn’t think I was that bleeding obvious,’ he mumbled.

‘You’re not old chum, not at all, only to one who knows you well and has had the benefit of a university education. Besides, I always said the girl had no sense, next thing she’ll have you chained to the railings somewhere demanding the vote for women, mark my words! Still, on your feet Abelard, King and Country calls’

‘Who’s Abelard?’

‘Peter Abelard; a famous lover, aspired above his station, fell in love with one of his students, the fair Heloise, bit bad form really, him being a priest an’ all.’

‘What happened to them?’

‘I think her family had him castrated; so let that be a lesson to you.’

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As they trudged back to camp, afternoon sun gilding the contours Tom, distracted by Eleanor’s letter, found himself unable to retain any sense of approaching cataclysm. It had been a hundred years since Britain had fought a serious war on the continent, ended when Wellington smashed the French at Waterloo – that much he did remember, ironic it was Blucher’s blue-coated Prussians who’d been on our side. Bit of a pushover really, no reason to think it would be any different, he said so.

‘Bollocks’ his friend replied, ‘different kind of war, now we’ve got rifles that can kill you at a thousand yards, the old black powder guns could barely hit a barn door at any more than fifty, you should know you’re the marksman.’ This was true, Tom had practised assiduously with the Long Lee-Enfield, had begun with a Martini, the old single shot lever action weapon, remembered in the stories of Rudyard Kipling. ‘And we’ve machine guns and quick-firers,’ Neville continued sagely, though he’d seen little enough of either.

It ought to have been worrying but Tom could not affect concern, his thoughts were far more inclined to contrast the upland scenery around him with his own native dale, the Killhope valley, huddled beneath a gaunt shoulder of the North Pennines. *Where a candle will not burn* ..... the rugged valley floor and encroaching hills scarred with the leavings of industry, men eking the barest living from subsistence farming and lead mining, so productive the seams that a full quarter of the nation’s lead was hacked from beneath the slopes. Little profit accrued to the mining partnerships themselves, their reward was the black spit at forty and an early grave within a decade.

8<sup>th</sup> Battalion Durham Light Infantry on annual camp, the threat of real war imparting a greater sense of urgency to the field of drab khaki and grey; still it was not too uncomfortably close to real hardship. The men slept a dozen to each canvas bell tent, site sloping toward the sluggish waters of a small river with its unpronounceable Welsh name. Officers, of course, had their own tents with Messrs Lipton to provide for the temporary mess, tables enlivened by some clandestine game shooting, Private Williamson finding his skills as a poacher more of an asset than a rebuke. Living under canvas in the warm summer sun was scarcely arduous a welcome break for many whose lives were otherwise spent in the grime of northern towns or stygian caverns underground. Wooden floors and camp beds were provided, as was a makeshift skittle alley, Morris tube shooting range, reading room and ping pong. As practice for waging war, it was really all very agreeable.

Whilst shaving that morning, Tom had looked into the rather uncertain mirror they used, attempting, not for the first time, to assess what a stranger might think of the face staring back at him. Someone had told him he bore a resemblance to the poet Rupert Brooke and, though he had made light of it at the time, he was flattered. Since then he had discretely cultivated the rather floppy hair style which his own thick, half unruly thatch allowed. As for the face, an irregular oval, decent cheekbones, eyes blue and clear, mouth and nose adequately formed. At 5'11" he was tall enough, had sufficient breadth to match; no distinguishing marks, twenty years of age, physically fit and engaged in the serious business of the law, articled to Messrs Wingrove, Templeton and Hicks of Newcastle Quayside.

He and Neville were sharing with privates Hinckley and Dodds the former, like Tom articled to a firm in Durham and the latter a trainee journalist. 'Well then professor,' Hinckley addressed Neville, 'will we be doing this for real come Christmas?'

It'll all be over by Christmas, Dodds interjected, 'everyone says so.'

'Thank God you're in with the General Staff Graham,' Tom quipped, 'Whitehall's every move in today's *Chronicle*; makes a change from school fetes and lost puppies.'

'A star reporter is ever on the lookout, Tom, mark my words, one day you'll be proud to say you new Graham Dodds just as he was starting out; the Kipling of the Territorial Force ... *For it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Chuck him out the brute!"* / *But it's "Saviour of 'is country" when the guns begin to shoot.*'

'If you really wanted action,' Hinckley offered dourly, 'you'd have joined the Special Reserve; they're the silly buggers who'll be going to France or wherever, we're just here for home defence.'

'Reality is, we're a bit of a bodge,' Neville informed them. 'Some wanted conscription back in '08 like continental armies but we decided to overhaul the old militia system; in all we're to be fourteen divisions strong and three cavalry brigades if I'm not wrong; intended to bolster the regulars wherever needed.'

'Bollocks to that,' Hinckley retorted, 'I only joined up so as not to be liable for service abroad, Wales is far enough, don't mind dressing up and playing soldiers but I'll be buggered if I'm having any bastard actually shooting at me.'

There was truth in this; Britain did not have conscription, though some, like the National Service League and possibly now also the Army Council, favoured compulsory service. The regular army was too small compared to the vast *levee en masse* France or Germany could produce and there was the Empire to police; Field Marshall Lord Kitchener was known to disapprove of ‘Saturday Night Soldiers’ on account of his experiences as a volunteer for France back in 1870. To save the part time warriors from the plundering tendencies of the regular establishment they were maintained as a separate entity run by County Territorial Associations.

Five Territorial battalions, the Durham Brigade, made up nearly half the Northumbrian Division and now, on the last day in July 1914, each was undergoing its fifteen days annual training; the 8<sup>th</sup>, with the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> was here by Conway. War and the threat of war was much talked about, part time soldiers who had never fired a shot in anger and came from every imaginable walk of civilian life debated earnestly the qualities of the 7.92 Mauser as against the French Lebel, the merits of our 18 pounders over the French ‘seventy-fives. War was becoming fashionable. Tom, in his itching wool, envied the company commander in his whipcord breeches and fine twill tunic, nipped and tailored, hailing, at some cost, from Saville Row rather than battalion stores.

‘You may all be new to khaki,’ the battalion commander had enthused on the first day in camp, ‘but you are the inheritors of a powerful tradition – your forbears were the volunteers who assembled to fight Napoleon, should he have landed. Some of your fathers may have served in the old 4<sup>th</sup> Volunteer Battalion, a finer unit never marched nor drilled as many bulls at Bisley!’

He had gone on to extol the virtues of their officers:

‘Our colonel, the Earl of Ravensworth has no equal as an all round sportsman; your company officers are good sportsmen too and fine horsemen, if I mention names such as Crookson, Straker, Henderson and Hunter you will understand the truth of what I say. At least two of your officers are Masters of Hounds...’

‘I wonder if many German infantry ride to hounds,’ queried Neville to Tom.

‘You should know, you’re the toff, pit ponies were as near a point to point as I ever got.’

‘Couldn’t ride for toffee,’ Neville confessed, ‘father tried of course; I had lessons, spent most of them on my arse.’

I fell off a beach cuddy once’, Dodds confided, ‘South Shields, bad tempered sod it was an’ all – ugly too.’ This drew the inevitable retort; ‘Should blend in well with the rest of you Sand-dancers then.’

As the Durhams’ recruited over a wide area, local rivalries were rife; the 8<sup>th</sup> largely drawn from around the ancient cathedral city and its less picturesque ring of colliery towns; but a few volunteers from South Tyneside (‘Sand-dancers’), Wearside (‘Mackems’ or, to give them their full title, ‘Mackem Bastards), even the odd



renegade Geordie from north of the Tyne, had somehow sneaked in. The Victorian Volunteers to whom the Territorials were successors in title had been re-formed in the 1860's to resist putative French invasion plans, harking back to the rather less fanciful threat of earlier wars.

Despite their apparent Francophobe purpose these ardent marksmen wore baggy uniforms of fashionable French grey and spent long and regular hours at the butts, their black powder Enfields and Snider conversions banging out vast clouds of sulphurous smoke. Their long service medal, the Victoria Decoration, rather unfortunately bore the letters VD writ large, much to the amusement of grizzled veterans who'd seen active service against a galaxy of the Queen-Empress' colonial enemies; Kaffirs, Afghans, Zulus, Matabele, dacoits and, latterly, the formidable Boers.

Tom enjoyed musket drill. Since early boyhood he'd hunted rabbits and hares with an ancient take-down .410 shotgun and, occasionally, Neville's father's slim and graceful bolt action .22. With this arsenal he had cheerfully decimated the Killhope fauna, more than a few illicit pheasants, unsportingly slain whilst earthbound, joined the bag. This experience stood him in good stead for the new Territorials, like their volunteer forbears and the vaunted regulars took their shooting very seriously indeed. His venerable Martini replaced by the less venerable Long Lee-Enfield, Tom became assiduous. He fired 250 rounds at ranges of 100 to 600 yards, kneeling, prone and with sword-bayonet fixed and unfixed, the weight of the blade giving a distinct drag to the muzzle, altering the dynamic of shooting. In his 'mad minute' Tom could pump fifteen rounds into the target at over three hundred yards.

'Did you realise, the old long-bowmen at Crecy or Agincourt could loose about as many shafts in the same time,' Neville informed him, Neville whose own marksmanship was at best indifferent. 'But I doubt they got an extra 6d a day,' referring to the hike in pay the crack shot might anticipate.

For Part III of the rifle course – dubbed 'the classification shoot', he had to fire fifty rounds, aiming for the inner ring of the two foot wide target; four points for that, three for the next and two for the outer ring; thus a total score of 200 was possible and Tom easily exceeded the 130 needed to confirm his marksman status. He got to know the rifle intimately, polished butt and stock, the gleaming, slender length of blued barrel and the fluent bolt, ten rounds of .303 ball, each a jarring rebuke to the shoulder, smell of burnt oil and cordite that became the shooter's steady perfume. The weapon was his alone, his number stamped on the brass plug set in the stock, his to retain as he spent extra hours in the drill hall, practising loading and aiming, Neville obligingly and patiently holding the disc.

It was on the range he first met Roland Bradford, a newly commissioned company officer; the battalion expected its officers to be as proficient as their less exalted soldiery; the adjutant was frequently heard to mutter that few things more offensive than an infantry officer who knew not how to shoot at least as efficiently as the best of his men.

'There's a fresh minted sovereign for you in this my lad,' the adjutant offered, as he and the subaltern took their places in the battalion competition. 'What about me?'

Bradford enquired good-humouredly. 'No more than ten bob for you laddie, officers should know how to shoot.' Weston, the adjutant, was no Saturday soldier, a retired regular who'd seen service in South Africa, his speech peppered with the idiom of the Veldt that so many veterans affected, thus hill became 'kopje', a camp described as a 'laager' and the Welsh, rather oddly 'Taffey Kaffirs'.

'If you'd offered me a quid, I might have done better,' Bradford quipped when he'd gracefully conceded victory to Tom, seventeen points to nineteen. 'A reward well-earned,' the adjutant observed as the coin changed hands, 'If we end up fighting Fritz, and we will, it's marksmanship that'll count, he's got a damned sight more fellows than us, so let's hope the bastards can't shoot straight.'

'What about the French?' Bradford enquired, 'quite a few of them, and rumour has it we're on the same side...'

Frog Kaffirs,' retorted the adjutant, 'fucking useless, we don't save 'em, they'll fold, just like last time.'

Tom walked back from the range with the young officer, about his own age he guessed with a serious but amiable face. 'Fine shooting,' Bradford offered, 'do you shoot, I mean for sport?'

'Not exactly sir, not as in a 'shoot', more rabbits and hares.' He nearly said and the odd pheasant but checked himself in time. 'Well I fear your skills will soon be in demand Private Laycock.'

'You think there will be war, sir?'

'Sure of it and no way Britain and the Empire can stand aloof. Why aren't you an officer by the way, you strike me as just the type for a commission?'

'Never really thought about it sir, when I joined up this was more, well like a hobby if you understand, I'm all set for becoming a solicitor.'

'God save us from more lawyers,' the officer mock-rolled his eyes, 'you should think about it, I rather suspect being in khaki will be more than a hobby for most of us from now on. If you do think of applying for a commission, let me know, be glad to help.'

'I will, sir,' he replied, and meant it.

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'What you reckon then?' Hinckley, his long face more dolorous than ever, queried as they watched the summer's evening fade.

'About what,' Tom responded.

'This bleedin' war, what else, will we be in it, or what?'

Tom noticed that Neville did not reply, the quartet looked to him, Neville had the knowledge but it seemed Tom was to be the one with the opinion, had he graduated to staff level, courtesy of his marksman's badge? Strangely, in the light of all they'd discussed, he'd not seriously considered his new skills might be fully employed in earnest.

'Then yes, I suspect so, Frog won't hold against Fritz so we'll likely have to do it for 'em, us against Fritz.'

'Won't that be bloody lovely, but what I mean is will it be us, as in part-time us, or just the regulars. I don't mind guarding the gas-works and if Fritz attacks Roker I'll be ready but I can't see us going to France, or Belgium or anywhere like, I mean it's not as if we're real soldiers, we're just weekenders, I'm an articled clerk Tom, like you, Doddsie's pretending he can write and Neville's waiting for his old man to die so he can inherit a life of ease and continue oppressing the workers. What the fuck are we going to do against the whole fucking German army?'

'It's our duty, simple as that,' Dodds answered for him, 'we don't have a choice, someone will have to stop Fritz and if Froggie and Ivan can't do the job then it'll be down to Tommy Atkins; simple as that', he repeated.

Afterwards he could not recall if the notion of going to war excited or repelled him. The plain fact was he had no concept of what war might really be. He'd seen pictures of gallant redcoats in very thin lines, seeing off hordes of savage natives; men with bones through their noses, armed with strong-bladed spears and clubs, or shifty looking dacoits, dark eyes flickering above massive beards; he'd read Kipling and G.A. Henty's *With Clive in India*, thrilled to stirring adventures in far off, exotic lands but as to the reality of war, he actually had no idea; none of them did. He did wonder about a commission though.

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'And now ladies, boomed Sgt. Hayes, we will dig trenches, so hands out of pockets, stick out those manly chests and let's see how well you can sweat.'

'We're bleeding light infantry,' Hinckley muttered, 'not the fucking RE, why can't those idle bastards dig the fucking trenches.'

'Because Private Hinckley,' the NCO could count upon excellent hearing as one of his qualities, 'the Engineers, fine fellows as they may be are not her whilst you my heroes are and moreover, Private Hinckley you will dig because I fucking well tell you so.'

Tom had seen trenches before, of course, he'd trained the previous year up on the artillery ranges by Otterburn in Northumberland a bare, windswept moor, ablaze with the rich purple of summer heather, but then the platoon had been spared the chore of actually digging the beastly things, others had performed that service beforehand. Now the thin and stony soil of North Wales suffered beneath the onslaught of shovel and pick; the men were a mix of manual and office workers, some came from the land and more from the mines; to all of these digging was second nature. Those from more

sedentary backgrounds suffered accordingly, hands soon raw and blistering, sweat in torrents soaking their thick flannel shirts.

‘God,’ Neville managed, his lean face blotched and glistening, ‘this is no work for a gentleman, I may write to my MP, if I can still hold a pen that is.’

‘It’s ‘cos you’re doing it all wrong lad,’ Ernest (Ernie) Thompson, thickset bantam and pitman from Wheatley Hill explained good-naturedly, ‘give me that sodding spade. Now watch and learn.’

With practised ease and a degree of economy bordering on the graceful, he slid the sharp-pointed tool into the tricky ground, his cut as sure as a surgeon’s incision. With a deft movement of his foot he rammed the blade deep into the earth then applied back and shoulder muscles to drag the load free and swung easily to unload. ‘If you’re going to do this for eight hours a day lads, you might as well do it right.’ To watch such a consummate professional was indeed almost a joy and Tom felt the prick of conscience at the haughty manner his ambitions had led him to disregard those following a manual trade.

They sank into the ground as the trench began to take shape; the sharp, rich scent of the peaty soil filling their nostrils, its dark elasticity and subtle texture hinting at ancient secrets. ‘Learn to love your trench, my boys,’ the sergeant enthused, all the more so as his exalted rank excused him from the labour, ‘if we’re for real then it’s mud or death, *Notes on Field Defences* or *The last Post*.’

Engineers had at least pegged out the traverses before they began to dig, with the line of the proposed parapet soon marked with sods, the emerging trench system conforming to the classic pattern laid out in the official manual: the line was not straight for a mere ditch afforded too much opportunity to the enterprising foe; rather the line was an irregular indentation of fire bays, a dozen feet in length, alternating with eight foot traverses. An impudent enemy, gaining a foothold would thus have to fight his way, bay by bay down the trench. The forward line was joined by a dug or communication passage to the rear or cover trench.

Dug down to eight feet through the heavy peat a fire-step was cut into the front wall of the bay. ‘Now then my lads, Hayes,’ continued, ‘here we have an excellent field of fire whilst the enemy has no clear view of your position. As you will note your rifles command the ground in front and should the air fill with the sound of enemy projectiles you can always hope they fall on the bay next door.’ Separate pits were dug to accommodate one of the battalion’s two Vickers machine guns, fat-barrelled weapons, lovingly fussed by their owners that ate up rounds at an alarming rate and spewed lead over the ranges in a rapid stuttering roar, chewing and collapsing wooden targets with lethal abandon.

That night they slept in the trench, men crammed in anyhow; groundsheets and webbing festooning the newly dug walls, the leading edge or parapet was built up with sandbags, rough Hessian sacks filled with the freshly turned earth, laid both ‘side-on’ and ‘end-on’ – the rear wall was likewise finished but the layers here climbed higher; ‘Just in case,’ Hayes cautioned, ‘any silly sod is daft enough to stick his head over the parapet in daylight, the rear, that is the parados breaks ‘is outline,

makes the enemy marksman work that bit harder.’ It was dark and dank, a world away from their almost gentlemanly existence under canvas.

‘What the fuck are we doing all this shite for,’ Hinckley continued in habitual mode, ‘what’s the fucking point in training light infantry to cover ground when we’re stuck in a bleedin’ hole?’

‘Nobody is suggesting you spend the whole war in trenches,’ Neville wearily explained, exhaustion heavy as a leaden pall, ‘we use trenches to attack from, would you rather we just stood out in the open and let Fritz’ guns enjoy themselves.’

‘As I’m not going east of Wearmouth, I can’t see it matters and not much point digging trenches round Roker Gasworks.’

‘Fritz will never get as far as Roker,’ Tom observed, ‘especially if he knows you’re waiting for him.’ This drew a ripple of laughter but they were all too tired to care.

Next morning they awoke after fitful dozing, still tired, rank, aching and unshaven; mess tins of warm, sweet tea, dark as treacle swigged with relish. Odour of frying bacon lifting the weary spirits, skies fine and clear, reveille of birdsong in the line of trees behind and the placid sheep unmoved by their earlier exertions and this strange, fresh scar upon the landscape.

Yesterday they dug, today they would attack and defend – A and C platoons in the trench, B and D seeking to dispossess them. Both Sgt. Hayes and the Adjutant had served in South Africa and experienced just such engagements; their observations were salutary:

‘I was at Colenso in ’99,’ the Adjutant confirmed, ‘and a bloody fine mess it was too, attached to Hildyard’s Brigade, pissing down too, middle of December. Your Boer was dug in at the base of the hill, regular trenches, not as good as these but good enough. Our men advanced in regular lines, skirmish order far too close and he upped and shot us down, simple as that, your Fuzzies might have had muzzle loaders an’ not too clever in the aim, but these Dutch farmers were using bolt action Mausers and the bastards could shoot straight and fast; they did both an’ we were beat.’

Happily the defending platoons were using blank rounds and the machine gun, due to the scarcity of blanks and its prodigious appetite stayed silent which was a blessing, though not necessarily to be expected should they be called upon to advance in earnest. B platoon came forward in good order, the ground rose gently toward their objective, lush and untrammelled by bombardment, after a day’s hard labour the mock attack was practically a recreation though they sweated afresh beneath the weight of their ’08 Mills webbing.

The British army had abandoned leather for canvas after the South African War and the webbing pouches gathered in cartridge carriers, worn at the front could hold 150 rounds; the haversack was carried on the left, bayonet and entrenching tool beneath, waterbottle and larger pack completed the kit. The weight of the ammunition, together with the other gear, bayonet and tool, was not inconsiderable but it was still a deal less disagreeable than digging.

They moved forward in open order a ten to a dozen paces between each man, moving quickly and in open order, avoiding bunching; ‘Remember,’ Hayes bellowed, ‘machine gunners love a group, spread out you’re a waste of lead.’ And so they advanced, moving rapidly over the easy ground, sheep, rather reluctantly, ceding passage. At this they were proficient, accustomed to the weight of rifle and pack, bayonets glinting in the clear and bright light, they jogged forward in open order, using cover, one section covering the rush of another, pausing to loose snap shots at the parapet ahead, then a final surge to the sandbags, leaping amongst their grinning comrades a deal of tussling and cries of ‘Had enough, Fritz, well done the Durhams!’

Afterwards they had lunch, a hearty mutton stew, served hot and washed down with cans of tea, ardent warriors basking in the glow of their achievement. Hinckley was moaning about his feet, Dodds furiously scribbling notes, no doubt this morning’s exercise would feature, in suitably re-mastered dramatic tones in a forthcoming edition of the *Chronicle*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Ridley was consulting with Sgt. Hays, wondrously pink and scrubbed’ the fine buff whipcord of his breeches immaculate above boots buffed to a high gloss.

‘Odd mix,’ observed Neville, ‘the battalion I mean.’

‘Be alright if it wasn’t for toffs,’ Hinckley grouched but without malice.

‘You’ve got university men, aspiring professionals,’ a nudge to Tom, ‘office workers, miners, farm-lads, shop-boys, tradesmen....’

‘Don’t forget us creative types,’ Dodds reminded, ‘likely I’ll be the one who writes the official history.’

‘Best learn to write first,’ Hinckley sneered, ‘journalism isn’t writing, it’s just sensation, besides I can’t see Kitchener rushing to the man who wrote up the Shincliffe Village Show of 1913, when he needs a proper historian.’

‘This war will be the greatest journalistic event of the century,’ Dodds portentously predicted, ‘and I’ll be front of the queue, best be civil if you want a good word said.’

‘Bloody good of the Kaiser to lay on a war just for your advancement,’ continued his companion, ‘what makes you think you’ll live long enough to land a job as war reporter?’

‘I’m lucky me, well as talented. That’s a hell of a combination.’

‘My arse.’

Tom and Neville were briefly alone as their comrades repaired briefly to the latrines.

‘Do you want to marry her?’ Neville enquired blandly, ‘my sister I mean?’

‘Christ, I know who you mean and how the fuck do I know. Your dear father wouldn’t be overly impressed.’

‘A formidable impediment to be sure, he knows to for an ambitious and amoral social climber, and he’s something of a practitioner, even a specialist in that area.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Still, if you were to get a commission, dress nicely like Ridley over there, polished Sam Browne, swagger stick and a decent pair of boots, you’d be a different class of suitor, you’d need to learn to talk some recognisable version of the King’s English of course, wash and shave more often, go to church a lot, that sort of thing.’

‘Fat chance.’

‘Well, between Kitchener and Kaiser Bill you might just pull it off; if this war does kick off in earnest, and it will, there’ll be a shortage of officer, even the better class of oik like yourself might stand a chance. What did the officers used to taste, wasn’t it something like ‘deadly plague and bloody wars?’

‘I can’t see the army recruiting its young gentlemen from miner’s sons Neville, you on the other hand would get a commission just for the asking, you’re almost gentry, been to Oxford and you dad’s an impressive record in abusing the workers, bastard that he is, sorry no offence.’

‘None taken, and he’s all of that, but I’m not officer material, you my lad very definitely are, I’ve seen you looking, don’t tell me you hadn’t thought about it.’

Neville, with his habitual insight, was of course entirely correct; Tom could not help contrasting his shapeless khaki with the officers’ precise and expensive tailoring, he’d seen the way girls looked at them in the streets of Newcastle, as a mere private he could not expect to complete. In time, if peace prevailed, he could expect to qualify as a solicitor; in time again he might aspire to a partnership in a respectable firm. He was, however, impatient, the whiff of glory and a couple of decent decorations could catapult a man through the ranks of society quicker than a lifetime’s graft. And did he want to marry Eleanor, well yes he did, partly as he fancied himself in love and partly because he was, if he was honest, determined to leave his lead-mining pedigree as far to the rear as possible. Tom had aspirations.

‘Imagine yourself strutting through Killhope, gleaming and brushed, perhaps a gong or two, the odd scar, nothing to detract from your beauty of course, that would make ‘em sit up and take notice.’

‘Don’t know who’d hate me more, my dad or yours.’

‘There could be some competition there, I’ll grant you. My old man would hate you because firstly, he always has, second he’d be jealous and third, he know your evil designs on his daughter would be getting closer to fruition.’

‘My dad would consider me a class traitor, betraying the workers’ struggle and joining the ranks of the urban bourgeois. He’d be bloody right too. Besides I’m not sure how Eleanor would react, she’s not that keen on the Establishment at present, votes for women and all that.’

‘Oh, this suffragette nonsense, just a girlish fad, once she sees you in full fig she’ll be easily won over, I know her.’

‘So do I and it won’t be that easy.’

‘Did I say it would be easy? First you’ve got to persuade someone you’re worth a commission, then you’ve got to fund the expense, then some nasty German might ruin the whole scheme by uncivilly blowing your pretty head off.’

‘They wouldn’t do that surely, not after I’ve laid out for the uniform?’

In the afternoon with the sun high in a perfect blue, they went for a run, swapping their uniform for gym kit, glad to be free of itching wool and stiff flannel. Strung out in a long, irregular column the battalion took to the hills, pelting along the valley floor, worn path shaded by birch and alder, the river flowing lazy over a riot of slick stones. They angled up in a diagonal across the flank of the hill, following sheep tracks, the going harder; ground more bare, leaving the patchwork of fields behind. The afternoon sun was fierce those first days of that August, the heather bright and purple, swathes of bracken, air like wine. As so they ran, the best and finest their nation possessed, strong in heart and limb, armoured by the invulnerability of youth and centuries of empire.

‘Come on lads,’ urged their officer, already reclining against the rough stone cairn that marked the summit, ‘don’t let those dozy sods in C platoon show you the way.’ Tom had been on the high moorland above Kilhope, where the shoulder of the North Pennines flattened into Alston Moor, above the watershed. Here, where even in summer, a chill breeze rode over the slab of moor, there was no noise bar the mournful wail of the curlew, haunting the heather, as though in search of lost souls; the village with its huddle of steadings and scars of industry, below and to the east. The Pennine landscape was a left over from creation, swept bare, featureless; not like here in Wales. Here the hills formed a pattern of defined crests that led away to a distant cluster of peaks; below the toy landscape of the valley floor, narrow ribbon of water a golden gash in the afternoon light.

They took a breather, the rippling of a mountain breeze plucking at soaking shirts. ‘Bugger me,’ Hinckley puffed, ‘thank Christ they don’t have hills like this in Sunderland.’

‘Typical mackem,’ Neville snorted, ‘absolutely no idea, just look around you man, this is God’s country, well it would be if it wasn’t in Wales.’

‘I went up Penshaw Monument once, that was quite high enough, if God had wanted us to climb bleedin’ mountains he wouldn’t have dumped ‘em all in Wales, its their penance ‘cos the daft fuckers can’t speak English.’

‘How’d you get up Penshaw?’ queried Dodds, whose notebook was again in evidence, ‘you shin up one of the columns? I thought Hartlepool was where the monkeys came from?’



‘Hartlepool’s where they hang monkeys stupid, reporters too if they’ve got any sense, I got up Penshaw by the stairs, like any civilised being, there’s a spiral in one of the columns an’ if I read that in the paper I’ll sue.’

This was the pattern of their days in training, mock attacks, route marches, drill, trench digging at PE. It was generally agreeable, air warm and enlivening, the camp dry and comfortable enough, food was plentiful and generally hot, sustaining if not inspiring. Officers ate in the mess, a large pavilion-like tent out of bounds to OR’s but silver and china were much in evidence, bottles of hock, (still in fashion despite the prospect of hostilities), chilled in the stream, crystal decanters of dark-red port which glowed richly in the evening light. The more he considered the matter, the more envious Tom grew, the more he felt he could cheerfully take his place at the polished boards, covered in fine white linen, gleaming glassware ranked in precedence, bugger.

Next morning was the third of the month and here the pattern was broken; reveille was at six with ablutions then breakfast, morning parade at nine. All four battalions were assembled, the meadow filled with khaki clad ranks. The brigadier a rather thin and sere looking individual with a huge and ferocious moustache that made him resemble some form of Mexican bandit ascended an impromptu dais, set up at the rim of the field where the ground began to rise.

‘Men of the Durham Light Infantry,’ he began, ‘we live in momentous times,’ his voice was strong and clear with just a hint of North Yorkshire. ‘Today I must tell you that we will not be staying in camp, congenial as this may be to all of us. More important tasks await; 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion will return at once to Bishop Auckland, 7<sup>th</sup> to Wearside, 8<sup>th</sup> – Durham and the 9<sup>th</sup> – Gateshead. You will have the opportunity to put your domestic details in order then report to your various stations as allotted under the mobilisation scheme...’

‘Is it war Sir?’ some intemperate soul called out from the ranks, swiftly followed by a ‘shut your fucking mouth,’ from his platoon sergeant. The brigadier paused as the warm air seemed to draw in and be stilled, so electric was the tension. After a moment he continued.

‘Suffice to say, the regular battalions will very likely be going overseas and in very early course, I do not believe I am giving away any state secrets if I suggest their crossing will not be a long one.’ This brought a nervous ripple of response

‘As you know our purpose, under the terms of the Haldane Scheme, is to protect the Homeland and free the regulars for active service in the field. As you also know the German army has flagrantly flouted Belgian neutrality and marched across that country’s borders in strength. The British Empire is bound by treaty to protect the neutrality of Belgium, I do not believe I need to say more at this stage; however, I do not perceive that Boldon Colliery or the Whitburn Gasworks Village are in immediate danger of attack.’ More general laughter followed.

‘Praise the Lord,’ muttered private Hinckley, ‘I was beginning to get worried there.’

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Barely a day later and Tom was on the train approaching Newcastle, crossing the Tyne by the High Level Bridge, the sweep of the great river on both sides. The news that war was imminent and now indeed a fact, had not come as a particular shock to the men of B platoon, nor to the rest of the battalion for that matter; debate had, however raged over the potential deployment of territorial battalions in offensive operations. The brigadier had finished by suggesting that though they were not obligated to fight in France or anywhere else beyond 'our shores' – there was an expectation that, should they be called upon, they would volunteer.

'Any man who would not willingly fight for his country then, let him take a pace to the rear,' the brigadier had challenged. Hinckley and a few others, ignoring the NCO's hostile glares, shuffled embarrassedly backwards but the majority, very nearly all, stood firm and when the officer finished with 'God Save the King' the echo resounded down the Welsh Valley like a roll of thunder. Tom and Neville, with Dodds and the rest of the platoon, had remained in their ranks. At that point, very few truly believed they would be sent to France but Tom found the notion a good deal less alarming than he might previously have imagined.

When he'd set off for camp he was determined to become a solicitor, work hard, derive rewards and status but that worthy course now dulled behind the prospect and opportunities which war had opened up. For young men like him, burdened with a poor background, the lure of martial glory was enhanced by the gloss on career prospects.

'I bloody well joined up to defend my home, not fight for somebody else's,' Hinckley had vehemently defended his stance as they struck camp, the tented city disappearing as fast as it had arisen, canvas folded and stowed onto wagons. 'That was the contract I made and I'm sticking to it.' His petulant self-justification failed to impress his comrades, still bathed in patriotic glow, the other members of the platoon looked darkly on the dissenter, their ardour diminished by his defection. 'What about you?' Tom had discreetly enquired of Neville, 'I thought you didn't believe in war?'

'In truth I don't,' his friend responded, 'it's all very stupid really a bunch of inbred potentates pissing on each other's boots but you can't really object to the absurdity of something unless you're a part of it. Besides, how'd you manage without me?'

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Tom had first come to Newcastle a year ago, very much the hick, even now the scale of the big city with its vast and sprawling industry, did not fail to excite. The Tyne shipyards produced the cream of the world's warships and men of war were frequently seen amongst the vast throng of shipping crowding the quays. Upriver, at Elswick, Armstrong's gun foundry had swelled to become an enormous enterprise, a town within a city. It had been Lord Armstrong who'd paid for the construction of the new swing bridge back in the 1870's, freeing up the river passage, his workshops and foundries built the great guns that comprised the warships' ordnance. Looking eastwards the quayside appeared dwarfed by the mass of vessels, oil tankers, tramp steamers, colliers, pleasure craft and a brace of sleek-hulled destroyers, doubtless fitted with Parsons' turbine engines, all jostled for space.

Central Station was a heaving scrum, beneath the wide sweep of the cast iron and glass vault, a tastefully grandiose statement of the city's Victorian prosperity, men and women jostled, many of the former were in khaki and the treatment afforded must have made those in civvies wish they wore uniform. Men slapped him heartily on the back or pumped his hand, earthy and encrusted navvies with a grip of calloused iron, gentlemen immaculate in frock coats and tall hats, manicured and fragrant. Girls glanced coyly and invitingly, hints of daring promise in shining eyes. It was all very gratifying, all the more so for one who had campaigned no further than Conway.

Messrs Wingrove, Templeton and Hicks had their offices on the corner of St. Cuthbert's Chare off the Quayside. Sixty years before the river-frontage had been spectacularly re-modelled by a massive explosion of the old soap-works on the Gateshead side which had demolished the warren of sagging tenements and scattered the disassembled remains of their inhabitants over a large area. Now the Quayside was the heart of the Victorian city, with the classical thoroughfares of Dobson and Grainger sweeping upwards, the squat, soot blackened bulk of the old Norman donjon, dwarfed by the railway complex. Tall and elegant facades, fine ashlar clouded by the black stain of unchecked industry.

The firm occupied an entire building, its occupants having their being in ascending order according to their station in the hierarchy, Tom, as an articled clerk, shared a crowded office on the first floor with half a dozen others, a couple he knew were in the territorials like himself, Mason and Goodyear, privates in the 5<sup>th</sup> Northumberland Fusiliers. A third, Johnston had enlisted in the more fashionable yeomanry, Northumbrian Hussars, a regiment that, as far as Tom could tell, was entirely made up of masters of hounds. Johnston was also in the office, sleek in his cavalry uniform, just that bit better cut than the infantryman's and sporting a leather bandolier that afforded the wearer an altogether more dashing look, the booby was even wearing spurs.

Perched languidly on a desk and working his cigarette with panache, Johnston, Tom admitted grudgingly, looked the part, a pair of twittering secretaries hanging on every ounce of military wisdom; he was tall and gangling and owed his place in the elitist yeomanry to his brother-in-law, a successful accountant from a bourgeois family. Though he had cultivated the languid drawl of the cavalryman, the distinctive rolling lisp of the coalfield occasionally escaped. He acknowledged Tom's arrival with the merest nod. 'All of us accepted service overseas when we joined up,' he was quietly bragging, 'wouldn't have it any other way, not much fun being stuck at home guarding the public loos when all the action's in France. What about your lot Tom,' he enquired, 'be deployed to watch Roker Park no doubt?'

'Same as you,' Tom retorted, 'you won't catch the Durhams sitting on the sidelines,' we volunteered to a man,' he exaggerated. Johnston snorted but a further exchange was interrupted by the senior clerk, sober in black who curtly informed Tom the senior partner wished to speak to him. That shut Johnston up. Arthur Templeton, great-grandson of the founding member had his office on the top floor, as befitted one in his exalted position. The room was large and formal, heavily panelled with glass fronted bookcases; shelves groaning under the impressive weight of leather bound law reports. Tom knocked discreetly – normally an interview with the senior partner was a

rare and not infrequently terrifying experience, Templeton a grave and austere character, impeccably formal and not renowned for mirth.

When he answered the summons to enter Tom found his employer looking out of the full length sash windows that commanded a superb view of the river and its constantly changing traffic. 'Well Laycock,' he began upon turning, 'you too have taken the King's shilling.' With this he almost smiled, the knot of his tie was perfect Tom noted, his cuffs shot forward precisely the required length, discreet gold cufflinks. 'we are all proud of you, our young men,' he continued and I am giving the same assurance as I gave to Johnston and the others, your place here with this firm is secure for the duration of hostilities and your career may resume thereafter as though uninterrupted.' Tom mumbled his thanks.

It seemed, for a moment, as though the interview must be concluded, Templeton seemed hesitant, as though not quite sure how to tidily dismiss his junior. Tom was about to save any embarrassment by excusing himself when the older man unexpectedly continued, 'You will take a glass of sherry?' This was indeed a signal honour, normally reserved for partners and then only at Christmas. 'I should be very pleased,' he dutifully responded though sherry rather reminded him of maiden aunts and chintz, neither of which roused any fondness.

A moment or two was occupied by the ritual of pouring the amber liquor into thin acid-etched glasses; the sherry was certain to be good, the firm did not stint itself where such important refinements were concerned, he wryly considered the decanter from which they were now drinking had probably cost the equivalent of several months remuneration for a lowly articulated clerk; the improving power of khaki was truly remarkable, or perhaps it was the febrile mood of the times, *But it's "Saviour of is country" when the guns begin to shoot...*

'You will understand Thomas,' his Christian name, another rarity, 'that we are all very proud of you young fellows, very proud.' Templeton was still not entirely at ease, seeming to stumble over the conventional platitudes. A gulp of sherry, 'it will be no easy matter though, this war,' now, and for the first time, he looked directly at Tom. 'I fear the business will not be done by Christmas as the gutter press predicts, I make no secret of the fact I find their incitements odious, damned dangerous. Are you prepared do you think for the rigours that lie ahead,' Tom realised he was absolutely sincere.

'I shall try and do my duty, sir,' he responded (earnestly as he hoped), 'there is little choice really. War has begun and each one of us must do his bit, however tough it gets.' He avoided pointing out that the Gas Works did not appear an unduly hazardous posting.

'But are you prepared for service overseas? I take it you volunteered when called upon? That will be no sinecure.'

'I would deem it an honour to serve my country in any capacity,' Tom dutifully and stolidly replied.

‘Whilst I am no soldier, oh I did my stint in the Yeomanry like your colleague young Johnston, I have made something of a study of war. I’m no armchair general either mind you but I’m bound to say that I wonder if our general staff appreciate the nature of this conflict which has already begun.’ Tom listened; he had considerable respect for his superior’s intellect which he suspected far surpassed most of the part-time officers in his battalion.

‘I wonder if our strategists have imbibed the lessons of earlier wars, particularly that between the American states, half a century ago, of course, but there were lessons that could have been learnt and I wonder if they have been. Our performance in South Africa was, in the circumstances, desultory. I’m having this conversation with you Thomas as I feel you will understand, I certainly believe a commission to be within your reach and you may count upon my endorsement.’

Tom murmured his gratitude.

‘Without wishing to seem unduly censorious I’m having this conversation with you rather than Johnston or any of the others, oh I don’t doubt their eagerness or their spirit, though I am less assured of their native wit. You I suspect are different.’

‘You believe we, that is to say the army, is unprepared?’

‘Unready, I’d say, in the sense that we prepare for a conventional campaign of movement and I suspect the actual nature of the war to be fought will be very different. Once you’ve seen a Maxim gun and a quick-firer in action then you wonder what scope there remains for cavalry, yet the BEF is commanded by horse-soldiers. In the American war the rifle musket reduced the cavalry to a subsidiary role on the field, what then will the machine gun achieve? The French will march forward with their drums beating and colours waving but I wonder what will become of them. In short, my boy, I suspect this war will belong to the infantry, fellows like you and a damn sight more than are wearing khaki at present. Dear me I do hope I don’t depress you too much but I would believe I was failing if I did not acquaint you with these ideas, I may be completely wrong, of course.’

He had not really considered the actual course the war might take, when he had thought of it he had supposed a fluid war of movement, rapid fire of rifles and the brave pennons of the cavalry, the deadlock of trenches had not really featured.

‘Well, we’ve trained with trenches, so I’d say we’re prepared, or as prepared as we can be, I am sure though that the Durhams are ready for any test.’

Their sherry was consumed and Templeton poured another, thought their conversation turned to more mundane matters of files and workload; lodgings and rent. When it was time for Tom to go they shook hands formally and he was surprised to see the older man’s eyes were full. ‘God bless you boy,’ he said.

That summer he was lodging in Heaton, a couple of miles from the city centre, a prosperous middle-class suburb that had sprung up during the preceding reigns in response to the city’s booming industry; the houses large and rather ponderous semi-detached villas, with ample gardens to the rear of tree-lined avenues, red brick and

pebbledash, coloured glass and grey slate. He had a room in no. 14 Rothbury Terrace, each being named after a Northumbrian market town, the new to the old, town with county. As the emerging bourgeois purchased smart new villas in the expanding suburbs, the upper echelon moved into the rural areas, creating themselves gentlemen and either buying up decaying pele towers or engaging fashionable architects, such as Lutyens, to construct the rural idyll but with running water.

Mrs. Hargreave was his landlady, dark and rather operatic in appearance she had been widowed some years previously and finding her late husband's pension uncomfortably frugal, was obliged to take in 'young men of good character and professional prospects' as lodgers. His room was on the first floor, pleasing enough and well-proportioned with a view over the neatly tended garden, floral wall-paper of the Arts & Crafts, brass bedstead and mahogany wash stand. This was, in fact, a good deal better than he was used to at home in Killhope and he counted himself fortunate. There was only one other lodger, a commercial traveller who, not unsurprisingly travelled a lot and was seldom seen; a rather ferrety little man in a well-worn tweed suit.

She greeted him at the door; he later thought she might have been waiting. Adele Hargreave was a woman of indeterminate age, probably some years older than her carefully tended appearance would suggest, of ample proportions, and indeed she was something of a leading light in local amateur dramatics, much, as he imagined, sought after by the rather sad and seedy older men or, worse, the sadder and hopeless young men, who were drawn to such posturing.

'You'll be off then,' she enquired, her dark hair was piled luxuriantly and the abundant orbs of her grapefruit breasts beckoned imperiously from a high necked silk blouse, wide hips in a well cut grey woollen skirt. 'Durham again tomorrow,' he replied, 'then active service,' she drew her breath in sharply, perhaps imagining him bound immediately for France, 'no further than Sunderland, I'm afraid, guarding the gasworks, not exactly *Under Two Flags*.' He was aware she read some romantic fiction and that her voice, clear and well-modulated might disguise a social origin not entirely consistent with her present position. She was, he thought a good-looking woman whose flowing curves had featured regularly in his insalubrious nocturnal fancying.

'I will keep your room if you want, this war can't last forever.'

'You're very kind but I don't really know what to suggest, obviously we could be called on to go to France, who knows, not everyone thinks it will all be over by Christmas.'

'I did have a German lodger once,' she confided over the tea she had made, sitting in the pleasant conservatory, overlooking the shaded garden, afternoon light adding healthy gloss to her darkly coiled tresses. 'Nice enough chap, awfully polite, not like some,' she teased; all part of their informal ritual. Though they both behaved well within the bounds of propriety, each was acutely aware of the other. 'I think he was buying guns or shells from Armstrong's, probably about to start shooting them back at us, seems so odd were at war with them. He didn't seem at all beastly.'

‘I suppose most Germans are mostly like us, though not if you believe the press, is that a new play?’ he gestured at a bound manuscript lying on the cane seat between them. ‘Oh yes,’ she replied, ‘seems a bit frivolous I suppose, what with the war and everything, a Jacobean tragedy,’ she smiled, ‘not exactly cheerful. I’m a rather naughty married duchess who has an affair with a younger lover, not the sort of stuff the Vicar normally goes for.’

‘A happy ending?’

‘Oh no, I end up fighting a duel with my estranged husband and he stabs me with his sword, I fall dead at his feet, in doublet and hose too,’ she added coyly.

‘Sounds intriguing, I hope the sight of you in costume isn’t too much for the vicar.’

‘Be careful, or I’ll make you help me learn the lines.’

‘Only if you promise to wear your hose.’

That evening, his last in ‘civvy’ street, they dined in some style. The commercial traveller was away, travelling in commerce presumably and the maid discharged for the evening. He did not particularly care for the dining room with its dark burgundy flock paper and ponderous oak furnishings but Adele had dressed for the occasion in a fitted satin gown which, though high necked for ostensible modesty, showed her not inconsiderable assets to their considerable advantage. If Mr. Hargreave had chosen to die at an injudicious moment from the pension perspective he had at least possessed the decency to leave a reasonable cellar. Tom was not particularly familiar with wine and though Neville had made some efforts to educate him, he could not pretend any degree of expertise.

‘I did think of a Riesling,’ Adele confided, the soft and artful glow of candles showing her dark eyes in shining pools of light, ‘but it seemed somehow unpatriotic, I suppose I can’t drink German wine till the war’s over, shame really as I prefer it to the French, even if they are our allies.’

They were eating blanquette of chicken with a potato border; somewhat superior to that which he’d consumed in camp, followed by a peirrot pudding. ‘I suppose I should strictly have served white wine,’ she continued, ‘I do hope that’s alright.’

In fact it was really very alright. Adele had liberated a rather fine claret and Tom was savouring the richness of the taste, the warm smoothness which seemed so suited to the balmy summer’s evening. ‘It’s really very nice,’ he responded, somewhat lamely he felt, cursing he’d not paid more attention when Neville was extolling the virtues of certain vintages. He had changed from uniform into his better suit, collar rather stiff and constricting in the still air, even though the French windows were open, there was no hint of breeze.

Next she plied him with cheese and a fine brandy, further booty from her deceased husband’s stock. The fiery spirit, properly served in a heated balloon, trickled delightfully mellow into his full belly, casting a glow on his fullness. A certain innocuous flirtation had been a part of their relationship since he had taken lodgings

the previous year. This had been enjoyable whilst remaining within the strict bounds of convention, she was, after all, a respectable widow and he had rather vaguely hinted he was spoken for, whilst not exactly true neither was this entirely false, guiltily he realised he had not thought of Eleanor all day and this beguiling matron was now entreating him to help her with her lines.

‘You’re not in costume,’ he gently chided.

She gave him a long look which held immeasurable depth then briefly excused herself, whilst he maintained his attention on the brandy. When she reappeared in full stage fig he was transfixed; her hair now hung loose in a dark, seductive curtain that made her look younger and her full figure was encased in a dark satin doublet, laced and pleated but which clung to the curves and light coloured hose that left very little to the imagination. She blushed slightly, aware of the effect. ‘I am supposed to be trying to look like a boy,’ she suggested.

‘I’m not sure that’s entirely convincing then,’ he replied, ‘I imagine your vicar needs the odd cold shower.’

‘Well he plays the madly possessive husband, the one I have the fight with, he keeps apologising every time he stabs me.’

They went through her lines which she delivered with gusto, he supposed she was very probably a natural actress, her movement and expression certainly seemed, to his untutored eye, to suit the tenor of the script.

When it came to her death scene she provided wooden rapiers with thin ‘blades’ of a couple of feet or so. When she was disarmed he hesitated briefly, killing her seemed rather ungallant. ‘Stab me,’ she commanded and, when he still hesitated, she took the point of his foil and placed the tip against her left breast, ‘push slightly,’ she commanded, leaning forward as though impaled. He obliged with a rather feeble lunge and she arched dramatically forward with a loud gasp. She remained stricken for a long moment; one hand cupping the fictional wound, then took a halting pace forward as though about to drop, treating him to an unfathomable glare. She sank abruptly to her knees before him and then flopped forward, the adulterous slain, her percheron buttocks quivered in a final, compelling quiver, arching slightly and then she went limp.

Adele did not move, as though killed in earnest, he remembered suddenly that the husband contemptuously rolls his faithless wife’s corpse over, he was experiencing some minor difficulty in that he was stiffly erect. He nudged her gently one one hip as she obligingly threw herself over as though unceremoniously kicked so now she sprawled immodestly on her back, arms outflung, heavy thighs spread in an apparently involuntary invitation. He bent, as he’d been instructed, to close her eyes, dramatically wide. As he did so she circled an arm around his neck, and drew his lips to hers, ‘dying woman’s prerogative,’ she suggested, her silk encased legs still wide.

‘Is this what they mean by active service,’ she next enquired as they drew breath.



Some hours later and after Adele had experienced a full and athletic recovery they lay tumbled in her bed, sheets entwined and twisted as befitted the fury of the encounter. She was draped over him, her pale and abundant flesh marbled in the dawn, clouds of dark hair spread wantonly. He supposed he should feel guilty, was going to war an excuse, not when the front lay no further than the Wear surely. She shifted against him, the stiff-nippled mounds of her breasts moving, his reaction was instant and vigorous; she stirred again, her hand moving delectably to assess the revived organ. 'The things a girl has to do for king and country,' she murmured huskily.

Thus did the warrior prepare for his war.

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