

FARRINGDON:

One thing was clear right from the outset – Percival hated your Grandfather. And if I read the signs correctly, the feeling was entirely mutual. Not that you could tell much by looking. Had a poker face did Stones. Back then, the men didn't talk back to an officer, not if they had any sense. But you could usually tell what they were thinking a couple of minutes after you met them. You can nearly always tell, in my experience.

Percival. Poor overeducated fool. Never recovered from his disappointment that Flanders wasn't Marathon or that he Miltiades, or any other of his precious Heroes. No glorious death for him – just a bullet through the throat and a lonely death in the King's Crater.

Forgive me for taking so long to reply to your letter. It shook me, I can tell you, reading that name, after all this time, and I needed some time to collect my thoughts. Returning from the parade today I felt I could put it off no longer.

My condolences on the death of your grandmother. I only met her once, in 1917, but I remember her very clearly. It must have come as a shock to you, reading her letters, discovering what you did about your grandfather, but it doesn't surprise me that she kept it secret for so long. Perhaps, with her passing, the time has come for me to complete the story.

As to your final question; a pardon is one thing, forgiveness - well, that is something quite different.

What everyone forgets, or perhaps I should say, never really knew, is how much people *wanted* the war. They were simply spoiling for a scrap. I had gone up to Cambridge in '14, and just about all of my friends at University were desperate to get to France. The libraries and lecture halls were soon half empty. Books and essays seemed so utterly trivial compared to the drama being played out in Europe. Mind you, it wasn't just the undergrads that wanted action. I had a pal from school, Tom. He'd a fiancée at the outbreak, Maisie.

(Pauses for a moment, as if remembering)

I'd meet them at a pub in town, not a mile from here. The place would be full, absolutely packed with young fellers in uniform, singing their songs, full of high spirits. Tom and Maisie couldn't wait, either of them, couldn't wait. Tom always said the army gave him direction; up until then he'd always been unsure about how he wanted to spend his life. Not academic, you see. No drive. Once he'd got into uniform, that all changed, oh yes. Their plan was for her to become a Red Cross nurse or a VAC, whichever was easier, and get across to France as soon as he got his commission. They'd rag me mercilessly, said I was wasting my time in my study, with my books. They stopped short of calling me a conshie but you sensed that they'd no time for those brave enough to swim against the tide. The pressure to join up was relentless. You know the drill – white feathers, women denouncing young men in the street.

“Why aren't you in uniform? You're a coward – a stinking coward!”

Everywhere you went it seemed Kitchener was pointing at you, accusing. I gave in, like all the rest.

A few days after enlisting I received notice that I was to travel to Salisbury for my training. I'd been to a good school, you see, and was thought of as officer material. We spent several weeks learning how to shoot, to use bayonets, and so on, as well as how to lead the men. There were games, too. Endless games. Rugby, soccer, and a local speciality the instructors called "Muddleball". A free - for - all essentially; no rules that I could ever make out, just opportunities for those of a violent disposition to get in a few kicks. It was all done for a purpose of course – they wanted to see who could hack it when things went against them. Find out who the brave boys were. It was never the ones you thought to listen to them. That was certainly true in battle.

I have to say, I rather enjoyed the training. Up to that point I'd been a bit of a bookworm, too busy swatting to get my knees muddy. Never had much time for the rough and tumble of school games. Somehow knowing that it all had a purpose made me want to take a part. They tried to get you used to the idea that life would be rough at the front – cold, wet, little chance of drying out during the winter. They got that bit right, fair enough, but they missed the worst part of it. By God, the stink would raise the dead. Stagnant water and putrid mud and God knows what else, knee deep. Stench of rotting dead mixed with cordite. You thanked God for a fresh wind to take it over to Jerry's side. A couple of days of bombardment and the whole lot would be churned up like some ghastly cake mixture...

I arrived in Dover early on in '15. Bloody shambles right from the start. Too rough to set sail, so we kicked around the port for a couple of days. No-one thought to pass a message back so the place got more and more full with each trainload arriving. Place was choc-a-bloc with men and officers trying to wangle a place on the first boat out. Almost came to blows some of them. Simply spoiling for a scrap...

As a boy I would accompany my father on his house visits to his parishioners near our home. He had a sit-up-and-beg bicycle onto which he had fitted a makeshift seat attached above the rear wheel. He would pedal tirelessly for what seemed like hours, even though he was far from young. I was an only child, born soon after my mother's fortieth birthday. "A wonderful gift, all the more precious for its lateness", she would say, "He hadn't forgotten us!" although it was many years before I fully understood who "He" was. My father was a sturdy fellow, although not particularly tall, who liked to ride quickly. He would time himself along certain familiar stretches of road, always trying to improve his record. "Come on, James, keep going! We're nearly there!" he would shout over his shoulder, as if I could have any influence over our speed or direction. I rarely enjoyed the ride. I was concerned only for my immediate safety. "If I can hold on for just a few more seconds, everything will be alright", I would say to myself.

Stones was one of the first people I met from the battalion. It was he who introduced me to the men. Memory fails, you understand, and I can't recall them all. But one of them sticks in my mind – Meredith. He must have been seventeen stone if he was an ounce, and not a shade over five feet two. A monster – an absolute monster of a

man. Could scarcely understand a word he said, not that he spoke much. Didn't hold with a lot of talk did Meredith.

If Meredith was frightening to us he must have been utterly terrifying to the Boche. His piece de resistance was a club he used to carry into combat. He reckoned he could do more damage with his homemade weapon than anything the Quartermaster could provide, and he was right. Give him a couple of feet of clearance and he would nearly have a fellow's head off.

He survived the war, did old Meredith, and in the long weeks of tedium that passed before they sent us home we talked at length about what we would do when the dust had settled. He fancied running a pub with his brother in Wallsend, their hometown. He'd have been a good publican, pulling pints, keeping things ship-shape. One thing's for sure -

(laughs fondly)

There'd've been no nonsense at chucking out time.

Who else, besides Meredith? A couple of very queer fish – identical twins, Robbie and Jamie. Never said a word to anyone but each other. Pale, nervous fellows. Not much good as soldiers, to be honest. The men tolerated them, by and large, since they kept themselves to themselves. One or two would try to bully them a bit, trying to get a laugh. I recall Stones putting a stop to it one night, when some ragging had got a bit out of hand.

We were part of a battalion, of course, but we were at the same time part of our own little crowd. You got to know your own mob, pretty well, living so close. The men amazed me. They had so little most of them, being from poor homes. Not two beans to rub together. They would be sent parcels from home – perhaps from a girlfriend, or more likely a mother; an ounce of tobacco, some cigs, perhaps a few sweets or a cake, some pozzie – all of it divided up so everyone got a share. They all did it – no exceptions. They were remarkable. The 19th Durham's were no different to any other fighting unit, except in the matter of their size. They were what were known as a "bantam regiment" – made up of men too short or light to be considered for service in any of the regular army regiments. At the start of the war, the recruiting officers had been contemptuous of the men that eventually made up the 19th. But later on once the casualties started to mount up, they changed their tune. Your grandfather and his pals did have an advantage over the rest mind you – they were miners, mainly from the North East - Durham, Northumberland. They were used to working underground. They were given the job of tunnelling under No Man's Land to plant explosives under the trenches opposite. Terrifying thought isn't it? 60 feet underground, pitch black, flat on your belly, scraping away for hours on end. Made my skin crawl I can tell you; it still does. Didn't bother them too much, or if it did they never used to show it. They'd dig right out to get under Jerry's trenches, pack the end of the tunnel with explosives, then scarper back to light the fuses. He'd be doing the same to us, you see, so there'd be many a game to be had listening out for the knocking and scraping.

It shook me to the core, I can tell you, the first time I saw the effect of a couple of hundredweight of cordite detonated from deep underground. An eclipse of the sun for a second, then a roar that you could hear in Picadilly, leaving a hole almost as deep as wide. That's how the King's Crater came to be. Caused us no end of bother did that day's work.

And the poor devils who didn't survive the desperate scramble back to safety before they were buried alive..?

(mumbles to himself, still horrified after all this time)

...Et lux aeterna luceat eis

Let eternal light shine upon them

My father had little time for the pomp and grandeur of Cambridge. He concerned himself more with the remoter corners of the fens – the quiet hamlet, the isolated cottage. I would sit, under strict instructions to remain silent, as he comforted those in distress. He spoke little, but smiled often, never breaking the thin thread that ran between him and his parishioner. Years later, in the mud and fury of Flanders, I found it natural do the same thing as he had done. Curiously, the men rarely talked of fear. What disturbed them more was the loneliness, the sense of isolation. Oh, the bitterness of that irony, coming from a man living cheek by jowl with a thousand others for months on end. Flanders made me understand my father's calling, having faced the pain of the unanswerable question, "Where was God in the trenches?"

The men weren't allowed to write much in their letters home – no details of whereabouts or casualties in case the information fell into the wrong hands. Bunkum of course – Jerry wouldn't have made head or tail of what was written. That was one of the worst parts of the business – reading the men's letters home to censor them if need be. An invasion – that's what it was. Mind you we had a few laughs at the attempts they made to beat the system. One of them wrote to Mr Y.P. Rees - wanted to tell his Da he was at Ypres, do you see?

Ah, the letters from home. Like manna from heaven. They'd be read through again and again, then carefully folded up and kept in the driest part of the tunic. Sometimes they'd be passed around the dugout to be read by men who hadn't had a delivery that day. Even the racier bits were made public. I wonder if the lusty girls at home ever realised how much their passionate love letters had been enjoyed by the other men in the division. Not all the news was good mind you. Perhaps a sweetheart who'd had second thoughts, or news of a brother who didn't make it back from a scrap. The men were rarely openly tender, but they understood each other, of course. If a fellow had read something he'd rather not have read, he'd take himself off to a quieter spot to think his thoughts. His mates would cover for him, if they could.

Much worse were the letters of condolence that I had to send to bereaved families. Can anyone nowadays understand how difficult it was to write those letters? I think not. For me, they were almost the most difficult duty I had to perform as a unit commander. Our brief was simple – to inform the next of kin of a deceased man that he had been killed. How do you do that without causing pain? You can't of course,

although some believed that you could ease matters by building up the reputation of the dead man. Make him a kind of hero, that sort of thing. This was one of Percival's ways; even for the most difficult, disagreeable man – and there were plenty of those, believe me. They would all die the way they wanted to die, or rather, the way Percival wanted them to die. Bravely, heroically. I remember Elliott, blown off the duckboard during an attack - headfirst into the mud. He was a sour faced, unpopular weakling. His pack dragged him under. He had no chance. What was I to do? Elliott drowned in an open sewer; not a very heroic death. I lied of course. You wouldn't believe the number of machine gun posts my unit captured over the years. Was that so wrong, do you think? To lie about the fate of a son or husband. I mean the end is just the same. Would the Reverend and Mrs Elliott curse me for depriving them of the truth or praise me for sparing them a deeper pain? All these years have passed and I don't know the answer.

Percival was a schoolmaster in Civvie Street. Latin, Greek. I doubt very much that he was a particularly good one. He treated the men in his unit in much the same way as he kept order in the Lower Fourth, I should imagine. The men sensed that he wasn't up to the job. They would push him to his limit, making his life as difficult as they could whilst stopping short of outright disrespect. He tried everything he could; mocking the weaker ones, trying to bully the strong. Newcomers to the unit would feel the sharp edge of his tongue, until they learned that it was he, not them, that was the figure of fun. As the months went by he became more and more distracted. He was shamefully inconsistent - overlooking the bad breaches of discipline, then putting a man on a charge for the most trivial of reasons – wearing a cap in an insolent manner. Inevitable, I suppose, that he should take to the bottle. The officers

had a daily ration of rum which he would hoard jealously. For myself, I hated the stuff so I'd give him mine. Added to his troubles. Regrettable – he was a dipso in the end.

An ordinary man in a situation completely beyond his capability.