

The
Boy
I
Love

**WILLIAM
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ANDERSEN PRESS

First published in 2025 by
Andersen Press Limited
6 Coptic Street, London, WC1A 1NH
Vijverlaan 48, 3062 HL Rotterdam, Nederland
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 83913 482 1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

*In memory of Sergeant Gordon Hunter Jackson (1921–1943),
who sacrificed his life in the cause of freedom.*



*'I love you, dispassionately, so much, so very much, dear
Fellow . . . you have fixed my Life – however short. You did not
light me: I was always a mad comet; but you have fixed me.
I spun round you a satellite for a month, but I shall swing
out soon, a dark star in the orbit where you will blaze.'*

Letter from Wilfred Owen to Siegfried Sassoon,
5th November 1917

1

5TH JUNE 1916

A grunting, gasping, clanging chaos of engines. Bursts of white smoke that remind me of shell vapour streaming across a foreign field. The platform at St Pancras swarms with railway porters and staff officers checking and loading supplies bound for the Front: tinned food, canvas tents, barrels of rum, scratchy blankets, crates of ammunition packed by lemon-skinned girls poisoned by their work in the munitions factories. Meanwhile, parents stand behind the ticket barrier, summoning their last scraps of courage, letting go of their sons with lingering handshakes and tearful smiles.

I turn away from the compartment window and flick open my grandfather's pocket watch. Quarter to five. We're already running late. I snap the casing shut, grip the warm metal tight in my fist. Force my hand to stop shaking. I think of my mother at our garden gate, like those other parents behind the barrier, her face tear-stained as she pressed the watch into my palm: *I meant to give this to you the first time you left, but everything happened so quickly back then, it slipped my mind.*

My father had remained inside the vicarage, though he kept the front door ajar. I can picture him now in the shadows of our hall, an expressionless, unmoving presence. Mother had given me the watch but I had left my own parting gift in Father's desk drawer, hidden under his books of prayers and sermons. The Military Cross I had no use for, the citation enclosed inside its little cardboard box: *Awarded to Second Lieutenant Stephen Wraxall, for conspicuous gallantry during an enemy raid on a British trench.*

I hadn't shown it to my father during my sick leave. Hadn't

wanted praise from those puritanical lips. But Grandpa's watch I will treasure, for as long as I live. Perhaps a month? The average officer's life expectancy at the Front is about twelve weeks, and I have already eaten up eight of those during my first deployment to France.

I tuck the watch into my tunic pocket and take an unsteady breath. The air feels hot, mucky somehow, stale with the sweat of unwashed men. The train is packed with Tommies and officers, either heading back to the Front after leave or youngsters who have just reached the age of conscription. Youngsters. I glance at my reflection in the compartment window. I'm only a kid myself, aren't I? A boy of barely nineteen, put in charge of a platoon of forty men, most of them years older than me. Shouldn't that be a joke of some kind? Well, no one seems to be laughing, least of all my old platoon, all of whom are now buried under the stinking Somme soil I am returning to.

I look away from that pale face and glance at the empty seats around me. Backs and shoulders bustle against the glass dividing my compartment from the corridor, but it seems no one wants to join me. I know why. I'm a reminder to the soldiers who've already been in France of what horrors await them and a warning to those nervous new recruits of the terrors to come. To look at me is to enter the war earlier than any of them wish to.

Still, eyes flicker over me like flames. I can feel them through the glass. I resist touching my right ear – or the place where my ear used to be – and instead run my hands over the writing case in my lap. A small brown leather suitcase made specially to fit the metal box that sits snugly inside. A box painted black and gold, my initials – *S. J. W.* – engraved on the lid, a silver key to fit the lock. Inside, slots for stationery – blue writing paper, field

postcards, envelopes – a tray stacked with a regiment of coloured pencils. Another gift from Mother, this time remembered before I first left home. I trace my initials with my forefinger. I could write to her, I suppose. Express my thanks for the watch. After all, I have no one else to write to.

Not now.

I picture my father again – the first words he said to me when I hobbled into the house after a fortnight in military hospital, my ‘Blighty wound’ still raw and aching: ‘The Greaves’ boy is dead.’ In that moment, I’d wished that the German grenade that had swatted away most of my ear had also deafened me. But I heard him perfectly, and those five words knocked the air out of my lungs. ‘Thought you ought to know, despite everything,’ Father added, before leading me into the parlour where tea had been laid out. Seed cake, doilies, the best china. Somehow, I had got through all the small talk that followed without screaming.

I had lived to see Michael again. Had killed so that I might survive in order to see him. Now I wished that I had dropped that bloody revolver before I ever aimed it; that I’d let the young German shoot first, and that I too was now rotting alongside Geordie, Phillip Danvers and the rest of my platoon.

Michael was dead. My friend.

My best friend.

The following day I crossed the village green, past the old school where Father still preached as chaplain, where the song of the choir rang out from the chapel, some bright chirruping tune. It was a fine spring morning. People tending their gardens, chatting to the postman, children playing skipping games. A rope *crack-crack-cracking* against the pavement like the distant sound of gunfire from an enemy trench. I kept my head down, ignored the

greetings, the concerned questions, the hearty congratulations that I was still (more or less) in one piece. A gummy-eyed major from some ancient conflict – the First Boer War, I think – struggled to catch up with me, desperate to share tales of the battlefield. But his war and mine were very different. How do you begin to explain to a soldier who fought with sword and musket what it is like to see a single machine gun cut down fifty men in the space between heartbeats? I might as well be speaking another language.

The Greaves' cottage stood at the edge of town, past the railway station and down by the brewery. Pauperville, as it was known to the snobs at school. Michael had been a day student, a scholarship boy. Not one of us. A fact he was reminded of on a regular basis, both by his classmates and the masters.

My heart thundered in my chest at the thought of meeting his mother at the door, of trying to find any words to console her. She knew about us, Michael had told me on one of our last meetings before we both headed off for training – me, a 'proper' public schoolboy, to the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst; Michael, son of a blacksmith, to the 'Tommies' training camp at Heaton Park. After our secret had been discovered, he had confessed in their parlour, tears streaming down his face, hands pressed between his knees. His mother had wrapped him in her arms and told him that she loved him, just the way he was. I had envied Michael that. God, I had envied him.

In the end, I hadn't got as far as the cottage door. A black-edged card in the front window confirming the family was indeed war-bereaved had sent me reeling into a neighbouring alleyway, shuddering, gasping, clutching at the wall for support. My best friend. It had only been a moment: a touch of nervous fingertips in the summer house, mouths brushing lightly, tongues sliding

together. And then the discovery. That expressionless presence standing in the doorway, a dozen damning verses bubbling behind biblical lips. And later, a trial in my father's study and a sentence passed: *Join up now or forever be a stranger to me and your mother. Go do your duty, son. It will stamp out these degenerate impulses and make a man of you.*

Now, in the train carriage, I take out some writing paper from the case and flick through the empty blue pages. We'd exchanged letters. Both during training and after we were posted to France. Chatty, everyday stuff with only the odd innocent hint of affection that wouldn't arouse the censor's suspicions. Like me, Michael had ended up in the Somme valley at the southernmost tip of the British line, in the trenches between the towns of Maricourt on our side and Montauban behind the German Front; a thin strip of No Man's Land separating the two. But with hundreds of troops surrounding us, and with our platoons being pretty much pinned down to their own small sector of trench, we hadn't had a chance to see each other. The couple of rest days we'd each been allocated had never coincided, and so letters were our only way to communicate. His last to me had arrived on my final day in military hospital:

*So take care, old chap, and give my regards to
Blighty. I'll keep up the good fight in your absence,
and perhaps I might see you again when my leave
comes round. I long for the day. In the meantime,
know that I am very proud of my old schoolmate –
the MC, no less!*

Ever yours, Michael.

I replace the paper in its slot, keeping back a single sheet. I don't write to Mother. Instead, I take a pencil from the tray and, resting the paper on the lid of the writing case, I begin to draw. Slowly, line by line, shade by shade, it becomes the likeness of a boy I once cared for, framed in the cobwebbed window of an old summer house. With each pencil stroke, my heart swells. We had never exchanged photographs, of course. How would it look for a man to be carrying another's snapshot in his wallet? But a sketch is different – just an idle, innocent drawing of a lost friend. A face I was scared might already be vanishing in the mist of my memory, fading away, but I have managed to capture him again here . . .

'Ear, ear, would you look at that! Danny, oi, Danny boy, come take a butcher's. Although to be honest, it looks like a butcher's already been working at that poor bastard's lughole. You know what, he'd make a pretty good exhibit in one of your fairground freak shows. Behold the one-eared wonder!'

I grunt at the sound of the voice, dragging myself from fast-dissolving dreams. I feel drowsy, heavy-headed. Hadn't realised I'd drifted off. A glance shows me we're still in the station. *Still*. I pull Grandfather's watch from my pocket and thumb it open. Almost six-thirty, we're going to be late for the boat.

'Leave off, will you, Davey.' A whispered warning. 'Can't you see the pip on his sleeve? That's a lieutenant. Do you want to be had up on charges before we even get over the water?'

The door slides back and a boy about my own age enters the compartment. A Tommy with his cap under his arm, short but strongly built. He has a bright, open face dusted with freckles, an upturned button of a nose, the dimples in his cheeks deepened by a broad, attractive grin. Some clumsy training camp barber has recently made an uneven crop of his shiny chestnut curls.

‘Hello, sir,’ he says, his grin broadening further. ‘My name’s Danny. Daniel. McCormick. Sorry about that idiot friend of mine. He didn’t mean no offence.’

He holds out his hand. He has clear blue eyes with little violet flecks at their edges. I notice this as he leans down, his hand unshaken, and picks up something from the floor. My drawing. My drawing of Michael.

His gaze plays across the sketch. ‘Did you do this?’ he asks, his tone almost musical. Difficult to put an accent on it. Cockney with a touch of Irish? ‘You’re very good. The expression you’ve captured . . . He looks happy and sad, all at the same time. Do you—’

I jolt forward and snatch the paper from him, burying it in my writing box, banging down the lid.

‘I’m a *second* lieutenant,’ I tell him, tapping the single star on my sleeve. ‘Lieutenant Wraxall.’ Then, harshly, ‘Hasn’t anyone taught you to salute when you’re in the presence of an officer?’

He stands back, startled, then straightens his spine and gives a sloppy salute. ‘Sorry, sir.’

I shake my head. ‘Better buck up your ideas, Private McCormick, or you won’t last five minutes at the Front.’

They are hard words. My eyes sting at the echo of them and I have to turn my face to the window.

A whistle sounds. Doors clack shut.

At last, we begin to move.

2

6TH JUNE

Moonlight on the water, a silver arrow feathered by the lazy ripple of the tide. Just after midnight now, Grandfather's pocket watch confirming the toll of some distant church bell. I wander along the Leas, the pretty promenade that sweeps the beaches of Folkestone and runs down to the dockyard where our ship lies at anchor. In the end, the lateness of our train hadn't mattered. The SS *Onward* was herself delayed by engine trouble that will, we've been promised, be fixed by dawn. Even from a mile off, I can hear the clang of men at work in the harbour, readying the steamer so that she might deliver another cargo of fresh recruits into the meatgrinder.

I walk on. The sea hushes against the shore. Then all at once a gust of rain rattles the pathways of the prom. I hurry across a short stretch of grass and climb up into the bandstand, its tent-shaped canopy sheltering me from the downfall. I wipe the rain from my nose, fix my gaze back on the darkness. Perhaps the *Onward* won't feed us into the meatgrinder after all. Perhaps she'll drown us instead. Only two months ago, the *St Cecelia* was sunk by a German U-boat five miles off this coast.

I squeeze the handrail. What the hell is wrong with me? Do I *want* to drown? Then why not head down to the beach right now and wade out into those peaceful waters? True, the grand hotels behind me are all stuffed-to-bursting with soldiers, but even if some restless private should glance out of his bedroom window, by the time he raised the alarm and a party reached the shore I would . . .

We'll get through this, Stephen. We'll survive and we'll see each other again, I promise. Michael's words echo in my head. Our final goodbye before we headed off to war.

The sea whispers to me, coaxing . . . And then I see them in my mind's eye, a host of mud-splattered ghosts rising up before me. Geordie, Phil Danvers, all the old platoon, whole again yet ragged in their blood-soaked khaki. *Don't you dare take that way out. Don't you dare. You'll buy it the way we bought it, Lieutenant Wraxall M-bloody-C; you'll die hard and you'll do it in the filth of the Somme, like us.* I nod and, at that moment, feel a tiny tremor work through the cast iron under my hand.

I know that murmur, have felt its gigantic heartbeat up close, juddering my bones. Even though I've stood beside those bellowing howitzers, all lined up behind our trenches, watched as they unleash their shells across No Man's Land and into the German lines, it still amazes me that their aftershock can be felt here at home, setting British bandstands atremble. They roar across the smooth sea, an angry voice calling me back.

My hand drifts to the side of my face. To the scarred and puckered flesh where my ear used to be. The rain has stopped. And now there is movement down by the beach. Four or five wakeful Tommies have jumped from the sea wall and are running about like schoolchildren, plunging their hands into English sand for perhaps the last time, finding shells to hurl at each other. I know why they can't sleep. Nervous excitement, tinged with dread, sings under their skin. I remember feeling the same thrill on the night before I first left for France. Visions of glory, of valiant battle, of the evil Hun pleading for mercy at the point of my bayonet. Tales fed to me by my instructors at Sandhurst, as well as reminders of the atrocities the invading Germans had inflicted on poor defenceless Belgium

in the early days of the war. The Boche were demonic, they deserved hell, and I was going to give it to them.

On the beach, one of the young soldiers spins on his heel and the moonlight hits him full-face. It's the boy from the train. Private Daniel McCormick. Danny. He is smiling that broad, attractive smile. *You should be in bed, Private, snatching every morsel of rest while you can. You have no idea of the exhaustion that lies ahead. The soul-sapping slog across a shattered country to those few hundred yards of ditch that will soon become your world.* Ignorant of the future, Danny swoops across the beach, laughing, dodging a sand-tailed comet hurled by one of his friends.

I watch their play and think of past times. Not long ago, not really. Twelve months, perhaps: I am chasing Michael through the cornfield that bustles up behind the brewery near his home. We hurtle between swaying yellow waves, pulling off caps and school blazers as we go. I can see him now, his outstretched hand surfing the corn, drunk on his own laughter. And then we are grappling and falling together, suddenly hidden beneath that dusty canopy. Hidden and safe. I feel the warmth of him against me, his face so close to mine . . .

I shake my head and return to the present. Not long ago, we might have joined Danny and his friends on the beach. Michael and I, boys together, playing their stupid chase game. But those days are gone. It isn't age that divides me from Danny McCormick. I might be as little as six months older than him. It's the things I have seen.

Danny stops, hunches over, combs his fingers through the sand to bring up his own missile. Then he turns and throws it overarm, like a spin-bowler, and a neat little plume of white jets out of the black sea.

A breath catches in my throat. Another memory takes me, darker this time. I am back in my sector on the last day, my platoon about to fall around me. Missiles are arcing high against the bone-white strip of sky above our trench. Missiles with bulbous heads and long handles. More like unlit torches than the Mills bombs that fit snugly in a British soldier's palm. *Stielhandgranate*. I barely have time to think the word before the German grenades land at our feet, scattering almost innocently between our boots like a rack of toppled bowling pins. Glances are exchanged, no words, an eternity squeezed into a few seconds. A light flurry of snow settles on our shoulders, begins to melt on cheeks and eyelashes, and then . . .

Flame and agony and blood. And me – a single miraculous survivor. A survivor who plays dead for a time. Blanketed by bits and pieces of my platoon, I bite through my bottom lip to stifle a scream. It feels like the right side of my face is on fire. I listen to whispers as the enemy fans out and only one demonic Hun is left to stand guard over the slaughter. I watch him through narrowed slits, count my heartbeats, stamp down the pain, see him turn his back. And then I rise, shakily, blinded by gore, half-deaf, my Webley Mk VI grasped in wet fingers. The revolver I've never yet fired in combat. My boots crunch on a splinter of duckboard. I see the murderer, the guard, the soldier, the victim, flinch. He twists clumsily around and stares at me. No pleading in his eyes, no terror, only the dull stupidity that we all share out here.

He said one final word, that young German, before I squeezed the trigger. *Kamerad*. Comrade. I shall never forget how he said it . . .

'Lieutenant Wraxall? Hey up there, Lieutenant, is that you?'

A shout from the beach. The blue-eyed boy dissolves back

into my nightmares and another takes his place. Private Daniel McCormick stands at the water's edge, the tide lapping at his boots. He waves up at the bandstand as if greeting an old friend. I prise my fingers from the railing, dig my hands into my pockets, and head back to the hotel.

Smoke blooms from the twin funnels of the big transport ship and is torn to shreds by the wind. I stand at the stern, my greatcoat fastened up to my chin, watching until the white cliffs of Dover are lost and the horizon is nothing but sea. Then I turn to the heaving upper deck of the SS *Onward*.

There's a jittery excitement to some of the men as they play cards, sheltering winning and losing hands from the breeze. On the lower level, a group of Tommies try to set up a game of shove ha'penny on the wet, rolling deck. I watch their loose change skate about until they realise it's a hopeless cause and collect up their coppers. Most have never set foot on a ship before, certainly not one of this size, and a few are already at the rail, hurling their breakfast into the Channel.

A fresh gust tugs at the brim of my cap. I dig out a woodbine from the tin in my breast pocket, cup the flame of my lighter, and draw deep. I keep sweeping the deck with my eyes, looking out for a familiar face. Perhaps a fellow officer or private from my own regiment, the Manchesters. Someone I'd known during training or had shared a drink with at one of the half-ruined bars behind the lines at Maricourt. But there is no one.

At least . . .

I almost step forward, the woodbine hanging from my lip. On the lower deck, the flash of a grinning face between a sea of khaki,

there one moment, gone the next. A face lit with an infectious kind of humour. The boy from the train. From the beach.

I think of his words as he held my sketch of Michael in his hand. The simple kindness of them: *Did you do this? You're very good.* Apart from Michael and one or two masters at school, has anyone ever expressed interest in my art before? *Genuine* interest?

A lump rises in my throat. I turn back to the grey waters and throw my fag into the swell. Why had I spoken to him so harshly on the train? *Better buck up your ideas, Private McCormick, or you won't last five minutes at the Front.* That didn't sound like me. At least, it didn't sound like the person I used to be. Sounded more like my father, if anything. A thought that makes me sick to my stomach. But this is what war does to you: hollows you out, makes you brutal, builds up walls inside you.

I turn again and scan the lower deck, searching for Danny among the crowd. I don't want this for him. To see that smile withered away or for it to slowly transform into the doomed, rigid grin I have seen on so many faces after a week or two at the Front. Right now, if it were in my power, I would order this ship back to shore, would drag Daniel McCormick down the gangplank and then command the boy to run.

Run and never look back.

I almost laugh at myself. It's absurd. Only, perhaps this feeling isn't just about me and how I've changed. Perhaps it has something to do with losing Michael too. He joined up at the same time I did. Joined up because of *me*. There'd been no need for him to do so; conscription hadn't yet come into force. I'd argued with him about it, saying we'd be separated anyway, both in training and, quite possibly, during our service. But Michael had insisted that I wouldn't face this hell alone. That he'd be with me in France,

even if not in the same trench. In the end, I'd simply given in and let him sign his life away.

I shake my head. Light another cigarette. There's nothing I can do for Danny. I can't save him from the war nor what it will do to him. I am just an insignificant cog in the great engine, roaring here on the sea, roaring at home in factories and training camps, roaring in the trenches of the Somme – a mindless engine to be oiled with much of the life that teems on this deck. There is no arguing with it. No appeal for kindness that it will hear. All I can do as one of its cogs is to help push Danny forward to his fate, as I myself am pushed.

And anyway, why should I care?

I tell myself I don't. That to care is pointless. And yet . . . If I could make amends for those hard words I'd spoken on the train, if I could somehow keep him from becoming like me – hollowed-out and defeated, old before his time . . . I don't know. Maybe it might feel like I was saving a part of myself.

I close my eyes and hear a cry of triumph from below, followed by a chorus of groans. A man has won his hand at cards. Which means, of course, that everyone else has lost.

3

7TH JUNE

I wake in a hard bed at the end of a long wooden hut filled with snoring, farting men, some sleeping, some watchful, as if the Hun might storm the place at any moment. Rubbing my eyes, I glance up. Pale light is beading the edge of the sack-covered window above my head. Soon the double doors at the end of the hut will be flung open and a barked order to 'rise and shine' will stun those still dreaming from their slumbers.

I sit up and waggle my aching toes. No spare troop transports were available when we arrived at the dockside, and so it had been a weary twelve-mile march to this old scout's hut at the heart of the British encampment at Étaples-sur-Mer. A march that has already drained some of the spirit from those fresh-faced Tommies. They'll probably regain scraps of it during the morning, but for now their first taste of war has knocked some of the liveliness out of them. Slogging along cobbled roads carrying seventy pounds of kit after hours on a swaying, sea-sprayed deck will do that.

As an officer, I'd felt obliged to bark an order or two myself to keep them all in line, striding along the column, offering the odd word of encouragement where I could. In the drizzle that accompanied us from the harbour to the field kitchen set up outside the hut, I had noticed the first sign of smiles starting to slip. Hot soup, a slab of grey bread and a cup of rum had lifted them a little, but Jesus, if they were tired now, what would they be like in a couple of months?

There was only one smile I missed in the ranks. Despite keeping an eye out for him, I had seen no sign of Private Danny

McCormick. All the way off the ship and to the camp, I had told myself again and again how ridiculous that idea of mine had been. To try and save Danny from the brutalising effects of this war. Even to make up for those harsh words of mine on the train. It was all so absurd, so impossible.

The bedsprings sigh as I stand. The man next to me whimpers in his sleep. I wash and dress as quietly as I can – cold water from the washstand at the end of the bed; then my vest, shirt, trousers, tie, socks, puttees laced firmly around my calves and ankles, the boots I had polished to a dazzle before going to bed pulled onto tender feet, my thick woollen tunic, my Sam Browne belt cinched around my waist and strapped over my shoulder, cap pulled tight onto my head, hand momentarily brushing the scorched flesh at the side of my face.

I pause for a second or two before collecting my revolver. It sits in my open palm and I look at it in the half-light of the scout hut, where little boys would once have practised their knots and sworn allegiances they barely understood. Boys who might now be men serving in the killing grounds at Verdun, if not already dead and buried. I force my hand to stop shaking and add the Webley to the holster on my belt.

Kamerad. The word slides into my mind like a bayonet blade. Did you deserve that bullet, my Hun friend? Does anyone?

A quick glance in the shaving mirror. The mirror – the entire shaving set – had been my father's. A neat leather case, handed over to his son by the Reverend Montague Wraxall with a kind of knowing nod. Handed over in the hope that the manliness of war might encourage a wisp or two to sprout on my obstinately naked upper lip. But not even the supremely 'masculine' act of killing another human being has worked that miracle.

A boy stares back at me from the mirror. Large brown eyes, swept back hair, a sensitive mouth with overly red lips. The kind of complexion the Romantic artists I admire like Dante Gabriel Rossetti had preferred to paint, full of the pale promise of death. Not a face made for war at all. 'A bit too womanly, if anything,' as one of my old schoolmasters had once snorted. I toss the looking glass onto the bed and stride as noiselessly as I can out of the dormitory.

It's going to be a hot day. You can feel it in the sunrise that is just now searing the horizon. A lick of fire that, within seconds, will paint scarlet the thousands of white tents stretching across these rolling sand dunes. In a tight avenue between them, I stand aside to allow a steely nurse in VAD uniform to hurry past. She's carrying something in her hands vaguely limb-shaped, all wrapped up in stained newspaper. Then a big-knuckled sergeant emerges from a tent on my right with a stuffed scarecrow under his arm. He salutes when he sees me and the motion jiggles free a little of the straw from one of the many holes punched into the mannequin.

'For bayonet practice, sir,' he says unnecessarily. 'Gotta get some of these new boys up to snuff. Don't know what they're teaching 'em at them camps back in Blighty. All we keep getting sent these days is a bunch of sissies, am I right?'

I leave him with his dummy and move on.

An odd place, the encampment at Étapes. In a way, it's a mirror for the beginning and end of many a soldier's experience of war. Part of it serves as a vast hospital complex, treating the injured who have been passed up the line from the casualty clearing stations at the Front. I stayed here myself for a short time after the raid on our trench and before I was shipped home.

They remade what remained of my ear and, when I started shaking uncontrollably one morning, had told me to pull myself together.

The other function of this great tented city is a little more infamous. They call it the 'Bull Ring' – the final training camp before a new recruit is dispatched to his sector. Run by a host of sadistic officers who have never seen front-line action themselves, it has a nasty reputation amongst the Tommies. A well-deserved reputation, in my opinion.

The geography of Étaples is always changing, hospital tents pulled down and repositioned almost overnight, so it takes a while for me to locate the cookhouse and my breakfast. Eventually, I find myself in yet another hut with a couple of trestle tables set up at one end, each stacked with bowls into which a thick gloopy porridge is being slopped. The place smells of starch, boiled cabbage, carbolic soap. Our chef this morning is a man who appears to have half the Somme under his fingernails. He sniffs, coughs, and ladles out my portion, while at the same time using one of those filthy fingers to excavate the treasures of his left ear.

'Spot of honey to go with it?' he asks.

I shake my head. I'm not even sure I want the porridge any more.

I sit alone at a big round table, my bowl pushed aside, sipping chlorine-flavoured tea from a tin mug. There's a scatter of magazines strewn about – old copies of *Punch*, *John Bull*, *The Strand*. While an Australian private starts up an argument with the chef – '*Call this breakfast? I could tar my backyard with this muck!*'; '*Well, if ya don't like it you know what you can do, ya Ozzie bastard*' – I pick up one of the dog-eared magazines, turning it over in my hands. On the back there is a colour reproduction of J. M. W. Turner's *The Fighting*

Temeraire. The subject is a ghostly old warship being dragged into port for the last time, its reward for forty years of faithful service to be stripped apart and broken up for scrap. I remember my father taking me to the National Gallery as a young boy and how I stood in front of this haunting image, fascinated. Even though I hadn't understood its symbolism back then, it had brought tears to my eyes. Tears that had prompted an embarrassed grunt from Father and his handkerchief shoved against my chest.

Stop all that nonsense right this minute. Can't you see, people are looking?

I feel the prickle of tears again now, staring down at this masterpiece: the glassy water, the setting sun, the proud old ship gliding almost majestically towards her grave. Sooner or later, it seems to be the fate of all warriors to be smashed to pieces.

'Lieutenant Wraxall? Thank goodness, I've been searching for you all over.'

I look up at the captain standing on the other side of the table. He has a prim black moustache and very precisely parted hair. His lips are pursed together into a thin line of annoyance. Clamped under his arm is a silver-topped swagger stick, a showy symbol of his authority.

I stand up and salute. 'What can I do for you, Captain?'

He doesn't answer right away, simply looks around himself with mild disgust. 'I thought I'd find you in the *officers'* mess. Took a dickens of a time to track you down to this quarter of the camp. Why on earth would you want to be billeted with the men?'

What can I say to that? Would someone like this captain understand that I am more at home with these men than the officers of my own class? That among the Tommies I feel in some way close to Michael, that scholarship boy I'd cared so much for.

‘Sorry about the confusion, Captain,’ I say. ‘Did you want me for something?’

He blinks at me, clearly irritated by my tone. ‘You’re to report straight away to Lieutenant-Colonel Gallagher,’ he says, his tone stiff. ‘Your commanding officer wants to see you, Wraxall. Now.’