

FRONT LINE

The night was dark and still, refusing to reveal any of its secrets for even the briefest of moments to the young private who glared into its grim bleakness from the safety of his trench. The war, the Great War, the War to end all Wars, had been raging for sixteen months now, although raging was hardly the word. Plodding, yes. Trudging, even, but not raging. Trench warfare was the order of the day, trench foot claiming almost as many victims as the relentless plodding advance and retreat over no-man's land. After the initial excitement of halting the German troops' advance across Europe, the last sixteen months had been spent capturing, losing and recapturing German trenches, at the cost of a great many casualties and even more fatalities.

The Private had lost a great many friends over the last year, and he was now the sole survivor of a group of six who had joined up in search of

action and adventure. Two, Johnny and Rex, lost on the first disastrous push. Archie, always the weakest of the lot, killed by the constant mixture of mud and death underfoot. James killed by shrapnel six months ago and, only last week, Tommy killed by the German bullet that had his name on it. Somewhere out there, in the cold, heartless night, was the bullet that had the Private's own name on it.

'A quiet night,' came a voice in his left ear, causing him to swing around with his rifle coming to bear on the impish figure standing beside him.

The small man put his arms over his head in the age old mime of surrender, but his Scots accented voice was oddly commanding as he said: 'You can put the gun down, I'm not dangerous.'

After a brief second, in which the Private eyed the stranger up and down, the rifle barrel was lowered. The strangely powerful figure in front of him had an air of danger, but it was more the air of one to whom dangerous things happen, not one who initiates dangerous deeds. Besides, the only thing that he carried that could be classed as a weapon was the umbrella in his left hand. The man doffed his Panama hat at the Private in his night-time vigil of the horizon.

'Might I ask where you come from, sir?' the Private asked hesitantly.

The stranger's piercing grey eyes never left the darkened horizon, but his index finger slowly raised itself until he was pointing straight up. Into the star-filled sky.

Strangely enough, the Private didn't disbelieve him - something in the way the stranger held himself made that impossible. The first thing to cross the Private's mind was what the food was like 'up there', but he realised that

was just his own hunger asserting itself. Apparently, so did the stranger, as when the Private turned back to him he was holding out a bar of chocolate. The Private fell on it as if he hadn't eaten during the whole campaign, and indeed it was the first chocolate he had tasted in the last two years. It was good chocolate, too. Rich, dark and sweet, it seemed to linger on his tongue and he was upset to see that within a few seconds he had demolished all but the last chunk of the confectionery. He offered this to the stranger who, much to the Private's delight, declined with a shake of the head.



'I wouldn't think you get much call for chocolate . . . up there,' he said conversationally through his last mouthful.

'Not really, no,' the stranger said, and then added, 'but I always carry some, just in case.'

There was a pause which lasted roughly a hundred years in which both pairs of eyes scanned the moonless horizon, trying in vain to search out the silent German troops that lay in the dark somewhere out there, probably doing just the same thing.

‘Why do they do it?’ the stranger asked suddenly and passionately. ‘Why are they willing to swap so many lives for a small amount of territory? And why do the troops aid them?’

‘I don’t know,’ the Private said, then thought. After a pause, he added: ‘Perhaps they think it will make their lives better.’

‘Or their deaths meaningful,’ the stranger added quietly.

The silence of the night invaded the conversation again, until the Private broke it with his hesitant:

‘You have wars there then?’

‘Yes,’ the stranger answered sadly. After another pause his mood brightened and he added, ‘and seas, and forests, and deserts, and sunshine and rain. And love.’ A thought seemed to strike the stranger, but the Private got the impression that the simple question was the stranger’s real reason for being there. ‘I could show you.’

The idea appealed to the Private more than anything else in the entire world. To see those alien seas, to feel the alien rain beating on his face, to have it dried by an alien sun. To dodge that all-too-Earthly bullet with his name on it. His mouth opened, half-ready to accept the stranger’s offer, but then his eyes fell on the grey horizon, lit by an invisible sun as it began its slow and relentless climb to its zenith. He thought of the German encampment, somewhere just over that horizon. He thought of his friends,

now all dead. He thought of his king and his country. He thought of his duty, and shook his head slowly.

'I'd be deserting my duty,' he said simply.

'I could get you back before we even left,' the stranger persisted.

'Nobody would ever know.'

The Private didn't doubt the truth of the stranger's words, but he said:

'I'd know.'

'Yes, you'd know,' the stranger's face fell and he scanned the horizon apprehensively. 'I feel the same way every time I take a break. Of course, I don't have a superior officer to tell me, but I know.'

The stranger's grey eyes glistened in the early morning light as the top of the sun's radiant face appeared above the distant hill. He pulled himself to his feet hastily.

'I'd better go,' he said, and added as an afterthought, 'you'd think that a universe millions of years old would be old enough to look after itself for a while, but it still needs a wet nurse. Be careful.'

With those strangely ominous words that he had heard thousands of times before, but only struck a chill into his heart now, the stranger disappeared into the grey mists of the dawn. He left the Private with nothing but an empty chocolate wrapper to set his mind at rest, to prove to himself that the whole incident wasn't just a dream.

Then, with the morning sun barely in the sky, the German troops advanced.