

THE SINS OF SOLDIERS

S J Hardman Lea

Prologue

Inauguration Ceremony of The Memorial to the Missing, Thiepval, France

July 1932

Anson Scott has come here early, in the peaceful hour before the rest of the crowds. Now they are arriving in numbers and the soldiers and regimental bands are drawn up in front of the vast brick and stone monument. He has his own place at the back of a canvas marquee, on one of the rows set aside for relatives, war veterans and news reporters. Opposite him, two white-haired British generals climb towards their seats on the other side of the broad stair leading into the memorial. He sees the rainbow of their medal ribbons and marvels that there can be so many as they push their way into their stand, past a group of men and women, forcing them to step back. Suddenly, Scott's muscles tense. There is something too familiar about one of those figures behind the soldiers, some half-remembered quirk of stance or posture that has grabbed at his attention. What is it? The seats there are hidden in the shade of the flags while he is looking into the sun. He can't make out anything clearly but all his long-practised instincts are screaming silently at him:

Run.

He stares hard into the shadows, trying to distinguish details. Who is it? Then the banners flutter on the wind and the clouds shift and he sees her. She is sitting half turned so that her face is in profile as she looks up into the towering arches of the memorial. She is more than fifty feet away and he has not laid eyes on her for sixteen years, but there can be no mistake. It's Beatrice Tempest.

She was bound to come. She'd no choice. Not today.

He shifts in his seat, trying to duck down lower so that he is hidden behind the tall hat of the man in front. He had almost forgotten the peculiar lightness in his stomach that he used to feel whenever she was near.

Damned fool! After everything; all the years, the tricks and lies. Still it comes back to here and now.

Is it possible to get away before she sees him? No – the wide gravel path leading back to the entrance has been cleared ready for the arrival of the royal party. He will be horribly exposed if he tries to cross that. It is a gamble he can't take. He is stranded here until it is finished.

If she turns this way, she'll be looking straight at me.

The air seems to have grown hot in the last two minutes. It is hard to breathe. He rises to his feet and makes his way down the stand, trying to keep his face turned away from her until he can duck around the canvas side wall. There is a uniformed guard there who looks puzzled, but Scott mimes a pain in his stomach and pushes past him. The back of the stand is quiet. Everyone else has gathered along the main path, awaiting the arrival of the President and the Prince of Wales. He doubles over, gasping to catch his breath. Could she have spotted him? There is no way of knowing. For the moment, at least, he is safely out of sight. He'll have to wait through the ceremony and then make sure he is the last man to leave. Trying to push her from his mind, he looks away from the monument and out over the rows and rows of identical white crosses. Each marks the burial place of a soldier who died, anonymous, in the four years of fighting on the surrounding battlefield of the Somme.

How many of these men have I known? Did we sit together for a smoke, waiting for the order to advance? Talking about love and life, sharing the last of the whisky while the signal flares burst in the night? Have we laughed at the same jokes; smiled at the same comic turn in a concert party?

He is not aware that he has moved but finds that he is walking between the graves, brushing his hand over each cross in turn, trying to picture the man who might be lying beneath.

One thing is for sure. None of these is David. He's not here.

There is a commotion behind him and the bands start to play 'God Save the King'. Anson Scott does not even glance around to check that he is still hidden: he has lost himself to the past.

I guess there was always going to be trouble, right from the start. Looking back on that first night in France there was already a scent of tragedy, like ashes blowing down the wind. But still I don't know if any of us could have done anything different. Maybe we were all just acting according to our natures. Me, her, Tollman, even David. Especially David.

December 31st 1915.

Picardy, France.

It was New Year's Eve. My transport ship had been held up by a storm out in the Channel and I'd had to endure five hours of nausea before we could get in to dock in Boulogne. By that time, I'd missed my planned train connections so I reached the battalion a while after nightfall and I'd tramped the last four miles alone along cold, dark lanes. At first, I didn't believe I could have come to the right place. It was a chateau; a real French country house with turrets on the corners, a moat all round and a bridge leading to a gravel courtyard in front of the main doors. It seemed quiet; deserted apart from a bored sentry standing under a lamp by the barrier on the bridge. He looked over my papers, then gave me directions that took me through the doorway and along an unlit corridor leading to the heart of the place.

I don't know what I was expecting to find when I pushed open the double doors at the end of the passageway. I suppose I'd anticipated rigid military discipline and stiff upper lips, the whole British military myth. I couldn't have been more wrong. If the noise hadn't warned me, the chunk of bread that flew through the air past my head would have confirmed it. Inside, there was a rousing party in full swing, going headlong toward the end of the old year. It was so loud and bright I was temporarily dazed by the glare of the electric chandeliers and the babble of voices and was glad to lean back against the door and gather my senses. It was also a pause that gave me the opportunity to make some mental notes about the scene. I knew I'd be needing them later.

The refectory was a big, light panelled room filled by a U-shaped table that was littered with glasses, china and silverware. Seated around the table a couple of dozen soldiers were enjoying the last stages of what looked to have been a pretty opulent dinner. Facing me, at the centre of the table, a group of grey-haired men were caught up in sober discussion; it was obvious that they must be the senior officers of the battalion. To my right, lining one limb of the table, a gang of pink-faced boys glowed and giggled. I'd been well briefed before I set off and I knew that the British Army was recruiting its subalterns kind of young, but these lads looked barely out of kindergarten. Opposite them, on the other side the room, a handful of older guys were hunkered down behind a stockade of bottles. Before I could get a closer look at them, I was interrupted:

'I was sure I'd spotted a fresh face. You must be Scott, our new man. What a relief. We've been expecting you for days. No matter, at least you're here now.'

A slight man had appeared at my side. He'd an affable face framed by thinning sandy whiskers and the type of round, steel-rimmed spectacles that put me in mind of pictures of Teddy Roosevelt. In one hand, he was carrying a clipboard, complete with a thick wad of notes.

'Welcome to the Royal Pennine Regiment. I'm Clarridge, the adjutant.' With an air of satisfaction he took a pencil, licked the tip and made a deliberate tick against what I assumed must be my own name. 'Shall we get on and introduce you to Colonel Ireland straight off, before we get caught up in the toasts?'

He took my arm and led me around the table to the group of older officers I'd first noticed. Sitting in the centre, the Colonel was a stiff-spined fellow with a long nose and short white moustache.

'Where're you from, Scott?' he asked.

'From the United States, sir. I'm American.'

'Good God!' He'd had to bend forward as if his hearing was defective and I realised that he was even older than I'd first thought. 'What th'Dickens were you doing there?'

'Surveying for the railroads, sir. In Alaska.' It was the truth and nothing but, even if it was some way from the whole truth.

'Ah. I see.'

But from the puzzled expression on his face, it was obvious that Alaska was a location way beyond his experience. 'Done any soldiering?'

'Three years at West Point, sir. I passed out in the year of '06.' The date was accurate, at least.

'Not Sandhurst, then. Pity. But not bad, all the same,' he said, clearly relieved to have moved back to familiar ground. 'I like to have fellows who know what they're doing.'

There was a crash of breaking glass and a bread roll shot through the air from one end of the table to the other. The Colonel's eyes followed it in flight. He grunted a comment at the adjutant, then turned again to me.

'Pal of mine's got a cousin just moved up to Haig's staff at GHQ. Says we'll see real action soon. Fine time to join us. Meet the fellows. Everyone present tonight, Clarry?'

'Everyone bar two, Colonel. Alexander is on leave, I believe.' Clarridge thumbed through pages on his clipboard and gave a grunt of satisfaction. 'Yes, as I thought, although he's due back today. And Captain Tollman's away on a course,' he added, with rather less enthusiasm. 'Come along, Scott. I'll perform introductions.'

I was glad to move on before Colonel Ireland had the chance to ask any more awkward questions. I'd been correct about the sober quartet seated immediately around him: they were the transport officer, quartermaster, intelligence officer and a faded major with yellow-grey skin who turned out to be second in command of the battalion. All of them were polite enough but were obviously keen to return to their military arguments as soon as possible.

'Now come and meet *les gars*,' Clarridge said. His pronunciation was atrocious but later I'd get to learn how proud he was of the French vocabulary that he sprayed around like buckshot. He took me off to the group of youngsters sitting down one side of the table.

'These are the chaps who actually live with their platoons in the trenches. Gentlemen, this is Mr Scott, just joined us from the United States. I'm sure you'll make him welcome. And orders from the Old Man: cease fire with the food, please.'

The pack of youngsters greeted me like a long lost cousin, confident in their well-scrubbed high spirits which I guessed were partly due to the number of empty bottles littering the table around them. The most vociferous were twins, pink-faced with white-blond hair, and identical except that one was sporting the faintest wisp of moustache.

'Are you really from America?' That was the clean-shaven boy. Without waiting for a reply, he rushed ahead: 'Absolutely top hole. Just like *Riders of the Purple Sage*.'

'Don't take any notice of him, Scott,' said the moustachioed twin, with the superior tones of the first born. 'He always talks rot. He's been obsessed with cowboy stories all his life.'

'That's a bit thick.' His brother took an indignant swig from his wine glass, managing to get most of it into his mouth. 'I only meant that it'd be good for us to have someone who can ride and shoot straight.'

I had to disappoint him. 'I'd be no great shakes as a ranch hand, I'm afraid. I get a kind of rash when I'm around horses.'

'You mean to say that you don't ride to hounds?' Another fresh-faced kid, sporting a moustache clipped to match his colonel, sounded appalled.

I realised my mistake a bit too late. How could I pass myself off as a typical backwoods American if I had to explain that recently my riding had been restricted to bicycles and tramway cars? I was saved by the younger twin cutting in.

'Never mind about your blessed hunting, Moore. I'll tell you what, Scott. You've arrived at exactly the right time. There's going to be a big push this next year, everybody says so. And we always get sent into the thick of it so you're going to see some really hot stuff in the next few months. Won't that be fantastic?'

Clarridge returned to rescue me from trying to answer and escorted me across the room. Out of earshot he peered at me over the top of his spectacles.

‘I can see exactly what you’re thinking, Mr Scott, and you’d be correct. They do act like a crowd of schoolboys, although that isn’t very surprising really. Those Cooper twins are only fifteen months out of Rugby – Tom’s the older one with the whiskers and the younger one is Tim, by the way. Still, they’re good chaps and keen *comme la moutarde*, as the locals here would say. They’ve done pretty well up in the front line so far.’

On the opposite side of the table, we approached the more sombre group I’d noticed. Clarridge made a show of consulting his clipboard and murmured behind it to me.

‘A word to the wise. These fellows are a completely different *tasse de thé*. They can seem a bit difficult at first, but they aren’t all that bad really. Not once they get to know you.’

The men hunched over their port glasses had none of the sozzled bonhomie of the youngsters we’d just left. Far from it. They reminded me of nothing so much as a gang of street hoodlums plotting who they should mug next.

‘May I introduce Second Lieutenant Scott? He’s been with the American Army previously.’

There was a silence before one of them drawled, ‘Gosh. Lucky old us.’

The whole group was staring at me with blank hostility. Not one of them stood or offered a handshake. Finally, another voice spoke up.

‘What do we need a bloody Yankee for?’ It was a slight man with prominent teeth. He was glaring at me. ‘Why the hell can’t they find us one of our own, a proper gentleman?’

‘Manners, please, Mr Wesley. There’s no call to be offensive. This is an evening of celebration, after all,’ Clarridge said with weary tolerance. ‘Anyway, Mr Scott will already have given up his American citizenship before he was allowed to join us.’

It was certainly true that my only official identity now was as part of the British Army.

‘On the other hand, old Weasel here has a fair point.’ An officer with sleek dark hair, oiled flat against his scalp, was watching me carefully. It’d been him who had been so sarcastic at first. He gave me a tight, insincere smile, holding his head on one side.

‘I mean, why on earth would anyone join a foreign army?’ he asked. ‘Are you just such a fire eater that you can’t pass up on someone else’s fight? Is that it?’

I wondered whether he had put on that melodramatic voice for effect, all exaggerated consonants and nasal vowels. The adjutant blinked nervously.

‘This is Lieutenant Henry Howerd, Scott. He’s with C Company.’ Clarridge said it as if he was apologising for something.

‘So which is it, Scott?’ Howerd went on, ignoring him. ‘Couldn’t you bear to be left out of our little scrap, or are you just here to spy on us?’

Even if he was only trying to be annoying, that was a bit too damned close for comfort. I shrugged my shoulders, looked him straight in the eye and stuck to my line.

‘Fair enough question, I guess. Well, my mother was a Limey and I’ve still got a few kinfolk in Britain. I reckon it’s as much my war as yours.’

‘Well said, Mr Scott. That’s the sort of fighting talk we like to hear.’

Clarridge sounded relieved as he steered me away to a vacant seat a safe distance away, next to a burly man who was slumped forward onto the tablecloth with his head pillowed on his arms, snoring noisily. My new friend the adjutant was starting to show me a parcel of official forms and dockets that I needed to complete for him but before I’d had a chance even to look at them, we were interrupted.

‘Bloody hell, will you put your little board away, Clarry? No business at the dinner table. It’s just not polite.’

Our slumbering neighbour had woken. He hadn’t stirred himself to lift his head off the table, so he was squinting up at us through the one single eye that was visible. ‘Do the man a favour and give him a break until morning,’ he muttered. Then the effort of concentration was evidently too great and he closed his eye and fell asleep again.

‘That’s Vaughan, our medical officer,’ Clarridge whispered. He saw me cock an understanding eye at the half-empty wine glass on the table and nodded in agreement. ‘Can’t handle his drink at all. He’s actually a first rate doctor, but...’ He shrugged.

It almost sounded like the battalion would have preferred an incompetent surgeon, providing he could booze all night. I was turning that over in my mind when a file of orderlies entered the room and cleared the last of the plates, leaving decanters of port and whisky behind.

‘The Colonel’s about to open the speeches. Are you going to stay for post-prandial refreshment?’ Clarridge must have seen my expression, and quickly added, ‘But if you’re feeling all done in, I’m sure you could leave without causing offence. The duty sergeant will show you where to get your head down tonight and we can sort everything else out in the morning.’

It had been a heck of a long journey and I wanted to think through what I’d seen, so I made my excuses and slipped out the door, trying not to draw any more attention to myself. The day wasn’t done, however. There was one more person I’d yet to meet.

I followed directions through the chateau to find the bed I'd been allocated, which they'd told me was up some stairs at the back of the place. The hallway was unlit and I was feeling my way along in the half dark when somebody hurried around a corner and barged right into me, nearly knocking me off my feet.

'I do beg your pardon. How clumsy of me.' I could only make out a tall figure in a great coat and muffler. 'Are you all right? I suppose I was expecting everyone to be at dinner.'

I couldn't see his face. Although he spoke quietly, his voice was very distinct, the sort that gets heard through a crowd without having to shout. My first thought was, *How bloody typically British – always contrite even when they aren't at fault.* I was probably a bit too sharp when I answered.

'I'm fine. I was just leaving. I'm new. I haven't found my way around yet.'

'You're sure I can't persuade you to stay and join us?' He was so sincere that it sounded as if I'd be doing him a great personal favour.

'I'm not much of a man for parties. Too much time in my own company, I guess.'

'I am sorry.' The way he said it, it wasn't clear whether he was apologising for assuming I'd want to be included, or commiserating at my lack of sociability. 'By the way, I'm David Alexander.'

I could see him holding out his hand and shook it. He'd a good strong grip.

'Anson Scott. I've just joined up.'

'Good for you. Always interesting to get some new blood into the battalion.' He stopped for a moment, as if something had just occurred to him. 'Now that is interesting. An American, by the sound of things, but named after a British naval hero. A curious combination – I wonder how that came about. You'll have to tell me more later, if you can stand my infernal curiosity. We'll meet again in the morning, no doubt. Goodnight.'

He strode off, leaving me staring after him. He might have sounded like some college professor but he moved fast and real soft on his feet, which explained why I'd not heard him coming. A couple of moments later, the dining room doors creaked open and I saw a wedge of electric light spill into the corridor. As he disappeared inside, there was a great roar of approval from the party, like he was a conquering hero being welcomed home. When I'd got over his smart observations about my name, I thought how good it must make a man feel to have that sort of effect by simply walking into a room.

2

The electric wiring hadn't been extended to the old servants' quarters up in the attics and the poky room where I slung my bag down was dingy and cold. Three floors below, the party was still buzzing while I spread my bed roll out on an ancient iron bed frame, lay back on the blanket and smoked a cigarette in the dark, sorting through my impressions.

I should have been satisfied because I'd managed to get through my first pack of lies without giving anything away. But I knew I'd got a problem. Fact was, the Royal Pennines were a whole lot sharper than I'd expected. Given my aims, I'd been keen to get into a traditional regiment, an outfit I could rely on to provide what I was looking for without stirring up too much curiosity, so I'd made use of the connections I'd been given to get me posted to a battalion that was renowned for its history, wild parties and military follies. And sure, the Colonel was indeed like some relic from Waterloo and I was convinced he'd swallowed all my guff. But Alexander, the fellow I'd just met in the corridor? He'd come over like a regular, friendly sort of guy, yet he'd also sounded way too clever, and inquisitive to boot. Then there was that slimy Lieutenant Howerd:

Just here to spy on us...

That's what he'd said. I suspected he was only trying to rile me, which hadn't worked, because I'd spent a lot of time preparing for that eventuality. However, he was still too close to the truth for comfort. I wasn't a spy. I was something at least as dangerous as that. I was an American newspaper reporter.

'I want to get a man on the inside. In the British Army.'

That's how it had started, ten months before on a dark afternoon in New York. I was back in town and out of assignments when MacManus, my editor on the *National Proclaimer*, dragged me off to the dusty old bar that served as an extension to his office; the place he always used when he didn't want to be overheard. He got us both a drink and started in on his pitch.

'This war,' he said. 'It's too good an opportunity to miss. We should be doing something.'

'Doing something?' I couldn't think what he was driving at. 'Like what – an editorial on the virtues of neutrality?'

At the time, there was a great deal of discussion in the air about whether the USA should choose to get involved in the war in Europe: MacManus himself had an Irish father and a German mother, so I wasn't sure where his loyalties lay. Perhaps he was considering using

the *Proclaimer's* influence to sway opinion in Washington, to persuade the government to stay out of the fighting. I should have known better. Mac was a born newspaperman and always knew where the best story lay.

'All that's a done deal,' he said, waving his hand dismissively. 'We'll go in with the Brits and French, of course. Partly principle and partly a hard-nosed estimate of what makes the best sense politically and financially. It's only a question of when. No – that's not the big deal. What I'm looking at is a real story to entertain our readers here. Something that'll make a proper splash. And you remember what I always told you? What's the first rule?'

When I first started on the *Proclaimer*, Mac had instructed me in the art of newspaper writing. He had a real simple set of instructions.

'Rule number one: real news stories are always about people, not places or events,' I said.

'Glad to see you remember it.' He nodded fiercely at me, as if he shouldn't need to explain anything more, then grabbed both our glasses and took them to the bar to refill. When he came back, he picked up where he'd left off.

'So here's my big idea. The British Army – what's it really like now for a man stuck out in France? How does it feel for soldiers in the front line in a modern war? Do they care about the French, or do they just want to get home? Do they hate the Germans? Really? That's the stuff that'll sell papers, if we tell it properly.'

'But surely there must be reams written about that – what about all the London papers?' I was very fresh back in the country and hadn't caught up with what was happening in Europe.

'That is exactly my point. There's no proper stories coming out, not the sort of thing you and I would call a proper story. Everything is censored to hell, and the only stuff that makes it to print is predictable garbage about heroism and sacrifice and nobility and all that sort of horse manure. Nobody's getting any real, detailed information about the British Army any more. What with their intelligence services, and them censoring any letters from serving soldiers, we just can't get hold of any reliable facts. And what's the second rule for a good newshound?'

'Rule number two: no facts, no story,' I recited. According to Mac, that was the only other principle I'd ever needed to know.

'No facts, no story,' he repeated, banging his hand four times on the table edge, once with each word. I couldn't decide whether it was the whisky or the frustration that was getting to him.

‘So? What’s any of this to do with me?’ I’d got an idea where he was heading but I wasn’t going to make it any easier for him, or any cheaper.

‘So what do we really know now? Only what the Brits let us, only what they want us to hear, and you can bet that it’s all been bent and twisted to suit their purposes.’

I could see what he meant. The year before, there’d been a big splash about the alleged atrocities inflicted on civilians when the Germans invaded Belgium and now we had piles of government releases about the gallant British soldiers fighting on the Western Front.

‘I want to get a man into the front lines with the British Army,’ he said. ‘Find out what’s actually going on. Real detail, you know? Not what units are stationed where and how far they’ve advanced and how many Germans have been captured – the usual junk that’s in all the London papers. What we need is...’ he hunted around for the best description of what he’d got in mind, ‘human interest stories. That’s it. Human interest.’

It wasn’t a phrase that I’d ever heard before, although it would become common later, but I understood exactly as he went on.

‘How officers beat up on the ordinary soldiers. How they’re sent out to get killed pointlessly. How there’s stuffed shirts in charge of decent men. How there’s idiots making decisions. How the soldiers just want to go home. You get it: proper eyewitness material that’ll show folk all over the world what this war is really like. Not just here in the US, but everywhere – even in England.’

He was talking faster now, carried away with his own vision. He looked at me and pointed his finger my way. ‘Only problem is, we’d have to get somebody right up and into the fighting and the only way we could do that is to get somebody to volunteer to join the British Army. Maybe someone with a British mother? Someone like that could dig up all sorts of useful information that we could work up into a proper report back here.’

That was his style, insinuating what might be possible without actually asking me whether I’d consider doing it. Still, he was right. It was a bright idea, although with one obvious drawback.

‘What’d happen to that poor sap if he gets caught?’ I said. ‘Wouldn’t he be facing a court martial? He’d get shot, most likely.’

‘Sure, sure.’ He dismissed that with a wave of his hand. ‘We’ll have to put together a watertight cover story, of course. But just think about it, though. For someone with enough guts, it’s a unique chance to make history. What d’you reckon?’

I didn't say anything. I was thinking. He was right, and if it could be done, it'd need someone with some military experience, someone with no family ties, someone who'd got enough know-how to survive. In short, me.

Mac could see I was interested. He finished his drink and started to talk again. 'I figure you'll have to join up as an officer, so you'll have enough freedom to send stuff out. And I'd not be expecting anything for a while. You collect details, you write the bones of an article and you keep it all secret and coded until you get a chance to send everything back.'

I was about to ask how he thought that would be possible, but he beat me to it, leaning forward as if we were already sharing a secret, talking fast and quiet. 'From what we know, the officers out there censor the soldiers' letters, while their own can be put through a superior, or they can pass them themselves, on a basis of trust. That obviously wouldn't be smart for you – too obvious if anyone started to get suspicious. Instead, I've been asking around, all discreet, and I've uncovered one or two pick-up points in France you can use so you can avoid battalion censorship completely. From there, they'll send anything on to the USA via Switzerland, or Holland – somewhere neutral, so it isn't easy to track it either way. If you use your usual shorthand, there's nobody else but me can read it anyway. That's how you get it to me. From this end, seems like there's a regular mail service out to the trenches from London, which means I'd be able to keep in touch with anything important. All sent out through our contacts in England and carefully worded, naturally. Reckon that'd work?'

I did. Although he sometimes sounded like he was pitching a line, underneath that half-Irish bluster, he was very canny.

'We just need an agreed code word so you'll know a message is from me.' He looked around for inspiration, then down at his glass. 'How about... Jack Daniels?' He tested the sound of it like he was tasting the bourbon. 'A bit too obvious – so maybe, John Daniels?'

'OK, that'd work. If I agree to do it.' I wasn't going to roll over just yet, but that didn't make any difference to Mac.

'We'll publish it anonymously, you'd obviously not be able to use your own byline. I'd got in mind something along the lines of "True Scenes at the Front: Letters from a Modern William Russell." Something real classy like that.'

I knew that he was crazy about Russell's war reports from the Crimea, so that was his highest compliment.

'If anybody guessed it might be you, we'd just flat deny it, say you were back in Panama, or wherever. When it's over, you can take the plaudits.' He lit himself a thin, pungent cigar. 'So all you have to do is get yourself to England, volunteer to serve for King and Empire, and

then keep your head down. Hell! If you manage to keep enough notes, you'll be able to write a book about it someday. What'd you say?'

'Maybe it could be done,' I said, real slow. I didn't want him to see how excited I was at the prospect.

'You bet. And if there's one man who can do it, it's you.' He leaned forward and slapped me on the shoulder. He knew he'd got me hooked. 'OK, it'll be a bit more dangerous than anything we've sent you into before. But hey... nothing ventured, nothing gained. And I'll be behind you all the way. So you're good to go?'

I nodded once. What else was I supposed to do? Not many men get offered the chance to do something that really matters. And it sounded straightforward enough. How could I turn it down?

That had been then. Now I'd made it to France, it looked a bit different. As I crushed out the stub of my smoke the noise from below swelled into loud cheers and I reckoned that the speechifying must have ended. A raucous yell echoed up the stairway.

'Happy New Year. Here's to 1916!'

They all sounded cheerful enough down there, but on my own in the darkness, it seemed like the new year was coming with more hazards than I'd anticipated. Still, I told myself I was used to taking calculated risks. And even if my new comrades were a lot sharper than I'd expected, I was sure that I'd get through in one piece somehow.

Poor bloody fool.

3

Next morning, breakfast was a quiet affair, with only a few weary individuals picking at the food on their plates. The only exception was a yellow-haired man in subaltern's uniform who was reading a broadsheet when I arrived.

'What a load of drivel!' he muttered from behind the newspaper. 'Why can't they ever write something worth reading?'

I smiled to myself as I sat down and poured a cup of coffee. He put his paper to one side.

'Morning. Scott, isn't it? Good to meet properly.'

I recognised his voice easily: it was David Alexander again. I'd been expecting him to look like something special, judging by the cheers he'd raised the night before, but he'd an ordinary, clean-shaven, square face that was attractive mainly because of his manner of speaking. If he'd stayed all through the party, he wasn't showing the effects like the others. He was turned out real neat and tidy, immaculate in white shirt and buff breeches and a fancy pearl tie pin that must have been worth a month's pay.

'Have you heard? We're being moved straight back to the front. We were supposed to be here for another few days but something's come up and it seems we're needed. I'll be a few hours behind the rest of you because I've got to take a working party out to collect some supplies that aren't due to come through until this afternoon. Sorry to miss your baptism, it looks as if you're going to be thrown straight in at the deep end.'

'Suits me. I've got to start sometime, so it may as well be today.' I drank my coffee down.

He peered at me, looking vaguely surprised and then laughed. 'That's the great thing about you fellows from the wild frontiers. No fuss, just ready for action.' He folded up his paper and stood up. 'See you later.'

Of course, he couldn't know that I was thinking the sooner I got acquainted with the trenches, the better. It was what I'd come for, after all.

Everyone I'd seen the night before was assembled for morning briefing by the time the Colonel and adjutant spoke to us with details of our destination and transport. I'd chosen an inconspicuous spot at the back of the old stable block that served as the assembly room so that I could examine the faces around me, making some mental notes for future use. Then I heard my own name.

'Mr Scott will join C Company, to fill the vacancy with them.'

Clarridge was nodding in my direction. C? I remembered that was Lieutenant Howerd's company. It might have been my imagination, but I thought I detected a twitch of anticipation in the room.

The adjutant was continuing: 'I'm sure you'll see plenty of action there, Scott, especially when Captain Tollman gets back.' He darted a rapid look around, as if he was warning everyone to keep quiet. 'The other subalterns can show you the ropes and there's always Sergeant Fox to make sure the men don't give you any trouble.' He moved on to the orders for the day, leaving me to consider what it was about this Tollman that seemed to make everybody uneasy.

We weren't due to move out until the afternoon, which gave me a chance to cast an eye over my new platoon during morning parade. The soldiers were a fit, tough bunch who drilled and handled their weapons with casual expertise, which suited me just fine and dandy. I might have volunteered for a stupidly dangerous job but I figured my chances of living to tell the tale were much better than if I'd been with a bunch of amateurs.

If that was encouraging, better news yet was my platoon sergeant, although it didn't seem that way at first glance. All good regiments rely on their senior NCOs and I'd made a point of going to introduce myself after drill, but when I walked towards him I had my work cut out not to turn tail and run. From a distance, Sergeant Fox was nothing remarkable; a man of about my own height and build. Close up, he was terrifying. Over the years I'd worked with some rough types – track layers, lumberjacks, leathernecks, crooks and thugs – but when it came to scary, none of them came anywhere near Fox. Under the peak of his uniform cap, he looked like something that had been dug up in a graveyard. He'd no lashes or brows or moustache or whiskers and his skin was stretched white over his skull, except for dark shadows around his eye sockets.

'Something I can do for you... sir?'

His voice was like someone sawing through timber and there was no doubt that the pause before the last word was deliberate, to let me know that he only used it as a matter of necessity. When he swept his cap off, I saw that his white scalp was completely bald, matching his face, so that it was like looking at a living skull. By now I was ready for him, however, and didn't flinch while I told him I'd been attached to the company. I made a point of shaking his hand, which wasn't military etiquette by a long shot, and did feel a bit like gripping onto a skeleton, but I had a feeling right off that I'd need Fox's support if I was

going to run the platoon. I was correct. In the following months he was one of the men I got to depend on for keeping us all alive.

At noon, the entire battalion lined up on the road in a human caterpillar a mile long and retraced the route I'd come by the night before back to the rail depot. We were loaded onto a train made up of two dozen cattle trucks for the troops and an ancient dilapidated passenger car for us officers. Within a couple of minutes, the rest of the subalterns had dozed off, catching up with the excesses of the night before, which relieved me from having to field any more tricky questions about my previous life. I was content to sit quiet and watch northern France pass by the window while we lurched and rattled our way eastwards, stopping and starting at pointless junctions before eventually being tipped out in a one-horse town in the middle of nowhere. It was dusk by the time we'd formed up into column and marched out across a main square that was lined with piles of smashed masonry. The leading companies started to sing:

The Sergeant-Major's having a time, Parley-vous.

The Sergeant-Major's having a time, Parley-vous.

The Sergeant-Major's having a time,

Swinging the lead behind the line, Inky-pinky Parley-vous.

I'd get to know all the verses of that one, and a hundred more like it, before I was quit of the war. Back then, I was only pleased to be with a bunch of men in such high spirits. As we swung off towards the front I looked around, expecting to see signs of military activity, but these were the quiet times at the beginning of the year and the night was only broken by the occasional rumble and band and flare on the skyline. If it hadn't been for the loudness of the explosions and the unfamiliar marching songs I could've almost felt like I was watching a Fourth of July celebration in the USA.

For the first part of the night a bright moon shone on the paved road that took us through the wreckage of shelled-out farm buildings. There we diverted onto a muddy path that snaked between broken walls before it sloped down into the ground to become a deep ditch that twisted its way onward towards the front. The Colonel and most of the battalion turned off from the main route but Howerd led me, Tom Cooper, Moore, and the rest of C Company straight on. It looked like I was heading straight into the front line.

I'd knocked around all over the world and I thought I'd seen most of what it could offer, good, bad and terrible. In spite of my experience, however, I wasn't prepared for the trenches

of the Western Front. Probably nobody ever could be. It was the weird combination of smells that hit you first. Wet earth, sewage, chloride of lime, fried bacon and explosive cordite, all combined with the scent of rotting meat, like someone had cooked breakfast in a druggist's laboratory in the back of a slaughter house. And then everything felt too narrow and closed in. It was an underground maze of twists and turns and dead ends, all filled with the echo of muffled voices, the sound of boots clumping on the duckboards, and glimpses of the shadowy figures of working parties. Our maps were useless and there was no one to guide us so we kept getting lost and having to turn back, all one hundred and fifty men in the company reversing and retracing footsteps, cursing in whispers.

A freezing mist came down at dawn, by which time we'd about got ourselves found again. Suddenly we were surprised by a rush of soldiers coming the other way. It was the outgoing company, from a Territorial Army battalion by the look of their shoulder badges, all falling over their own feet in their hurry to get back to their billets. They earned themselves a chorus of insults from our men and a growl from skull-faced Fox as they jostled past, which only made them run quicker yet. I was still too raw to realise that we were dangerously late. We should have relieved them before dawn, which would've allowed them to get clear before first light. As it was, we were all mighty lucky that the fog covered our movements and cloaked us from the enemy field guns.

Finally we came to the end. At a T-junction, our path divided left and right, forming a single deep trench with walls higher than a man is tall and topped off with sandbags to create a parapet on either side. There was a ledge or step built onto the front wall about three feet up to allow soldiers to perch and see over the sandbags, and every few yards it kinked around a buttress to create a series of separate fire bays. I knew the anatomy of the trenches well enough to realise that we'd arrived. This was the front line.

The men spread themselves out along the bays, leaving Tom Cooper and me to carry on until we located Lieutenant Howerd in the company headquarters dugout – a pretty grandiose name for the cramped cavern we found at the bottom of some rough steps hacked out of the chalk in a dead end branch off the main trench.

Three officers from the Territorials had waited down there to hand over to us. They were fidgeting and nervy, obviously anxious to escape as soon as they could. Even to my newcomer's ear, what they had to say about that stretch of the line sounded sketchy and Howerd made himself comfortable on an upturned wooden crate to put them through a long list of trivial questions. It was clear that he was enjoying their discomfort.

‘Look here, surely we don’t need to go over absolutely everything? I’ve written it up in the notes,’ the Territorial Captain said. He was a man with all the vigour of an aging hound-dog. ‘We’ve had every sort of mayhem: mortars, rifle grenades, artillery. If you ask me, Jerry’s got this stretch absolutely taped. Do you know how many chaps we’ve had killed these last two days? Five! Five good lads, all shot by the same sniper. You’re welcome to it. Good luck to you.’

He grabbed his revolver from a flimsy table, probably something pilfered from one of the nearby villages, flung his knapsack onto his shoulder and before even Howerd could come up with a sarcastic crack, he and his subalterns had scurried up the steps and away.

I looked around in the dim light filtering down from the entrance. The dugout was about the size of the loggers’ shacks I’d bunked in years back, barely large enough for the table and makeshift seats, with beds constructed of chicken wire nailed over wooden frames standing along the sides. A row of coat pegs had been hammered in by the steps, the walls were smeared with soot, wax dripped from the stub ends of candles stuck on nails and the atmosphere was thick with the smell of old fat, cigarettes and sweat.

‘Pretty fair, as dugouts go,’ Tom Cooper said. ‘We’ve had much worse. It’s dry, there’s room for everybody and for once it’s meant for someone bigger than a pygmy.’ He prodded at the ceiling. ‘That’s good too. Thick enough to stop most things except a direct hit. As soon as we’ve unpacked our stuff and Moore has pinned up his Kirchner girls, we’ll be snug as a bug.’ He threw himself on one of the cots and bounced up and down, casting his dignity to the wind.

‘No time for playing the schoolboy when we’ve work to do,’ Howerd said and turned to me with his usual sneer. ‘You’re not going to be much use, Scott. Why don’t you stay down here and read through whatever drivel they’ve written up in the trench notes while the rest of us start to sort out this mess?’

Two hours later, my head was swimming with details of bomb stores, gas gongs, drainage sumps, barbed wire pathways, observation posts, listening saps and the rest of the paraphernalia of modern warfare. There was no sign of any of the others returning, so I climbed up the dugout steps and out into an eye-wateringly bright January day. The last of the morning fog had cleared away and a smart breeze was blowing straight down the line of the trench. Suddenly, there was a kind of fluttering sound directly overhead. I ducked behind the sandbags and looked up, thinking it must be new military technology I’d not heard about

yet, a prototype airplane or barrage balloon or some such. When I saw what it was I had to laugh.

Soaring on the wind in the sky above there was a kite, the sort of toy that children make, with a long tail of paper bows that streamed behind as it swooped from one turn to another. It was painted with red, white and blue Union Jack colours that showed up bright against the dirty chalk of our parapet.

A soldier I recognised as one of my own platoon was sitting on an empty cartridge crate nearby, pulling an oiled cleaning rag on a string through the barrel of his rifle. He stood up as I came his way.

‘What’s the game over there?’ I nodded toward the kite.

‘Not sure, sir.’ It looked as if he was trying to make up his mind whether I could be trusted. Then he added, ‘If it’s who I think, it’ll be worth going to watch, sir. You’ll likely find some fun.’

There was another narrow communication ditch nearby that led me down a twisting path and into the fire trench that faced out into No-Man’s Land. Coming out of the shadows, I stopped short. In front of me, two men were crouching up on the fire step thirty feet apart, each of them holding a ramshackle arrangement of mirrors and rods – periscopes that allowed a safe view over the sandbags. In between the pair of them, David Alexander was standing in the middle of the trench. He’d not changed out of the smart uniform he’d been wearing at the chateau and looked bizarrely pristine in his cord breeches and yellow leather gloves. In one hand he was holding a ball of twine, while with the other he was tweaking the string that stretched to the kite above. He was talking out loud as he watched it pirouette in the air.

‘Come on, come on. You know you want to do it... you can’t stop yourself. Come on.’

What the hell was going on? Alexander hadn’t seemed like a half-wit before, far from it, which made his antics even harder to understand now. Next instant, a single rifle bullet cracked overhead. The string broke with a twang like a banjo and the kite crumpled in the air and fluttered down into the trench.

‘Did you spot him?’ Alexander called out.

‘Aye,’ replied the soldier nearest me. ‘Right about where you said he’d be.’ He was a corporal – a grizzled man who had a short clay pipe gripped upside down between his teeth.

‘What about you, Stephen? You’ve the best sight of the lot of us.’

‘He’s dug in below that iron plate, Mr David, in a heap of old wire.’

The young private at the other end of the trench was still staring through his periscope. Alexander bent down to pick up the wreckage of his toy and then caught sight of me watching.

‘Scott! Excellent. They said that you’d been posted to us. Welcome to the joys of C Company.’ He seemed to treat it as completely normal that I’d seen him playing around with kids’ toys. ‘We’re just doing a bit of tidying up.’

He held up the string and paper wreckage. I had no idea what he was talking about or what he was up to, and it must have been written clear across my face.

‘So sorry, should have explained. My fault. It’s just that Old Bill here – that’s Corporal Keeble, officially,’ he said, waving a hand towards the pipe smoker, ‘found out that the Territorials who’ve just left had lost a few of their chaps to some sharp fellow with a sniping rifle.’

I knew that already. It was a recurring entry in the notes I’d been reading, one of several sections that had given me food for thought.

‘I worked out a few likely spots and decided we’d try and tempt him into showing his hand, hence the kite. Give the devil his due, he’s a fair shot.’

Alexander nodded his head as if considering a philosophical problem in a classroom, not a lethal marksman who would blow the brains out of any one of us given the opportunity.

‘Aye, he can shoot a bit,’ the corporal butted in, ‘but if he was really good, he’d have rumbled us and then we wouldn’t know about his hidey hole, would we?’

That surprised me. Surely he wasn’t supposed to answer back like that. And wasn’t he supposed to say *sir*? This was getting more interesting by the minute. I’d understood there was a big divide between officers and men in the British Army. Maybe it was something I should report back on. Alexander didn’t seem bothered by the informality at all.

‘That’s true, Bill, very true. And it’s a mistake that will lead him to a sticky end, I regret to say.’

Right then, I really didn’t know what to make of David Alexander. How could someone with his drawing room manners survive in a war zone? It sounded like he was genuinely sorry for the German sniper’s error of judgement. On the other hand there was something about the way he said it that gave me a bit of a shiver. I’d never met anyone like him before.

While I was considering that, Alexander had taken off his gloves and folded them into a pocket. Then he unstrapped his wrist watch and handed it to the corporal.

‘Here you are, Bill. About three minutes, if you wouldn’t mind.’

He vaulted over the parapets at the back wall of the trench, very nimble for a tall man, and disappeared behind the cover of the sandbags, leaving the corporal gazing at the watch and counting down the seconds. He didn't feel the need to explain anything to me, so I sat back and waited to see what would happen when Alexander's allotted time expired. At the end of three minutes Corporal Bill handed the watch to me, then unslung his rifle, took off his uniform cap and stuck it over the muzzle. He held the cap just above the level of the sandbags and jiggled it up and down slowly, pacing a foot or two along each time. From any distance away in the enemy lines, it would look just like some raw recruit bobbing his head up and down for a glance across No-Man's Land – a fine juicy target for that sniper. Sure enough, the third time he raised the cap, I heard the crack of a shot and it spun away as if the wearer had been hit in the head. A second later, however, two deep reports boomed out from behind our position, one after the other in quick succession.

'Got him!' the young private shouted. 'That's fixed the bugger.'

Corporal Bill picked up his cap and wiggled his finger through the bullet hole that perforated the crown, shaking his head.

'Good effort, Jerry, but not good enough,' he said. He looked at me as if he was trying to take my measure. 'Not bad with a pistol, is Mr David. When it comes to rifles, though, he's the best I ever taught, even when he was a lad. Different class to anybody else.'

I could hear the possessive pride in his voice and considered how long he must have known David Alexander, who had just come into view, strolling back along the trench. Under one arm he was carrying a large bore rifle with two massive barrels side by side, the sort of weapon I'd once seen a big game hunter use. He propped the gun against the wooden revetting that lined the trench and started to brush the mud off his tunic. He was looking thoughtful.

'I suppose that might not have been absolutely fair play,' he said. He must have seen the expression on my face and went on. 'It's just that it doesn't seem quite right to use an express rifle for anything smaller than a rhinoceros. Ah, well, I suppose we have to make use of the best weapons for the job. May I take a look, Stephen?'

He took the trench scope and examined the outcome of his marksmanship. 'Well, it might not have been sporting, but it was certainly effective. Pity I've had to muck up a clean uniform.'

That gave me a bit of a start. I'd been taken in by his quiet, amiable manner. Now he was making no bones about having just stalked and shot a man. OK, it was war, but it was darn

cold-blooded all the same, and the only qualms he'd got were that he'd used the wrong sort of gun and got a tad dirty.

'No need to worry about your jacket, Mr David. I'll sort it out for you later,' the young private muttered.

'Good man, Stephen. I wouldn't trust anyone else to look after me. Well now, I suppose that's the end of fun for the day. We'd better get back to more mundane labours.'

He turned to me and gave me a great beaming grin. It lit up his face, changing his serious, academic expression into something utterly different, something much more reckless and restless.

'Come along then, Anson Scott. Let's see what state they've left the trenches in for us. This way to the war.'

That's how he is still fixed in my recollection, face angled up into the sun, smiling. There was nothing I could do except give in with good grace and follow him.