

**Away from the
Western Front**

**Creative
Writing
Competition
2018**

Over 18 category

'Away from the Western Front' ran a Creative Writing Competition in 2018, inviting entries in the form of poems and short stories. This document includes shortlisted entries which met the competition rules (outlined [here](#)) in the Over 18 category.

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Poetry

Lawrence of Arabia

Lowell Thomas brought this
Arabic-speaking soldier to fame following
World War One; said soldier joined the
Royal Air Force so he could find anonymity.
Effective forces under the command of this
North Wales born soldier
Carried out attempts to
Ensure the Arabs had their independence.

Overshadowed is this time by the
Fight in the Western Front.

An avid motorcyclist
Rode through the English countryside
Aboard his
Brough Superior SS100;
Injured fatally following
A crash.

© Annabel Louise Barker, Wadhurst, Kent, UK

A Short History of Salonika

Desolation, destruction, fury was wrought
As the brave but weakened Serbians fought,
Allies came to help but were too late.
The Central Powers had sealed their fate.

Retreating back to Salonika, Greece
There seemed no chance of gaining peace,
Hostile Bulgarians bordered beside,
How many more people would have to die?

Allies failed to gain ground,
Only death and disease could be found,
Hundreds of thousands of casualties,
Cause not by guns but disease.

Finally a 3rd offensive began,
The Allies crossed the Bulgarians land,
The enemy surrendered 30th September,
A date not many have remembered.

© Kira Chew, Ilfracombe, Devon, UK

Plague of Salonika

Everyone is sick,
Like a wave it consumed most of the camp,
Strong young men, English, French, Serbian
Weakened over a night.

It doesn't matter what nationality,
Disease doesn't care,
He will thread himself into your very being,
And slowly tear away any sense of existence.

We thought our men would die in battle,
However, more soldiers, friends have died from this foreign plague
I watch as the life flickers from their eyes,
This is one war we cannot win.

Far away from the comforts of home,
I didn't even want to go to war,
Which makes me think, will I die in battle,
or here in my bed?
Only God knows.

© Tom Clarke, Bideford, Devon, UK

A Voice from Africa

Broken shattered bodies laying side by side,
Eyes wide open from their stare I cannot hide,
Somehow I feel forgotten being so many miles from home
Swamped by swarms of insects giving pain I've never known,
We are dying here in Africa, more dying every day,
Enemy fire does not take our lives away,
So much disease surround me, with nowhere to hide,
I've written no letters as I know I would have lied,
Our rations a meagre sight there is very little to eat,
The sun is so strong here, on my head it does constantly beats,
The hunger eats away at me but there is little I can do,
The one thing that calms me my love ; is you,
I know you are waiting but I fear I won't make it home,
So please my love do not live your life alone,
We get weaker by the hour and sicker by the day,
No one talks anymore as there is very little to say,
The native armies fight with us the enemy is not our foe,
This is such a desolate land where desperation seems to grow,
My uniform is barely rags now falling off my skin and bone,
It matters not how many are here I still feel very alone,
I feel I've been deserted most of my comrades have died,
No tears have fallen from me but it is inside that I have cried,
There is no medicine here for us from disease we cannot run,
Death would be a relief if it came from an enemy gun.

© Siobhan Cleary-Pearce, London, UK

Men of Valour

A hundred men,
From Lancashire to Mesopotamia,
As tough as teak,
As brave as lions,
Young, strong and full of vim,
Of calm and temperate nature,
Prepared to lose their lives,
For family and for friends,
They knew their duty,
For queen and country,
They ran towards the Ottoman guns.
Unwavering and ready for the fray,
With spit and polish and love of life,
Into battle, going over the top,
The mortal foe waiting behind the ditch,
A hundred men,
All honest and true,
Into battle tomorrow going over the top,
Only fifty men,
As tough as teak,
And as brave as lions,
Of spit and polish,
Those men of valour,
They saved us all.

© Mike Conlan, Bushey, Hertfordshire, UK

Soldier of the Sun

A hundred years ago, I'm fighting still,
Where guns and feet pound in the tropic sun,
On land ruled not by those who bleed its soil,
I march; the forgotten soldier of World War One.

A hundred miles through mountains moves a ship,
And bridges built, one-fifty, along the way,
To face a German Tanganyika Lake,
To face the faces that are ours; the same.

A hundred gun-shots call ten-thousand bees,
To sword the skin of those that broke their hives,
The bees would never fight for those that swarm,
To battle where they lead their honest lives.

Now fifty men are flagging as we march -
Victims of our mortal enemy,
Their hollowed, thirsting, sickly eyes do plead,
With fever, malnutrition, dysentery.

One time I held a sick man as he died,
His lips were dry, discoloured, but they moved,
And mouthed prophetic words to men unseen;
"It almost seems that nature disapproves."

And in this land my body will remain,
My blood will feed the lonely trees that grow,
My bones are desert dust of restless spirit:
I'm fighting still, one hundred years ago.

© Philippa Crundwell, Horsham, Sussex, UK

Oh Dear, No Reverse Gear (no going back now)

Between you and me
Speaking politically
There should always be
A plan B

We could have delayed or avoided
those blood curdling horrific war years
If Graf and Stift had considered fitting
their automobiles with reverse gears

Earlier in the day by the grace of god
Or merely through chance or fluke
A small bomb simply bounced off
the car transporting the Archduke

Franz Ferdinand announced unabashed
With dignity and aplomb
I came here as your guest
but you people greet me with a bomb.

Sophie went to speak in private
with the unveiled Muslim ladies
Assuring them that she too strived
for a better future for all their babies

The decision taken, the programme must continue
Potiorek advised against and an immediate exit
Thinking of that mornings innocent casualties
The couple detoured for a hospital visit

The driver was unsure of the route
The governor realised his mistake
When he turned down Franz Joseph Street
'Turn back' this is not the road we should take

It is not possible I fear
this car has no reverse gear
As they got out to push
They were met by an ambush

Gavrilo Princip a Serbian revolutionary
Could not believe his luck
He lowered his .38 revolver
From five feet away, he struck

Only two shots were fired
The Archduke and Sophie were dead
Only two shots were fired
but millions more eventually bled

Promises made should be kept

Have you ever heard of the Arab Revolt?
During World War 1 it brought the Ottoman charge to a swift halt.
Turkish trains blown-up, Aqaba was captured
Legendary camel charges, raw emotions were stirred.

It was Sharif Hussein who pledged his military might
To ensure their independence, the Arabs would all fight.
The Brits and Arabs had finally become Allies
Hussein's son, Faisal led the tribes, brought about the Turk's demise.

Promises made should always be kept
But the lies and deception left the Arabs bereft.
Damascus Protocol was the name of the agreement
Hope and religious fervour fuelled the cataclysmic event.

They fought bravely through a thousand miles of hostile territory
Reaching Aleppo and Damascus, they had changed history.
While battles were fought, the Brits and French began to plot
The Sykes-Picot plan was agreed upon by this treacherous lot.

The Turks were now tied down in their garrisons, their new prisons
While trains were derailed and soldiers killed, there went the rations.
The Russian revolutionaries leaked these secret plans
Capturing Damascus to obtain independence felt like his last chance.

Captain T.E. Lawrence knew of this deception, he wished he could die
Having fought with honour, for what was now essentially a lie.
Damascus was won, but promises were still reneged
Humiliated, treated as a nuisance, Faisal could've all but have begged.

General Allenby reaped the glory, while Lawrence took the blame
Great betrayal became manifest, was made clear when the French came.
Faisal's army fought the French and were annihilated
Iraq was to be his consolation; Arab hearts were now filled with hatred.

Maps were redrawn, new states were formed overnight
Civil war, unrest, betrayal, no way to make things right.
The Brits wanted a Jewish "homeland" to be based in Palestine
750,000 Arabs later evacuated, but they were told all would be fine.

The conflict that followed persists to this very day
Tens of thousands left dead but politicians still lead us all astray.
The blood-stained sand, unmarked graves and mother who wept
Was not the fault of the Arab Revolt, but of promises not kept.

The Subaltern's Speech

Once The Mars was readied
to sail away from Africa,
without the harbour lights of Alexandria,
across the seas of Greece – north – to Salonika,
the subaltern addressed his men from the deck,
November sunshine sharpening their forty faces.

He was proud, he said, of the men
since that first day they'd sailed from Southampton.
On the Somme, everything they were asked – they had done.
The Regiment was proud of them.
The men could be proud of themselves.
Now – to important work on the Serbian front.

He seemed to lose his train of thought ...
gazing out across the sea,
his eyes at the horizon.
He urged the men, this one time in their lives, to grasp
this chance to sail across the golden seas of Greece,
the seas Odysseus sailed for Helen and for Troy.

They'd heard of the Minotaur?
They must listen for his roar as they sail past Crete.
Later, they must look to spot the tiny isle of Delos,
the tributary where Athens held the spoils of war.
Those glory days of Athens; the cradle of Democracy;
Plato ... The Republic ...
blank looks from all.

Perhaps off Sounion they might glimpse the Acropolis?
With luck they'll sail near Salamis, past Thermopylae
where Athens held out against the Mede,
until betrayed by Ephialtes ...

Bill saw
how all this mattered to the subaltern.
An educated man. A man to be admired.

© Richard Devereux, Bristol, UK

A note from the author:

My grandfather was a country boy with minimal education who spent three years in Salonika. The poem tells [some of] the story of his journey there. It would have been his first encounter with his well-educated contemporaries, junior officers, known as Subalterns.

Deserters and Heroes

Shivering, sweat dripping,
the rhythmic thud, thud, thudding,
pounding headiness, relentless.

Under a foreign sky, a brazen sun burns,
A savage, arid land moving,
Snaking through the sand I stumble.

Sinister isolation.

Deep, grainy it slips away,
Rifles and ammunition become burdensome,
A red sun lightens the load.

Stop.

Falling forwards toward another,
Gurkha, Pathan or Sikh cannot tell,
A colored turban Drabis.

Throbbing, creaking limbs move,
One, two, one, two, one,
More steps toward Ottoman lines.

A prayer.

Suez in sight, blinding light,
Fades to hopelessness, deflating,
Persistence quenches what's empty and hollow.

Warfare.

© Lucinda Fountain, Guildford, Surrey, UK

Fife Knoll

I've heard your tales of old,
In the ash-covered town of Fife Knoll.

Your soft cotton turban spun in a country of warm colours anew,
Sets you apart from the British who rely on a million of *you*.
Sitting in the front row wearing the Indian Order of Merit – an honour!
Strong broad shoulders, immense physique and undoubtedly prouder...
'Aah' - I see how you look like my son - such a resemblance, Great Grandad.
Legends once *whispered*, so stories have cast images of a great **Shahzad**¹!

One of the brave - you displayed a determined resolve it seems,
As the Company Commander was wounded; you spurred to his needs,

Through **bursting** bombs and heavy machine gunfire ●●●

You did not falter but charged forth against hellfire!

Yet behind, the young sepoy's certainly floundered,
None left to charge the flank as artillery pounded;
Fear overwhelmed, creating an entombed abyss.

On a treacherous September Night - the 18th it is.

Unbeknown that your great, great grandson would be born on the same night,
Eighty-two years later in 2000 indeed. Did you ever think that war was right?

Dark sounds drawn from the genesis of metal beasts,

If only I could plough the Kashmiri lands again at least,

Ideals of basking in glory lay strewn with twisted limbs,

Burials a must as Indians pile irreligiously to the brim,

A prison of **psYChological** scars...with empty promises and good wages.

You never did share your brave tales of old despite advancing age.

The world is etched with names in parks and seared in lasting memorials...*lest we forget!*

Suffocating voices **doomed** with the grip of fear tightening many words with beset

Indian mothers sobbing behind lost *veils* - forced enlisting of boys as young as **ten**.

Quivering in marching parades with dashed hopes of return fading and then,

A bacha² with *curled* chappals³ replaced with **blood** stained boots under a stiff uniform,

¹ 'Shahzad' - prince

² 'bacha' - child

³ 'chappals' – soft Indian sandals.

Sobbing to a Forgiving Lord, *Do not let me ROT in the trenches like an abortive-unborn,*
Prayers soon rendered on trays of light...You rescued lives and many a lineage.
I honour you with a timeless echo encrusted with the Kohinoor jewel of heritage,
Subadar Muhammad Alam of the 153rd Rifles,
As a silent hero who imbued coolness amongst the stifled.

I have understood your tales of old,
In the unknown town of Fife Knoll.

© Ameena Zameer Hanif, Birmingham, UK

A note from the author:

My great grandfather served as a Subadar in the 153rd Rifles (later formed part of the 53rd Welsh Division). He was awarded the Indian Order of Merit by the government of India in relation to his bravery in the Battle of Nablus. He was part of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force.

Auckland, my Ithaca

Auckland, my Ithaca,
In my dreams I cry out for you:
But your peaceful, green land wavers now like a mirage,
The cruel khamasins sweep you away.
My memories are lost here in the threat of the sand
As I push on against the Ottoman Turk,
An exotic enemy in this relentless land,
So far away from all I loved before.

Auckland, my Ithaca,
Am I not destined to journey back to you?
Will I die here where there is nothing to sustain me,
My days an un-ending quest for water
In this place of searing days and freezing nights?
Will my bones break and crumble to dust here,
To be blown away by the desert wind?
Nothing left behind of the boy from Aotearoa.

Auckland, my Ithaca,
In the eerie silence that falls in the Sinai night,
I hear the voice of your blue sea,
I see again the kereru as it eats berries in my mother's tree,
And, in the morning of each new day
I search the horizon for your long white cloud.
But all that lies in front of me is unforgiving sand
That cares nothing for me.

© Rachel Hawkins-Crockford, Bristol, UK

A note from the author:

Although I live in the UK now, I am a New Zealander by birth. I grew up with the stories of the Gallipoli campaign and the almost 3,000 New Zealand troops that died there. This poem gave me the opportunity to explore a less well-known NZ story, that of the mounted rifles brigade who participated in the Sinai-Palestine Campaign. I tried to imagine what it would be like for those who came, for example, from the lush, green farms of the North Island in NZ to find themselves in the Sinai Peninsula: a quite unfamiliar environment of searing day-time heat, freezing temperatures at night and the dry sand-storms of the desert. I wondered what it would be like to be such a man or boy, to face those physical challenges and fear you might die in such an alien environment so far away from everything you loved.

The Syrian

he blinked awake
wondered where he was
smelt the blood
saw a leg
was it his
remembered the explosion
heard the voices
were they Turks
the enemy the bondage slavers
had Feisal lost
this final battle of Damascus
october 1918
the voices neared
a stretcher a cockney voice
grinning his thumbs up
'we'll have you out of here mate
In a jiffy'
the British Empire helping Feisal
recalled it now
that legendary leader
Lawrence
beloved of all the Arabs
so grateful
didn't know about the oil
the calculating splitting up of
the dream of Lawrence
a united Arabia

appalled refused a knighthood
and in 2018
the Syrian's great great grandson
blinked awake

© Patty Lafferty, Much Wenlock, Shropshire, UK

A note from the author:

The Battle of Damascus 1918 and the ironic twist of fate that Syria is yet again embroiled in brutal warfare. When I was researching this I found that T E Lawrence was so right. Arabia should have been united instead of being split up by cynical self interest for which we are paying now.

St. Magnus Cathedral, 31 May 2016

Together, they commemorate
the Battle of Jutland, and the loss
of eight thousand, six hundred
and forty-six men from British
and German navy fleets
in nineteen-sixteen. Today, flags
touch on the altar of St Magnus Cathedral
and the tone of their colours change,
as men and women from both countries
stand together, singing hymns
and reading from the Bible
in English and German. Together,
they translate remembrances of men
who died, and as one say: Amen.

© Olive Ritch, Aberdeen, Scotland, UK

Forgotten

Even as an old man he would go
wandering amongst
the spiky light in olive groves
every Autumn
with a fading photograph in his pocket;
the only sound now goats' bells and a
peaceful snatching at rough grass.

They got to recognize him
in the market cafes
where he chewed all meals
as though they were dry bread
and his eye caught you
and let go.

Once, a man with a keffiyeh,
who determinedly knew about grief,
took him to a graveyard
of a more recent war.
He, too, had lost a son
and let him think it was
to honest, sparking metal rather than the
slow, self-inflicted seep of
injected forgetting.

But when the old man said:
'You don't understand,
you don't understand at all,'
he feared his might be a lesser sorrow
and quickly pointed out how
the Catholic graves had a candle
and sometimes a photograph
and the buses were always
at eight minutes past the hour.
His wife would be waiting.

© Peter Slater, London, UK

A note from the author:

'Forgotten' is based on an encounter I had in 1977 with an old Englishman in a café in Haifa. I was a gauche youth working on a kibbutz and he was sitting at a nearby table showing this faded photograph of a young soldier in uniform to a small group of people who'd gathered round. In retrospect, of course, I should have introduced myself and got talking and discovered his story. But I didn't. I was in a hurry – for a reason I've now forgotten. The conversation, the real contact, never happened: which seems to add another metaphorical layer to the story. I'd always assumed the boy in the photograph to be his son, lost perhaps at The Battle of Megiddo, and it wasn't until much later that, doing some calculations, I started to realize that this had to be unlikely. The boy had to have been a close comrade-in-arms – perhaps even a lover. 'Away from the Western Front,' then – representing a forgetting and a lack of understanding on so many levels.

The Beechey Boys

I had a large brood, a baker's dozen,
raised all but one, to healthy adulthood
watched them fledge; my job well done.

Barnard, my darling, first born son,
I held so tight to drink him in.
Now I clutch his final letter home,
the wheat ripens in the field.
There is nothing left of him
and I must carry on.

Then Frank, my sweetest boy,
my laughing, smiling, shining son
who climbed the oak tree to the top.
Both legs torn off on the Somme,
lay in No Man's Land from dawn till dusk.
Now the sheep shelter from the rain
and I must carry on.

I hoped Harry would make it through,
the farming life was always in his blood,
survived Gallipoli and the Somme,
patched up, they shipped him back to France.
Bitter he was, denied his final leave.
I'm thankful he did not suffer long
and I must carry on.

Charlie, a teacher and a gentle man
did not rush to fight at first
but joined his brothers in the end.
Mown down by machine gun fire,
buried in a land I'll never see
and I must carry on.

Then little Len, my loving, dreamy boy,
who like to walk on Hampstead Heath
Gassed and wounded at Bourton Wood.
From the field hospital he wrote to me,
'My darling mother, don't feel like doing much yet'
Three pretty chicks all in a single year
and I must carry on.

The Queen thanked me for my sacrifice.
'It was no sacrifice.' I said,
'I did not give them willingly.'
and I must carry on.

Starlings in Serbia

Snowy mountain passes
Vibrant blue white sky
Sun glistening on rutted road
Driving as shrapnel flies
Like a Murmuration through the air.
The horror of blood and bone.
Of gas and not so much
Air.
No ecstasy here
But the ecstasy of death surrounds.
Smiles and songs, laughter and tears
To keep each other
Awake.
Alive
To the sounds of
War.
As girls just out of school
Drive heavy wagons
From Front to back, from war to peace.
From harm to haven, such sweet
Heaven.
Girls save men, women boys
Their roles reversed
Bravery never questioned
As they do their bit
For country, King and Flag.
Chilblained fingers turning
On unforgiving wheel.
Bouncing and sliding as tyres
Meet ice and bone.
Eyes red raw, from wind and rain.
Brain seared numb by sights seen
And thoughts unseen.
As nightmares fill the daylight hours
With War.
To what will they return?
A land made fit for Heroes?
What of the Heroines?

© Jon Wilkins, Leicestershire, UK

A note from the author:

I feel that the VADs and Nurses who served in Serbia are so often overlooked. Volunteers, they made their way to the Balkans and served with honour. This is for the ambulance Drivers who drove fearlessly from Front Line to clearing Stations and Hospitals.

Short stories

Far from the Western Front

Lily sits in the parlour at the round wooden table. She has changed out of the overalls, her uniform for Munitions Factory. She has put her engagement ring on her finger and it catches the autumn light. The Copperworks siren will sound in half an hour and she should help Ma before then to make supper for the five of them left at home. She considers the sheet of white paper and gathers her thoughts. Her sweetheart is in the desert in Egypt. She can only begin to imagine the heat, the sun, the flies.

Lily will not tell Herbert about the telegrams bearing news from the Western Front. She cannot mention the bad news that arrives daily, and decimates lives as thoroughly as if a bomb or shell had landed on a family. She would like to say, "Cissie Griffiths has had a cut to her hand and now she is lying in a hospital bed with a fever. She has turned yellow, puffed up like a mustard bubble, poisoned by sulphur. The forewoman is checking our hands daily. We must not cut corners. We will stop if we are injured by the lathe, or if the fumes make us light headed." But despite this, Lily thinks, it is still preferable to make shells for a real wage, rather than sitting in the Tailor's workshop sewing buttonholes for crumbs.

She begins her letter, "My Dearest Herbert." She can say 'dearest' now they are engaged.

"I am very pleased with my diamond cluster. It is brighter than it first looked in the catalogue, and your mother gave me a bunch of late roses when I went to collect it from your house. It fits well, and was much admired at church on Sunday. I am looking forward to having you back home, and getting another gold band to match." Is that too forward? "Here on the home front my work goes well. I am pleased to be helping with the war effort. We are meeting all our targets. The Factory manager even says that us girls are much more diligent than his usual chaps!"

Then, Lily thinks, if we are to be married, we have to share the bad news. "Some difficult news, Herbert. Uncle George had a telegram that Alec is missing in action. He is pounding the street outside the Post Office, but Ma says, "No news is good news", and we have to live by that. Sometimes it is as if the town is waiting; poised, dull and hopeful at the same time. Even when the weather is beautiful and the apple trees heavy with fruit, there is a sadness that our dearest ones are not sharing these moments with us."

Lily hears the scraping of the coal scuttle, and rushes quickly to finish. "Write when you are able and be sure that you are always in the mind of, your very own Lily." Then she adds a few kisses.

"Lil!" Her mother calls. And Lily leaves the quiet room for the bustle of the scullery.

The light filters through the cotton of the tent. Even though the fabric is thick and heavy duty it makes no difference to the power and heat of the sun. Even after sundown down the sand continues to radiate heat, like a mould in the copper works.

Herbert sits, the small letter from his sweetheart open on the desk. Lily's writing is large, it has looping tails and it fills the lines evenly. 'A Generous Nature', the Padre had pronounced, when Herbert had sought an opinion about a marriage proposal by letter. The Reverend had questioned him about Lily at home, and Herbert had shown him her letter where she described her work at the Munitions.

"You can give her hope, Herbert." The Padre had said. "That is all we have, when it comes down to it. Faith and Hope."

"Pandora's box." Herbert had said. And in his head, he began to plan a future- maybe a new house, with a sturdy oak front door. And a position away from the Copperworks; his accounting skills were second to none, now, in the Quartermaster's stores. And children. Plenty of them.

Herbert writes quickly. He dips his fine-nibbed map pen that has accompanied him throughout his journey. Judea, Sinai, Biblical names he had only ever heard of at Sunday School. The pen has travelled with him- steam train, fishing boat and spitting camel. He keeps it in a wooden case with a small bottle of ink. He pauses. He will not tell Lily about the local children who broke into the stores, looking for chocolate. Or were they men, knives between their teeth, working for the Turks? He cannot mention the dysentery that has ravaged their company, leaving dozens of the men as weak as kittens, shells of their former selves. And others who have been hastily buried in the unforgiving glare of the sun. Sand blowing over their name plaques, the desert swallowing the Empire's soldiers as it did those of Napoleon and Alexander before.

He would like to say, "I loathe it here. Every day is purgatory. The Arabs say that Allah, having created hell wanted to make something worse so formed Mesopotamia. Then he created flies. We battle more with nature than we do our foes. And the command chain is weak, with vain fools at the top, and debilitated men at the bottom. I dream of clear clean water, and cool nights where no groaning wind passes over the sand. Sometimes I cannot remember your face."

Instead he writes on, "I am so proud of you, Lily, doing your bit! I pray that God will keep you safe- keep faith. Live in hope. The night here is magical with inky navy skies and stars so bright you can name the constellations. They sparkle, as I hope your ring does. I send you all my love, your very own, Herbert."

© Miriam Coley, Winchester, UK

The Princess Beatrice

'How can man fly?' Jemadar said to the clouds, but quietly, so the officer didn't hear him. It might not have mattered. The officer was watching the three aeroplanes with amazement too. Jemadar, three other men, and the officer were on a roof, out of range of the guns. The officer had a table and chair where he drank. The men had the roof.

The aeroplanes were flying towards them, in and out of the clouds. It hadn't rained for four days. The dry season was starting. Footrot would reduce, but summer brought its own problems. Four months when it would be over forty degrees. Jemadar was used to it, the Punjab was hotter than here. The officers were not. It was barely thirty degrees and they were already complaining.

The Ottoman guns started firing. The aeroplanes moved higher all at the same time as if they were tied together. They kept getting closer to the town even as they climbed. One of the aeroplanes started to trail smoke. It had been hit. It started to sink, still heading towards them.

The other two kept going, and things started to fall from them, like birds shitting in flight. This must be the supplies. The aeroplanes looked so small. How could what they carried make a difference to the thousands of men in the town?

The first things they dropped landed in the Ottoman trenches.

Others landed inside the walls. Then others landed in the Tigris.

Jemadar was watching the falling aeroplane. It was heading straight for him, a tail of black smoke behind it that remained in the sky, a memory of its passing.

The aeroplane hit the flat roof of one of the houses just inside the walls. It bounced, twisted, broke apart, and crashed to the ground.

The officer had gone, run off somewhere. Jemadar grabbed his rifle and ran for the stairs. When Jemadar got to the wreck there were others around it, but they were staying back, afraid.

Jemadar was not afraid. He had seen so much death, so much pointless death, he was already dead in his heart.

He ran to the wreck, the ruin of this thing that had been in the sky.

It was small, and light, which it must be to stay in the air. Its nose had broken off and was over there, the casing shattered, the name of the aeroplane, 'The Princess Beatrice', still legible. Within the nose was an engine. Jemadar knew engines. That one came from a tractor.

The wings were broken off, the cabin crushed, the tail somewhere else. Two seats, a pilot and a man to man the guns. But because the aeroplane was carrying supplies they'd taken

out the guns. The man in the gun seat was dead, shot through the head by the Ottoman gunners who had hit the engine. The man in the pilot seat was not.

'Sir, we will get you out,' Jemadar said, looking at the twisted metal and trying to work out how. The man was crushed within the broken cockpit.

'I doubt that,' the man said, his voice simply pain, his eyes tight shut.

'Are you from England, sir?' Jemadar said. The man's accent was strange.

'Adelaide, mate. Other direction,' the man said.

'I have not heard of that, sir,' Jemadar said, with no idea what to do. He was next to the man now, close enough to touch him. One of the man's hands was trapped under him. The other was not. Jemadar took it on instinct, as he had with dying men before.

'Australia, mate. Greatest country on earth. How about you?'

'I am from the Punjab, sir, in India. Greatest country on earth,' Jemadar said.

The man opened his eyes and squeezed Jemadar's hand.

'What's your name?' the man said. 'Sir,' he added.

'Jemadar, sir.'

'Name's Frank. And you don't have to call me 'sir'. I just fly planes.'

'Yes, sir,' said Jemadar. Frank laughed, and it hurt him.

'Frank, my name's Frank. My wife's Alice. I brought food, didn't drop it. You look like you need it.'

Frank grimaced again, his eyes closing. The grimace eased out of his face and his grip on Jemadar's hand lessened.

Jemadar looked down. A piece of metal was sticking into Frank's thigh. Right by the artery. Dark red blood was everywhere.

'I got no words, Jem,' Frank said, his eyes still closed. 'It's a long way to have come to die.' Frank tried to swallow.

'Good to have met you, mate,' Frank said.

Frank said nothing else.

Jemadar looked around. The others were still at a distance, scared of the wreck.

Then an officer was there.

'What are you doing? Get everything out of that contraption. Get them down to the burial site,' the officer barked.

Jemadar let go of Frank's hand.

'Good to have met you, sir,' he whispered.

Other men came, pulled the gunner's body out and emptied the supplies from the gunner's seat. Bread, and a sack of socks. But Frank's body was trapped in the crushed pilot's cockpit, so ten men picked up that part of the aeroplane and carried it to the walls, throwing it into the Tigris.

Jemadar risked punishment to follow and watch Frank sink into the river.

The next day the rains came again. Half-heartedly, like they knew summer was coming. Jemadar stood with his rifle on the roof and watched the same things he had watched for the last five months.

Another airdrop, as they were now calling it, was due. But the rain probably delayed it because it did not come. Not that day.

Tomorrow was the same.

On the third day the aeroplanes came again. Three of them, but the third was different to the other two. They came from another direction, to confuse the enemy gunners. None of them were shot down, but only half of their drops landed inside the town.

Jemadar wondered if Alice would ever know.

© Antony Dunford, Stevenage, Hertfordshire, UK

A note from the author:

It is set in the city of Kut in Mesopotamia, inspired by the first recorded airdrop of supplies which took place there in April 1916

The Slow Thaw of the Frozen War

Giuseppe shivered: the cold was the worst, combined with the effects of the thin mountain air. He shifted, trying to find a less uncomfortable spot and musing on the injustice of his situation. What did he, a poor boy from southern Italy, know of the quarrels between his country and the Austro-Hungarian Empire? Why did he have to sit on a rock in the high Dolomites, dragged away from the slums of Naples? Life in Naples was lived in poverty, but he longed for the southern sun with the heat bouncing off the cobbles and absorbed by the terracotta roof tiles: compared with that, these mountain ridges were like hell. It was not Father Tommaso's fiery hell, where souls burned in endless torment, although Giuseppe would have welcomed a few hours of that, while crossing himself at this blasphemous idea. Rather, it was a freezing, nipping hell with vicious devils sticking sharp icicles in a man's buttocks, surrounding him with blizzards which made the world invisible. The breath rasped into his sore lungs, and he could not stop trembling in the thin, inadequate uniform.

But even this was better than the autumn: cold rain lashing down, so that his uniform was sodden all the time, the wind knifing at him while he slipped and slid through the rivulets of mud pouring down the mountain. And it was better than the awful journey up here through tunnels driven into the rock, up ladders fixed to sheer faces, along slippery narrow paths where one misstep would send a man down hundreds of metres to his death. He certainly didn't miss the days spent hacking trenches out of the mountain rock while all the time, Austrian snipers and machine-gunners had waited for the unwary – and the wary.

He sidled to the right, towards the cave where the engineers had blasted tunnels deep into the rock. Their intention was to place explosives under enemy positions and to blow the Austrians into the next world. Giuseppe's intention was less strategic: simply to gain some relief from the icy wind and snow in this world. But the officer who, like all officers, had eyes in the back of his head saw him.

'Hey you, you useless fucking southern layabout, you're a look-out! You won't see much from a sodding cave, will you? Get back on the slope where you can see across the valley. If you fall asleep I'll wake you with a boot up your lazy peasant arse. Or shoot you.'

Giuseppe was close to pointing out that he couldn't see much anyway, with snow whipping around him and his eyelashes freezing together, but his friend Luigi had been shot the other day for insolently questioning an officer's order. So he shuffled forward and slumped down beside a lump of rock, hoping to gain some shelter from the all-embracing chill. What wouldn't he give for a nip of grappa, sitting in the sunshine outside Michele's bar on the piazza at the end of the street, preferably with Maria sitting next him. For a moment he even imagined he could smell her perfume. But no, the only aroma he could detect was the odour of his own body: he had no idea when he had last washed.

A rending scream filled the air, and a shell burst a hundred metres away. Silly bastards, those Austrians. They couldn't possibly see anything to fire at. Below Giuseppe, the Italian artillery fired back. A complete waste of ammunition, he thought, but kept his opinion to himself: the officer was still very close to him.

Another shell landed at the top of the snowfield above him and there was a faint shriek, soon whipped away by the wind. That one had obviously found a target. Giuseppe hoped that the poor sod was not too badly hurt, but bad enough to be sent to a hospital somewhere down below, where it was comparatively warm and a man could breathe. A rumble started, like his father's cart but amplified a hundred times. The mountain and the very air were shuddering. What the hell was happening? Perhaps that was it – they had woken hell itself which was coming to join the party.

The thunderous roar grew rapidly and he realised that an avalanche was racing down the mountainside. Giuseppe found himself locked in a tight embrace with the officer, tumbling down the slope, struggling for breath as the snow packed into his mouth and nose. Their progress was abruptly halted by the next rocky ridge. By then Giuseppe's awareness of the cold, the fear and the discomfort had ceased, but not before he had a brief picture in his mind of baking hot alleyways and flowers trailing off sunlit balconies.

* * * *

Alessandro and Francesca came down the mountain arm in arm; they had basked in the hot sun all afternoon – it was hotter in this summer of 2015 than they could remember. They had gone a long way up the slope to where a ridge of rock offered a modicum of privacy out of sight of the village below. Last year, this area had been covered in ice and even in this time of climate change they were both amazed when their glacier melted so fast. Suddenly, Francesca stopped, her hand to her mouth, and clutched Alessandro's arm.

'Ali, look!'

She pointed at the lowest edge of the glacier, which had spat out two bodies. Their uniforms, although ragged and rotting, were still recognisably those of a soldier and an officer of the Italian army of the First World War.

© Alan Findlay, Guildford, Surrey, UK

A note from the author:

In the Dolomites during World War I, there were many clashes between the forces of Italy, fighting with the western allies, and those of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Over the last twenty years or so, caches of equipment and bodies of combatants from both sides involved in the fighting have emerged from the snow and ice covering the mountains. This project was inspired by the grim beauty of the Dolomites and the conditions in the mountains: ten thousand soldiers from both sides were killed by avalanches in the winter of 1916. The campaign, in which little ground was won or lost, was futile: there were for instance twelve Battles of the Isonzo. The effects of climate change which have led the glaciers to give up their secrets were another inspiration.

Buried Letters

Captain Aleksandar Petrović,
Camp Interpreter,
Serbian Army,
Scottish Women's Hospitals,
Macedonia

Sister Chloris Drabble
Scarborough

12 VIII 1918

My dearest Sasha,

I am lost without you. I desperately hoped your first letter would greet me when I arrived home. I pray it's only been delayed, but I'm terrified you've gone down with malaria – or worse.

Why, why, why did I accept Dr G's order to return home for my annual holiday before she would allow us to marry? I should have stayed at your side, but I know we couldn't wed without her say-so.

Pa is trying to talk me into delaying our wedding till after the war. How can I explain over a teacup the devastation done to poor Serbia? He can't grasp I have spent this last year treading in an ocean of sweat and blood. I'll keep trying to make Pa understand, for it'd be a sorry start to leave with bad feeling between us.

But don't fret. I knew when you took my hand in yours for the Kolo that I am yours and you are mine. Do you recall your first words to me? You said, 'Trust me, Sister.' You soothed me as well as the delirious, wounded soldier' and 'You will need to learn the men's language. Start with, "Ne govorim srpski." – 'I don't speak Serbian.'

You promised me the soldier would give me 'no more trouble' – but you still agitate me. Sometimes when I remember the time we've spent together, I can almost feel you near me. Our stolen kisses I leave till bedtime. Goodness me, I'm blushing again!

I learnt so much in your language classes – not just how to talk to my patients, but how to understand their proud characters. I miss everyone so and I'm in hot haste to get back. I don't fit here anymore, Sasha, worse, I feel useless. I try to be bright and merry, but I'm bitterly lonely. I still have bad dreams, but I keep my head up and eyes to the front. No one can hear my heart pounding or know my throat sometimes tightens and it's difficult to swallow. To think we're driven to death when we're near the front line, yet I haven't been happier than when I've been with you, amidst the chaos. All we can do is trust Him and His plan for us.

Hannah says I look haggard, but I'll be well-rested for our wedding. I've been stitching our sashes. I'll wear the silk proudly over my uniform on our special day. Sewing is not my greatest accomplishment, as you know, yet you still love me.

I'd feel everyone is against us if not for my sisters. Pat says she'll join us when she qualifies. It's she who baked the wedding cake in your parcel. Family tradition dictates a silver sixpence be stirred in for luck, but we agreed Ma's silver crucifix is more fitting.

It hurts that I don't have your photograph, so I've been busy drawing. With a pencil stroking your cheek, I can almost believe I'll look up and see your loving eyes gazing down on me. Pa wanted me to have a portrait taken before I leave, so I'm sending you a copy.

I've written to head office to say my orders to return haven't arrived yet and I've urged the secretary to post them again. I beg, write as soon as you have a moment.

Your little wolf, always,

Chloris

Sister Chloris Drabble
C/o Scottish Women's Hospitals
London Office

28. August 1918.

My dear little wolf,

I trust this reaches you quickly. Your address went missing in the rush to get to my new posting. I'm eager to receive a letter to say when you're joining me, but yet nothing. I'm worried Dr G was right, and you've changed your mind. Yet I know in my heart that you yearn to be back with me.

I hang onto my memories. As I write, I remember the first day I called you 'moj mali vuk': 'my little wolf'. The gramophone was playing 'They Didn't Believe Me'. When the music ended, I heard you shouting and ran to your side. The convalescents were amusing themselves by piling mattresses on a poorly Serbian soldier. He was just a boy and was panicking. Instead of going to his aid, they were bent over with laughter. You were bristling from fury and pointing your finger like a dagger at the ring-leaders. You gave them such gyp, just as you did when persecutors took away Nellie's crutches, I think.

Is 'gyp' the right word? You see I am still collecting new ones. I hope I remember correctly every word and phrase you taught me. I think of you when I use them. No, I think of you every minute, dear little wolf.

Soon we'll start to rebuild my poor homeland. How did our love spring from such horror? The image of our wedding candle lighting your loving face moves me through each day.

I pray that after the war we find someone in my family alive. I know if, God willing, you meet my mother she will take you to her heart immediately. I believe your family will accept us when they know how much happy and purposeful we are together.

Please send me your photograph. It will nestle in the pocket next to my heart until I have you in my arms again.

Father [redacted] at St [redacted], [redacted] fervently hopes you will write very soon with your arrival date.

My life is yours,

Sasha

Scottish Women's Hospitals Collection

22.08.2018

Dear Ms Drabble,

Thank you for your email concerning the all-female medical units, under the umbrella of The Scottish Federation of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies.

Please find enclosed the letters related to the service of Sister Drabble. You will see that two of the letters were written to and from Chloris and her fiancé. It appears neither letter reached the addressee.

Yours sincerely,

Aila Murray

© Helen Parker-Drabble, Swindon, UK

A note from the author:

A work of fiction, in the form of 3 letters, inspired by a young working-class woman, Chloris, who left Huddersfield Infirmary to nurse at the Salonika Front. I spent a week at an archive in Glasgow where I unearthed that Chloris became engaged to a Serbian interpreter in the summer of 1918. This story is the result of that research. (Britain has largely forgotten the all-female medical units the [‘Scottish Women’s Hospitals’](#), but Serbia remembers.)

From Kolkata to Kut

Kolkata, 1917

The letter arrived today that my husband, Deben, is still alive. That he was injured in a battle and is very ill. But he is alive. He is in a ship near a place called Mesopotamia. He is alive and everyone else was wrong.

I had always believed that Deben is alive. No matter what they said—that he had died in a battle; that he has run away from me; that I should break my bangles and smear away the *shindoor* on my forehead, I had clung to the belief that he is alive.

Kolkata, 1914

From the moment I was brought to my in-laws and my *alta*-covered feet stepped over the door, I had realized *BodoBou* was the real head of the house. Short, fair, and plump like *rosogolla*, she has none of its softness or sweetness. She disliked *MejhoBou* for possessing these qualities. And I, I was anathema to her since I came to Kolkata.

Deben is the youngest of three brothers. All three brothers lived in a red-brick two-storey house with their families. I, a poor village priest's daughter had thought the house a palace, and the three brothers as princes. But, I had soon learned there was trouble in the little kingdom.

My family was glad to get a Brahmin family to accept me. But, soon after our wedding, I realized that Deben is different from other men. He was fighting for the *angrez* army and believed in women's education. He started teaching me Sanskrit, English, Arithmetic, and History. As a result, *BodoBou* and the older women of the neighbourhood had even more grounds to taunt me.

"Who does she think she is? This young generation has no respect for the traditions and rituals of our culture. I would not be surprised if she brings shame to our caste."

They found fault with everything I did—cooking or sewing. *MejhoBou* was my refuge. I would put my head in her lap and cry. She always comforted me, "Shona, this is our fate. We must please others. You are doing your duty by following your husband's wishes. Do not mind others' anger.

MejhoBou's kindness always brought tears to my eyes, while I could endure the punishment meted by others with a stony face. Is that not strange? In fact, when she and *BodoBou* were arguing over me, and *MejhoBou* said it was not my fault, I cried for the first time since they told me my baby boy was dead.

Unlike the other women though, Deben had not blamed me. "It was that good-for-nothing midwife who was at fault. It proves the reformists' point that there is a great need for women doctors. In fact, a lot of *Angrez* women are now studying medicine."

As always, his tone became sad when talking about the *Angrez*. He paused and then pronounced, "Barin *Babu* was talking about a women's college outside Kolkata. I think you should avail of this opportunity."

My mind reeled when he had said this. I, study in a college! Do I want to face even more ridicule and get ostracized by the community? I had not answered him and in any case, he was leaving soon for the war again.

Kolkata, 1915

This time, Deben went with 30 other men including *Mejho Jhaa*. Their picture was taken by the doctor in the main Governor's office.

Mesopotamia, 1915

Deben wrote, "After a long journey on a ship, we have reached land. The shops here remind me of home. The shopkeepers are very honest and charge the same amount from everyone! It's very hot, and my clothes from India are too warm."

Mesopotamia, 1916

"The bullets fall like the monsoon rain—they are relentless. The heat and mosquitoes have got to me and I feel very weak. The winter rains bring little respite. The river bank is like the land near our village pond—it sucks everything that steps into it. We are going to win eventually, and I will be home soon. We are determined to fight for our *Angrez* King and bring glory to our land."

Kolkata, 1917

After that letter, I didn't hear from Deben for a long time.

I know now that after that last letter, his regiment was in a battle of Kut where more than ten thousand men went into that battle and very few survived. *MejhoJhaa* died at the battle of Kut. The letter with this news arrived at the same time as Deben's letter. Three women from the barber caste descended upon *MejhoBou*. They tore away her earrings, necklaces, hair jewels. They held her hands down and broke her bangles with a large stone. When we took the body for cremation, *MejhoBou* had to walk two hundred paces behind us because of the belief that a widow's shadow is inauspicious. Upon reaching the *ghat*, she had to lie in the shallow side till the rites were over. On the way back, we stopped for water several times. No one was permitted to offer her even a drop of water. The barber women continued to shove her, half-unconscious as she was, like a heap of dung, forcing her to walk.

Deben is back, though resembling a skeleton. He brought *MejhoJhaa's* medal. *MejhoBou* saw it and cried for the first time since she heard the news.

It's my turn now to comfort her. Deben and I have moved to a smaller house with her. I am studying for college. The war has ended, and our life will begin with peace at home and in the world.

Glossary:

Angrez: English

Shindoor: Vermilion powder put in the hair parting on the forehead to indicate that the Hindu woman is married

Alta: Red dye for decorating hands and feet at weddings and festivals
BodoBou: Elder Wife
Rosogolla: Sweets made of cheese and round in shape
MejhoBou: Middle Wife
Babu: Term of respect used for an elder man
MejhoJhaa: Middle Brother-in-law
Ghat: River bank

© Jonaki Ray, Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, India

A note from the author:

This story is based on the battle at Kut al-Amara, a town on the river Tigris. It occurred between the British and the Ottoman (Turkish) armies. The British army comprised troops from India, with India having sent a million men over the course of the war. After an initial victory, the British were besieged at Kut, and waited for relief that could not arrive. The winter rains made the situation worse, and Kut fell on 29 April 1916. The survivors, around 13000 men, were marched to imprisonment at Aleppo, and very few survived. This battle was called the worst defeat of the Allies at World War I.

The inspiration for this story came from a photograph that I found in a museum near Kolkata. The photo shows Indian soldiers in their uniforms ready to board the ship that will take them to a 'foreign' land where they will fight for a 'foreign' king. My grandfather was in the British army and some of the "letter extracts" were inspired by his stories as well.

'My Darling Girl...'

My name is William Haroldson. I am 83 years old. Soon, I will die.

I say this not out of morbidity or for dramatic effect. I have been in poor health for some time, and my doctors tell me I have two or three months left.

I am quite reconciled, both mentally and practically. When I die, my house will be sold and my estate divided between several charities. I have no close relatives - nor, indeed, any distant ones I am aware of. I have nothing of any close or sentimental value to pass on.

Except for three letters. They are in a drawer in the desk on which I write this. They were all written within a week of each other, in different hands; the ink has faded now, but I count them among my most treasured possessions. The first is to my grandfather, Ernest, from his younger brother John. It is dated 4th September, 1916.

My dear old chap

How are you? I expect you are pretty surprised to be getting a letter from me, it's usually Ma who does the epistolary duties for our little family. Not that she regards it as a duty, of course, I know she misses you dreadfully. And of course Emma, I know, writes almost incessantly to keep you up to date with the news of the light of both your lives, little Stanley. Emma brought him over yesterday for his weekly visit to his dotting grandparents; he is a great joy to us all.

Anyway, old son, to cut to the chase: I have just been to see this marvellous new film 'The Battle of the Somme' that is proving to be an absolute smash hit in picture houses the length of the country. It is grim reality – the huge bombardments, the infantry going 'over the top' and yes, the human cost, the bodies of friend and foe alike lying where they fell (I can imagine it would be very harrowing for some to see).

How are things in wildest Mesopotamia? I always feel slightly galled that you chaps are rather ignored by our newspapers; quite natural, I suppose, when all the action of the moment is happening so close to our own shores, but I know how keen you are to play your part. Do not worry, your day will come!

Keep safe– my off-spinners have deteriorated badly without you to bowl to in the garden of an evening!

Fondly, your brother

And it is signed 'John'.

The second is in a service envelope, and is addressed to my grandmother, Emma. It is dated 6th September 1916, two days after John wrote his letter.

Dear Mrs Haroldson

I know that before receiving this you will have received official notification of the death of your husband, Second Lieutenant Ernest Haroldson. It is with great sadness that I write now to express the sincere condolences of all his fellow officers at his passing.

Ernest was taken ill four days ago, on 2nd September, and cholera was quickly diagnosed. Despite the best efforts of our medical staff, he died yesterday.

It may be that you will feel that, as he had only recently arrived here and saw no actual combat, his sacrifice was to no avail. That would not be true. Since our defeat at Kut earlier this year, the army has been fired with a passionate desire to eradicate that humiliation and to show the enemy just what we can do; we have been very busy reorganising and training and Ernest played a full and important role in that. His commitment, determination and dedication – not to mention his cheerful disposition – won the respect of his men and the admiration of his brother officers. We salute him as one who has made the ultimate sacrifice in the most noble of causes.

His personal effects will be forwarded to you at the earliest opportunity.

Yours most sincerely

*Capt. D N Rodgers
O/C B Coy, 2nd Leicestershire Regiment.*

Ernest's personal possessions arrived at my grandmother's house some weeks later. They included two letters, both in sealed envelopes – the one written by his brother, which had arrived in Mesopotamia after his death, and another written but never sent to his wife, my grandmother Emma. It is dated 2nd September.

My darling girl

A few lines in haste to let you know that I am well and busy here. There are a great many things afoot and I am kept on the go all day.

As you know, we are part of an Indian Division, and some of us went to dinner with some of the Indian troops' officers the other night – they are British, of course, but speak very highly of their men and their dedication to the Empire. I'm sure they'll put up a jolly good show in the months to come.

I must dash. I have been feeling a bit queasy today, a touch of tummy trouble, so I am going to nip off to get something from the doc to settle it down.

I miss you and little Stanley most dreadfully and carry the photograph of you both with me always. Kiss him for me, and Ma.

Ever your loving husband

Ernest

My grandmother never remarried. She and my great-grandmother grieved the rest of their lives.

Every year, I watch on television the ceremony at the Cenotaph on Remembrance Day. I am always moved but to me these letters, passed to me by Stanley, my father, equally well

encapsulate that war- its sheer scale, the men who died in distant deserts, the emotional wounds that never healed.

And it worries me that those sacrifices, despite the best of intentions, will gradually slip from our collective memory.

So the letters will go to the Imperial War Museum. I suspect they have many like them, and they will be filed away with the others. But at least they will still exist, mute witness to sacrifice on so many fronts.

Lest we forget.

© David Simmonds, Penarth, Wales, UK

A note from the author:

The subject of the story is serving in Mesopotamia and he writes of his colleagues in the Indian Division in which he serves, but the stress is on the impact of war on those 'serving by standing and waiting' on what was to become known as the Home Front, and on the legacy of war after the shells stopped falling.

The Cheecha

The Great Serbian Retreat happened during November and December 1915. German and Austro-Hungarian armies had crossed the Danube River in the north of Serbia, and two Bulgarian armies had crossed Serbia's eastern border during October. The virtually unopposed Bulgars had moved rapidly and they had blocked all routes south to Greece. The hard-pressed Serbian army had been overwhelmed and it risked being surrounded. Its only escape routes were to the south-west across the mountains of Kosovo, Montenegro and Albania.

The Serbian King and the remnants of his army formed a long column trudging slowly up the muddy slopes in cold, wet and windy weather. The Serbian government desperately ordered every Serbian boy over the age of twelve to join the retreating column. It knew that their enemies wanted to annihilate the Serbian nation; the boys might preserve it.

The column attracted many thousands of civilian refugees with their horses, pack-mules and ox-drawn wagons. They had already been ravaged by cholera and typhus and they were determined to avoid Austrian oppression. They hoped to reach the Adriatic Sea where their French and British allies would rescue them.

Irregular veteran Private Radomir was fifty-five years old. He was one of the old men, the Cheechas, who had been detailed to wield the artillery and delay the invading armies in any way they could so that the younger troops could escape. His youngest son, Stefan, was old enough to join the retreating column but his wife, Milica, did not want to leave behind her husband.

For several days, the sounds of artillery fire had been getting louder. It began inadvertently: a hardly perceptible rumble. Then it became a dull booming interference. Now it was blatant: percussive, explosive and frightful.

Radomir had already spoken to the other cheechas in his village. They had always been supple but fiercely independent; they solemnly accepted their duty and none of them remonstrated. They would fight mindlessly and savagely to their bloody deaths.

Now, he had to persuade his wife to abandon him. He was sitting at a table with her and his son Stefan. They were drinking black tea laced with honey. Milica had baked Tain bread: a mixture of white and rye flour and spiced with dry plum; she had prepared salty cheese with peppers to go with it.

Milica had made plans for all of them: "The Entente will save us. The French and the British have landed in Salonika. All we have to do is hide and wait, or we could flee southward and meet them."

Radomir ignored her: "The Bulgars have blocked the railway line. You will have to travel by road. You can do that. Pack as much food as you can carry and take some blankets."

She ignored him: "You must come with us. We cannot survive on our own."

Radomir agreed: "I suppose I could go as far as the column. This town will soon be evacuated anyway. There are better places to make a stand."

Milica encouraged him: "When we get there, you can report to the officers. They will probably want you to guard the column."

Radomir explained: "You know what you have to do. Join the other women and take care of Stefan."

Milica pleaded with him: "You do not need to stay here."

Radomir tried to joke about it: "Do not worry. I have spoken to the other men in the village. We have a few surprises for our unwanted guests. I shall catch you up later."

Radomir looked out through the window. The Austrians would soon be looting and burning the houses. They would be chopping down the fruit and seizing the livestock and poisoning the wells. Unimaginable atrocities would be perpetrated on any Serbs who remained there.

Milica was still persisting: "Winter is coming. Stefan will not survive the trek through the mountains. Winter is coming. He is not strong enough."

Radomir knew that she was right. Stefan was weak. He would have more chance of survival with his father's protection.

Artillery shells were now landing a mile away at the far end of the town. Radomir looked out of the window again. Several cheechas were hurrying along the street toward the front line. They had no uniforms but they were armed with old Berdan bolt-action rifles and quadrangular socket bayonets. Civilians and wounded soldiers were shuffling in the opposite direction.

Radomir had fought in previous Balkan campaigns. He knew how terrible war could be. The Austrians had already sacked and demolished other villages that had resisted their advance. He did not want his family to witness that.

He instructed Milica: "Hurry. Gather your things and go. Try to reach the column. Don't stop. I shall find you later." Milica picked up her bags and walked to the door. Radomir called to her. She turned around. He gave her a photograph of him. He smiled: "Here. Do not forget me." She smiled too. They looked intently into each other's eyes for a few seconds and then she and Stefan were gone.

Radmomir tried to understand what was happening. He looked around the room at his meagre possessions. That room contained his life. His world had been reduced to that and soon it would vanish completely. A tear ran down his cheek. Death was lonely. He could end his life with a bullet in his back or with a bullet in his front. That was his only remaining choice. He tried to think about wholesome things: "Milica and Stefan must make it to the column. For their sake, I could hold the enemy for a few days or even for just a few hours." That meant something. For a moment, the memories distracted his mind: "What do I care for myself, what do I count for?" He picked up his rifle and stepped outside. He turned toward the cause of the roaring noises and he hurried forward.

THE END

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Harry's War

Grace sat, reading, on the bare floor of the tiny cottage. 'When's Mum coming back?' she asked. Harry was nice enough, but she never felt really at home if he had to babysit her. She was eight, going on eighteen, and felt she could be trusted to stay home by herself. The tiny hamlet they lived in wasn't exactly the crime capital of Norfolk.

'She'll be home soon enough, Littl'un. Don't you worry 'bout that.'

Ugh. Littl'un. Didn't he know she was soon going to be a big sister?

She looked around the room. Harry had lived here all his life, but had so little in the way of creature comforts. Though a small fire glowed in the grate, there were still ice crystals forming on the inside of the windows. On the mantel Grace looked at two shining golden cylinders. As she watched, Harry reached up, took a rolled newspaper spill from one of them and used it to light his clay pipe. 'I like your vases, Harry. They're really shiny.'

'Oh them's not vases, Littl'un. I brung them back from the war.'

'What, the one that's just finished? Or the one that killed my granddads?' Both of Grace's grandfathers had died in the Great War. Their medals hung proudly on the wall at home.

'Oh the Great War. I got those in Egypt afore I come home. They're made from German shell cases. Funny to think an ornament can be made from something that was used to kill people.'

Grace scratched her head. She was good at geography and she loved looking at the globe in her classroom at school. Egypt wasn't anywhere near France, or Belgium, or Germany. What was Harry doing there? 'I don't understand,' she said, 'How did you end up in Egypt? Wasn't all the fighting in Europe?'

'Lots of people think that, Littl'un, but the war was fought in other places. It might not have been muddy, but it was just as terrible. I was in Gallipoli in 1915. We were trying to defeat the Turks and keep the Dardanelles for the allies. It started as a naval battle, but when a lot of the ships were destroyed they decided the only way was to invade, capture the area and let the ships pass safely.'

'Did you win?' asked Grace, beginning to realise that Harry hadn't always been the grumpy old man she was seeing now.

'Not really. It was a blimun' disaster. But I survived! The worst bit was there was no room to dig proper latrines,'

'Latrines?'

'Toilets, Littl'un. So it wa'n't very nice.'

'Eeeuww!'

'But anyway, after a while, we was moved to Egypt to protect the Suez Canal. The local folk had started collecting the shell cases and decorating them with them hieroglyphs. It was a good way of making some money, selling 'em to us. Mind you, they weren't easy to pack in my kitbag...blimun' heavy they are!'

'Oh I think they're beautiful! I wouldn't fill them with newspaper spills - I'd fill them with dried flowers or greenery!'

'Well, I'll tell you what, Littl'un, when I'm dead and buried, you can hav'em. They'll help you remember a bit about the Great War that not everyone knows about.'

Just then, Grace heard a car door slam and ran out to meet her Mum.

'Mum, guess what! Harry says I can have his shell cases when he's dead and he told me all about the war and Egypt and don't you think it's nice that things that kill people can look so pretty?'

Harry watched Grace excitedly talking to his dear friend Vera, who helped him in so many ways. As their voices faded, he leaned back in his chair and thought about other friends. Friends that he'd lost in the Great War. He remembered that long journey aboard the *Derflinger*, and how excited they'd felt about embarking on their new adventure. He lived again that tortuous trip on open boats, dodging enemy bullets as they made their way ashore. He remembered the discovery of the barbed wire stretched across the top of the dunes, preventing them reaching shelter, and how their hearts had sunk. He grimaced at the memory of his pals, Bill and George, their lives destroyed by enemy fire before they'd reached both safety and their twentieth year. He thought about how hard they'd desperately tried to gain ground on the Ottoman troops, only to be driven back again... one step forward, two steps back.

How had the warlords let it go on for so long? For months they'd endured the heat, the flies, the stench and constant fear of death. When he closed his eyes he still saw the piles of rotting bodies, left unburied in No Man's Land. Had he imagined the vultures, feasting on their human carrion? He could feel the tightening of his gut as he tried to battle against the ravages of the dysentery that had depleted their ranks as effectively as the enemy had. He could hear the buzz of a million flies, and feel them in his eyes, ears and nose. Thousands upon thousands of men had ended their lives out there, in the heat and dust. He may have been one of the lucky ones, but that didn't ease the relentless nightmares that continued to haunt him.

He hadn't shared all this with Grace - that would've been too cruel. She was only eight, with time enough to discover 'man's inhumanity to man'. But he hoped that his words would stay with her and that she would remember that the Great War was fought in many places and on lots of different fronts. But more importantly, long after he had gone, maybe she would look at the golden cylinders that she had admired so much and still marvel that things of beauty could emerge from death and destruction.

Harry reached up for another spill to relight his pipe. A silent tear rolled down his cheek.

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A note from the author:

This story was inspired by two decorated shell cases, gifted to my husband on the death of his mother's friend Harry Day. He had brought them back from Egypt on his return from duty at the Suez Canal in the Great War.