

A NIGHT IN HELL

BY LIAM FOXX

Chapter One

I lay with my back to a tree in the warm late afternoon sunshine looking down at the small First World War cemetery that was set out in front of my eyes. Insects droned lazily going about their business and this plus the complete silence all around had me fighting to keep my eyes open. The fact that I had also eaten a large picnic lunch and had drunk most of an excellent bottle of wine only added to my sense of wellbeing and even now I was being lulled into the realms of sleep.

When Bill Jones the editor of the Sunday supplement on one of the big national papers had rung me up and asked me to do an article on the World War 1 cemeteries in France and Belgium I had been a little sceptical. This was after all not my bag in fact it was a long way off my particular niche which was capturing lurid tales of the wrong doings of the rich and famous. But I must admit things had been pretty tight just lately and as the old saying goes 'any port in a storm' first though I had to make it look as if I was busy and I would be doing him a favour taking the assignment.

When he rang I replied. "I don't know about this Bill there are other things that are a priority in my caseload at the moment and let's face it this really isn't my style if you know what I mean". I heard a laugh at the other end of the line. "Come off it my son, don't try playing the old soldier with me your up shit creek without a canoe let alone a bloody paddle". I pulled the mobile away from my ear and looked at it I was getting good and mad now. "You listen to me Bill you old fossil I don't know what you've heard but its all a load of crap I'm as good as I ever was and I've got assignments coming out my ears". There was a pause on the other end and then Bill shot back. "No you listen to me Jacko that last debacle you were on with the glamour model just about finished you with everyone." I heard him laugh again down the phone.

I was just about to but in when he carried on in that holier than thou attitude. "Not content with being fed a load of shit from her you then how shall we say let her get pics of you in highly compromising positions". I tried to stutter out an explanation but he cut me off. "Those photos are doing the rounds now and you're the laughing stock of every snapper, reporter and press member around the world". I gasped with the sheer shock of it I never thought the bitch would release the photos that she had set me up for by drugging my drink and getting some dank greasy snapper to click away whilst I was arranged in different positions. I had seen some of them that she had shown me but thought it was a simple case of blackmail so I wouldn't publish the things she had told me when she was pretending to be drunk. It was only afterwards that I realised I had been setup and the things that I had passed onto my editor had been out and out lies.

The paper had published my story about her illicit lesbian affair with a pop diva and it was only when the diva's lawyers sued the paper that the whole rotten mess came out. The love letters between the two that I had

found in her flat were forgeries and all the rest of the shit that she had fed me when I thought she was drunk had exploded as well. I tried to reclaim the high ground saying how I had come into possession of the letters but the slag said she knew nothing about them and had never seen them before. The divas lawyers had the letters fingerprinted and there were only mine and the editors on them and he was not a suspect. At a meeting between me the editor and owner, this pop divas lawyers were in no doubt about what the missing fingerprints meant. How could their client have written these very intimate love letters without getting her fingerprints on the paper and envelopes? While my finger prints were all over them there could only be one conclusion that I had manufactured the letters with the intention of getting a sensational story.

Everyone knew that the pop divas reputation was squeaky clean and a scandal like this would have ruined her career and maybe even her young life. There was talk about fetching the police in but in the end the lawyers said the diva would settle for damages out of court and no police would be involved. But this would only happen if a full page retraction was published and I was given the boot by the paper. It did not take long for the editor and owner to hang me out to dry like last weeks laundry and in two shakes I was being escorted out of the building by security. It seemed that I was now surplus to requirements in the newspaper industry but I didn't think word had got round so fast. As for the so called glamour model that whore I thought she would have got her jollies out of ruining my career. But oh no she has to further dis me by letting those fucking photos loose to the pack; well there was nothing else for it I would have to flee.

Bill as though sensing what I had thought announced. "She has sold the rights to the photos to one of the tabloids but they had already been published on the net by someone, but no doubt the whole thing will be raked over tomorrow complete with the more lurid pictures". I heard him sigh. "Who would ever have thought that the famous Jacko Valance would end up the victim of a sting". This wizened old bastard on the other end of the phone at one time would have tripped over himself to get me to write a few lines for his miserable rag. I was about to tell him where to shove himself and his assignment in graphic detail when he hit the nail on the head. "I should think a few weeks in France and Belgium were just what the doctor ordered in the present climate. The chance to get away and let things die down which they will have done by the time you get back, you know what they say 'today's news tomorrow's fish and chip wrapper'".

I thought about it saying. "Well when you put it like that I might just be able to squeeze it in of course we will have to agree the fee and expenses I mean you know that I don't come cheap". That same old cackling laugh came down the phone. "Oh please leave it out Jacko you couldn't get a job on a school bloody newspaper at the moment nobody and I mean nobody including the bloody Gobi Dessert Times would touch you". My nose was rather put out of joint by this statement but I could not disagree with the accuracy of it. Bill sensing that he had me then cleared his throat. "The fee for this job is fixed but the expenses are quite generous." He then quoted me a figure which was very reasonable and would be a welcome boost to my dwindling bank

account. Although the fee was small in comparison to what I would usually get I thought it would be best to except the commission and get out of the country for a while. So I said. "Alright Bill you've got a deal." We then thrashed out the deadlines for each story between us Bill told me he would send a courier with my itinerary and the expense money in euros along with a Euro star ticket. There was a hire car booked and paid for that I was to pick up at the Euro star terminal in Paris and all the confirmation for this would be included.

That is how I ended up sitting under this tree with my eyes closing in the late afternoon sun looking down on a small British war cemetery in France. Things had gone pretty smooth up to now and I had packed my bag travelling light as I usually did the courier had arrived and given me the package. I had made it in plenty of time to catch the train the trip to Paris was uneventful I had picked up the hire car and from there driven out of Paris and got on the auto route for Belgium. There I had proceeded to visit the war cemeteries one by one writing an article about each doing my research and tracing through my articles the rout of the War to End all Wars as it was called. I must admit that I had not wanted to do this commission at first but when I was only a few cemeteries into it I was hooked. From the massive cemeteries to the very small ones I was touched by the simple dignity of the graves. The quietness of the cemeteries and the rows of comrades lying buried together which was how they had fallen moved me more than I would care to admit.

Each cemetery was a battle or skirmish that had taken place where young men had laid down their lives for each other not wanting to let there pals down even when they were terrified. I had travelled back through Belgium and into France stopping sometimes in fine hotels and others in small country hostelries. I had followed the British Expeditionary Forces trek through France and had nearly finished my commission. Bill Jones had rung me saying how pleased everyone was with my articles and that there could be a few more commissions along the same lines. He told me that the news had moved on from me though at the breaking of the story there had been a press feeding frenzy and I was well out of it.

I did not tell Bill that I was about to write a book about the cemeteries that I had visited a short history of how they came about and a guide for people wishing to visit them. Bill informed me that seeing as this was the last article of the commission I could pick my own cemetery to write about I thanked him and said I would send my copy to him as soon as I could. I didn't want to write about any of the larger cemeteries I was more interested in writing about a small intimate place one that would seem really personal and interesting, after all this article would be the cream on the cake of the whole series. I had travelled back to the Somme district and had just passed through a small village when night had dropped fast with a thick fog covering the country lane I was travelling along. Its tendrils crept over the car like a living being leaving wet traces behind it on the windscreen and bonnet. I pulled up sharply visibility was down to about two feet and there was no way I was going to try to navigate this narrow country lane in weather like this. I managed to turn the car round and I retraced my way back to the village very

slowly creeping forward and straining my eyes looking into the fog for anything coming the other way.

As I passed down the main village street I saw that the cottages were all in darkness, it was as I crawled along in first gear that I saw the glimmer of a light on my left. As I got opposite it I saw that it was a small café, as it seemed the only place with any life in the entire village I decided to stop and have a bite to eat. I parked the car up and walked to the café I opened the door and entered there was an old lady behind the counter the rest of the bar area being empty. I asked her for a menu, she looked at me without replying I was just about to ask again when she pointed silently to a chalkboard on one side of the bar. This displayed what there was to eat I looked at it and decided what to have I asked for some soup and bread and a little cheese and fruit. The old woman made no sign that she had heard me, nor did she say anything to me instead she continued to look through me as though I wasn't there. However she turned from the bar and went through a beaded curtain that led out to what I supposed was the kitchen. I stood there feeling like the spectre at the feast wondering what I had done wrong and whether I should look to see if there was another café in the village.

I was just about to walk out when the beaded curtain was pushed back and to my surprise a young woman and not the old one entered the bar and spoke to me in English. "Could I get you a drink Monsieur whilst you wait for your food it will take only a short while to warm up"? Things seemed to be looking up and I smiled. "Why thank you if I may have a glass of wine please that would be marvellous". I watched as she poured the wine from a large stone jug into the glass. I said to her. "I am sorry if I seem to have upset the old lady for any reason I did not wish to cause her any offence". She shook her head. "We don't get many strangers round here and I am afraid you rather startled my grandmother she does not say a lot even to me". I smiled then asked: "Maybe you can help me." I hesitated not knowing how to address her properly but she came to my rescue. "Mademoiselle Simone Bouchard." She said looking straight at me it was just a statement of fact but the words seemed to thrill me because they were spoken with such allure. I looked at her properly for the first time from the dark hair as black as night that hung down her back in tresses to the sapphire blue eyes that gazed at me boldly and without fear. Her lips were full her nose was of an equality with her face all in all she was a very stunning young woman her figure was lithe but curved in all the right places and when she moved it was like watching a cat pad around.

I tried again. "I would be most grateful if you could help me Mademoiselle, I am writing an article on British war cemeteries of the First World War in your country." I coughed feeling like a schoolboy who was addressing a large audience Simone's head was lent over on one side as she listened intently to what I was saying. I put on my most helpless face. "Do you possibly know of any British cemeteries around here or in the surrounding countryside"? Her head straightened up and her long hair swished as she turned away. "I will fetch your food sit down at a table." As soon as she said this she retreated back through the bead curtain. I scratched my head in

bewilderment was there something wrong with me? Maybe it was my face or what I was saying but whatever it was the Jacko Valance charm didn't seem to be working at all well. I sat at the table and lit a cigarette I had just finished it when the old woman came in this time with my food and placed it on the table, she went out again without speaking a word. I decided that when I had finished my meal fog or no fog I would find another place to have a drink.

The soup was really excellent thick and filling and the cheese was tangy and went down well with the crusty bread and some creamy butter that was served with it. I had just finished an apple as my afters when the young woman came back through the curtain along with the old woman who cleared the plates from in front of me then disappeared again. Simone came over to my table carrying a smaller jug of wine and two glasses she set these down and sat opposite me. She poured wine into the two glasses and pushed one towards me taking the other she took a drink, I followed suit not knowing what to make of this gesture. Simone tilted her head in my direction. "I have talked to my grandmother and she has told me that there is a very small cemetery just outside the village." She took another sip of wine. "She says that it might not be what you are looking for as it is very intimate and secluded". I responded eagerly to this information. "No that is exactly what I am looking for it will suit me down to the ground." I then went on to explain how this last article that I was writing was my choice of location and that I could not have received better information.

Simone looked hard at me. "Very well then I will show you where it is tomorrow morning the fog will have lifted by then and it will be a beautiful day." I could hardly believe my luck for I was now on a role and to cap it all she then told me. "You must stop here tonight grandmother is preparing a room for you to use" I tried to protest saying I didn't want to put them to any trouble as I had already imposed on their hospitality. Simone silenced me with her hand. "There is nowhere else in Villeneuve to stay and the fog will not lift while morning so there is little choice I'm afraid" I thanked her profusely which she waved away and when we had finished our wine I got my bag from the car looking at the fog which was even thicker now if that could be the case and realising that she had been right about it. I shivered and went back into the café. Simone showed me to my room which was functional but plain however the bed was huge with brass bedsteads on each corner and a huge duck down continental quilt covering it. I turned to Simone and smiled. "Thank you so much for your kindness and the room, I hope you won't forget about the cemetery tomorrow?" She shook her head and looked at me with what seemed to be a pitying stare and then she was gone. I thought no more about it putting it down to my tiredness I got into bed and in the immense comfort of my sanctuary sleep soon overcame me.

Chapter Two

I rose in the morning refreshed and wide awake and thinking that I had just awoken from the best sleep of my life I had a quick shower and changed my clothes. I could hear noises from down stairs and when I looked at my watch saw that it was after nine o'clock I opened the windows and shutters and saw what a beautiful day it was just like Simone had promised. There were people passing along the village street as I looked out and I wondered were they had all been last night, I decided to go down and get some breakfast. I went down and saw the old lady. "Good-morning Madam it's a beautiful day." The old lady just looked through me as though I wasn't there and carried on with her cooking. Well I had tried with the old buzzard so sod her, Simone came in and we wished each other good-morning then she showed me to a table. There were a few regulars in the bar having breakfast or drinking coffee and the smell of this and the French cigarettes made the atmosphere heady. She turned to me. "Would you like coffee Monsieur Valance?" I rubbed my hands together. "Yes please Simone and do you think you might do me some ham & eggs instead of a croissant." She nodded her assent and went off to the kitchen no doubt to inform her grandmother of my order for breakfast.

After a leisurely breakfast I sat there smoking and savouring my second cup of coffee, none of the locals spoke to me or even acknowledged me. Well two could play at that game I looked round the bar it really was old fashioned but then a lot of country Cafés are in France. What really surprised me though was that there was no television in the bar usually there would have been one showing some sport or news channel. It didn't bother me though in fact it was refreshing not to have a bunch of slaves to the tube watching open mouthed every flicker of the screen. The bar started emptying and then Simone came over to my table. "We shall leave in about half an hour if you can be ready by then". She turned and walked back to the kitchen. I sat and had another cigarette and then saying goodbye to the locals who were left but who showed no sign they had heard me I went to my room.

Up in my room I grabbed my bag and thought I would call Bill and let him know I had found a place perfect for my article. I pulled out my mobile phone and found his number in the menu and hit the dial button putting it to my ear I got absolutely nothing no tone the phone was dead. I thought to myself that the village was probably in a blind spot allowing me no signal well it didn't matter I would ring him later. I grabbed my bag looked round the room to check I hadn't left anything then opening the door I went downstairs to meet Simone. She was in the bar when I came down serving a man in a suit and what looked like the local Gendarme she motioned me to wait. I nodded held up my bag and turned to the door thinking I might as well put it in the car while she was busy. I stepped out into the main street of the village old women moved past me I greeted them but got no reply or even recognition.

There were a few small children across the street who stood and looked at me open mouthed I smiled and waved at them, the only thing this

produced was a hasty retreat by the children. I thought this village would never win the friendliest village in France competition but would stand a good chance of being awarded the wooden spoon. I tossed my bag in the boot thinking hard I had heard there were villages like this in France so isolated and insulated that they turned in on themselves with never a thought for anyone else. This was what must be happening here as an outsider and stranger they just didn't recognise me well that is apart from Simone. Now there was an enigma she didn't seem to mind talking to me albeit in rather stilted conversation. But at least she was well educated which was a contradiction in itself in this tiny village no doubt she had been educated in a nearby city or town. All these thoughts went round in my head as I returned to the café. I decided that I would ask Simone a few questions about this as we walked up to the cemetery and about her life in general.

As I entered the bar area Simone stopped talking to the Gendarme and man in the suit and went back through the bead curtain into the kitchen probably to let her grandmother know she was going. I approached the bar and stood there neither of the men looked at me which I thought strange. For a police officer not to take any notice of a stranger on his patch was very odd indeed. I was about to say something then I thought Simone must have filled him in on who I was. He must have looked in my passport as well for in France you have to leave your passport for inspection by the authorities with the hotelier. Simone came back carrying a basket covered with a towel which she set on the bar. She bent down and reached into a drawer underneath retrieving my passport and handing it to me still the two men looked directly behind the bar. Simone said. "Grandmother has prepared a luncheon for you so you may eat at your leisure without having to come back here." I was overwhelmed by the kindness of the taciturn old lady. "Please thank your grandmother for her kindness but I must pay you for this and the meal and room last night." I reached in my pocket and pulled out my wallet putting quite a handful of notes on the bar, I thought why not this was my last article and I still had a fair amount of euro's left from the expense money.

Simone never even looked at the money she just grabbed the basket and nodded in the direction of the door. "Come we must get going I must get back as soon as possible." I followed her out of the door looking over my shoulder to where the money lay on the counter and thinking she must trust those two. We set off down the village street Simone nodding and greeting people she met but I might as well have not been there. I mentioned this. "The villagers are not very sociable are they not one of them as answered my greetings or even nodded at me." She stared at me. "They are very wary of strangers here it was not always the case but it is now." I was just about to ask her to elaborate on this when a handsome young man came up to us ignoring me he tried to speak to Simone. She moved past him as though he did not exist I stopped and watched him as he looked at her retreating figure the love and frustration on his face was an almost physical thing. I rushed to catch her up. "Who was that an old boyfriend?" The look she gave me could have turned me to stone as she answered. "He is nothing less than nothing he does not exist." She marched on down the street head held erect and shoulders straight as a Sergeant Major. I pondered on her answer as we

walked together obviously something tragic had happened to these two lovers something that had replaced love with hatred.

We had now walked up the hill and out the far end of the village which sat in a kind of hollow. The countryside here fell away and there were small glades of trees dotted up and down the landscape. We left the lane from the village and walked over to one of the smaller stands of trees as we got to the edge of them I could see the land flowed into a kind of hollow. It was in the centre of this that the small cemetery stood. All thought of asking about Simone and her lover went out of the window as I looked down at the final resting place of my countrymen. It was not what I had expected I was used to the graves being tended by the Commonwealth Graves Commission. These graves however were not the upright white headstones shining in the sun, instead there was a row of six rustic wooden crosses. Around these and making a fence for the cemetery a wooden trellis wall had been erected that was covered in creepers that had now bloomed.

I was enchanted it was the most beautiful cemetery that I had seen yet I took out my digital camera and got some shots looking down from our vantage spot. Later I would go down and get some close up shots of the graves but just at the moment I was content just taking in the tranquil scene that met my eyes. Simone put the basket down near a tree I asked her to join me for lunch but she refused saying she had to get back to the café. I can't say that I was really disappointed for I was enthralled with this charming peaceful little cemetery. As I gazed down at it Simone said. "You must be away from here before nightfall it is dangerous to be round here after dark." I looked at her to see if she was having a laugh but she just stared at me I shrugged. "I am not afraid of any cemetery or the bodies in them it takes more than an old graveyard to frighten me." She scowled at me. "Please yourself you fool but remember what I have told you do not stay here when darkness comes." With this parting comment she stalked away I shouted after her. "Sorry Simone I didn't mean to upset you I will be long finished by the time it gets dark." She didn't react to this and she soon disappeared from sight I thought it is probably some village superstition to keep the children from here. I walked down the hollow and entered the cemetery through a trellis archway covered with creepers and their sweet smelling flowers. The crosses of the graves were all in one row in front of me, six of them exactly the same. I walked up to them but to my surprise there were no names on the crosses there was however what looked like an old rag hung on one. I looked more closely at it and saw that it was what was left of an old cap there was a badge still attached but it was rusted and eroded. As I studied it more closely I thought it might have been a rose at one time but I could not be sure and I didn't recognise which Regiment of the army it belonged to. I spent some time just staring at the graves and vowing that I would return to the village and ask Simone's grandmother what she could tell me about them. That is if I could get her to speak she must know something about them after all it was her who had told Simone to show me this place.

The quietness and intimacy of the place must have got to me for it was quite late when I finally finished taking my pictures and returned to the stand

of trees at the top of the hollow. I arrived there and found myself suddenly starving I could have eaten a scabby pig but there was no need as Simone's grandmother had packed quite a feast in the picnic basket. I enjoyed the cheeses, cold meats, bread and wine that the old lady had included the wine especially was very good. So it was that I found myself sat with my back to a tree sated with food and drink glorifying in the peace and solitude of this place with my eyes closing. The late afternoon sun warmed me and the dappling of the leaves over my body moving in a slight warm breeze acted with a kind of mesmerising quality. So it didn't take long for me to drop off into a deep sleep dreaming of writing the story of this cemetery and how perfect it would be with just the right information from the villagers.

Chapter Three

I opened my eyes and saw instead of the late afternoon sun a starry night sky I could no longer see the cemetery but I could make out something in the distance although I was not sure what it was. I was stiff from my sleep but even now my brain was sending signals that something was wrong at the moment though I could not understand what it was. Then all of a sudden I must have come fully to and I realised that I should not have been able to see the stars above me not with the branches and leaves of the tree. I scrambled away from the tree trunk and looked at the stand of trees that I had been sat in only that afternoon. Although it was dark the starlight was bright enough to see by and what I saw had the hair on my head standing on end. For the tree that I had fallen asleep under and the rest of the trees in the stand were only a set of pointed stumps. It was as though a hurricane had happened whilst I had been asleep and had torn and splintered them. I hit myself hard in the face and it didn't half hurt but this was no dream more a nightmare the trees remained shattered stumps with the starlight illuminating them. A cloud must have moved for now the moon shone through lighting the scene before me even more and believe you me I could have done without it.

My mouth sagged open and I thought that I might lose my mind as I could finally make out what had been in front of me in place of the cemetery. It looked like miles and miles of tangled barbed wire stretching right across the front of me for as far as I could see. This had to be some kind of joke played on me by the villagers I mean it was obvious they didn't like strangers. Then there was the warning by Simone not to stay here after dark, well they wouldn't be scaring Jacko Valance with their shoddy tricks. I was turning to march back into the village and give them a piece of my mind when the night sky turned into day. Once again my mouth flew open as I saw the landscape of trenches and shell craters in front of me. Then to my further horror machine-guns started their song of death and not just from the direction of the cemetery but from that of the village as well. As I looked both ways I could

see that my little mound with its tree stumps was bang slap in the middle of both sets of trench lines. So I was effectively in No Man's Land caught between two fighting armies I must admit that I then had a little accident in my pants as the saying goes I had the 'piss scared out of me'.

More and more machine-guns were joining in and explosions were going off as well all around me I tried to tunnel into the earth behind my tree. Then as I buried my fingers into the ground trying to dig beneath it and praying to everyone and everything that might help me, promising outlandish things if I could be kept safe I was stopped in my tracks. I heard a strange kind of whooshing followed by a whistling and I saw this huge black thing falling from the sky. I watched this in fascination as it fell faster towards my little hill I don't know how but I knew it was either a shell or something similar. My one last thought was this is the end of Jacko Valance; there would be no more articles no more drinking beer or smoking. In fact all the pleasures in life the women I had known and the ones I was yet to know would all be gone the pleasure of a good meal or a laugh and joke with family or friends all no more. In that instance I knew exactly what all the men in all the cemeteries that I had visited had given up and it filled me with awe at their sacrifice. I was also sorry that I had not found out who the men were in my little cemetery but there was no chance of that now, nor was there any of telling Simone that she was right about the night here.

The noise of the shell now somehow seemed to cease and there was a kind of silence I closed my eyes and commended my soul to god. There was a flash like a sun burst then darkness again when I opened my eyes I could not believe I was still alive. I checked myself there was not a scratch or a hair out of place on me. I couldn't believe my luck it must have been a dud shell that had come down and not exploded I raised my head and looked round. I had been wrong about the shell somehow for the hill I was led on now had a large smouldering crater in it were the stand of trees had been. The stump I had hid behind was gone and I was led on the craters lip and now I could smell the cordite and the scorched earth. I tried to work out what was happening as the bullets and explosions petered out and darkness and silence descended again. I slid down the crater a bit and racked my brains for an explanation but I couldn't seem to figure out what was happening. Then I heard moaning coming from over on my right and then a screaming that rose and fell and rose and fell until I thought my eardrums would burst. I looked across trying to figure out where this poor soul who must have been in agony was lying it seemed to be further off than the man who was moaning. It was then that the hairs on my neck stood up again I could here the sound of something being dragged along the ground towards my hiding place in the crater.

I froze not sure what to do as the sound of the dragging got closer and then something came rolling down the crater followed by someone jumping in. I squealed like a stuck pig and felt sure that the wetness in the back of my trousers was not from the ground; I pulled my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms round them. I could now hear and make out the shape of a man moaning softly while another bent over him. This man seemed to be

looking after him and was saying. "Hold on there Dusty try to keep the noise down mate otherwise the Hun's will be all over us." He felt down the man's body with his hands checking for wounds all of a sudden there was a loud moan. I heard the man again. "It's me Dusty Jimmy listen I am sorry about that but I have to find out what's wrong. You've been hit in the legs mate so we will wait here for a bit then I will get you back." I could see he was trying to wrap something round the legs of his pal probably to stop the bleeding. The screaming started again and this time just went on and on till finally there was a shot and everything went silent. "Thank god for that Dusty one of our snipers must have put yon poor bugger out of his misery and not before time if you ask me". I was appalled by the callousness of what had just been said and forgetting about my try not to be seen approach I crawled over towards them. When I got close enough I said. "I know the poor sod was injured and screaming but there was no need for someone to shoot him surely."

The man who I could see was a Corporal from the stripes on his arm took no notice of my presence, or to what I had said. "Tell you what Dusty that poor bugger was gut shot, it's a good job that sniper got him otherwise he might have lasted for hours or even days in agony. The Germans leave them out in No Man's Land and then when one of ours tries to rescue them the German snipers get them." As I listened to this I was struck by the coincidence of me asking the question and of the Corporal explaining to his mate. Something else was nagging at the back of my mind as well but it had not yet fully formed. Well I thought I have no idea what the hell was going on here but in for a penny and all that. I moved closer to the Corporal thinking I would ask him for some help, and then I thought what can I say to him. Excuse me but I don't know what's going on or happening here I am from eighty odd years in the future. That would go down as well as vegetables at a cannibal's picnic; the Corporal would probably think I was mad and shoot me. Instead of this I pointed to myself. "Hello my names Jacko Valance and I seem to be a bit lost I would be grateful for any help you could give me." I was looking right in the Corporals eyes but once again he neither acknowledged that he had seen or heard me.

Then like being clapped round the head with a baseball bat it hit me these people couldn't see me I was like a ghost to them as much as they were to me. That was why the shell never hurt me it was like I was superimposed on an old film although I was there and could hear and see everything and to a certain extent smell and absorb what was happening. There was no way that any of this could really touch me I could watch these people and events in real time to them as a kind of movie. What was happening here was what had happened to these men on one night during the First World War. I looked at the Corporal and his friend dizzy with what had just struck me the whole concept of what was happening was hard to get my head round. I reached my hand out and touched the Corporal I could feel the rough khaki of his tunic but he did not feel me as such instead he shivered like a wet dog. Looked at his mate and said. "The ghosts are about again tonight Dusty I could have sworn one of them just grabbed my arm." I sat watching them wondering what to do next and although a part of me wanted to stay with these men and see what happened my common sense told me to get the hell out of there.

I climbed out of the shell hole with the intentions of walking back to the village but after taking a few paces to my utter bewilderment I found myself back in the crater near the Corporal and wounded man. I could not understand this and tried again to leave and get to the village but the same thing happened. I sat back and tried to work out logically in my mind what was happening it was obvious that I was trapped here with these two soldiers so I would have to play things by ear. I watched the Corporal drag the wounded man to the top of the crater and over the edge. I scrambled up behind them then I heard the Corporal. "Right Dusty it's time to get back to our own lines lickety spit so I will kneel on all fours and you will have to pull yourself onto my back." I watched the Corporal kneel and the wounded man pulled himself onto his back the trouble came when the Corporal stood up. For it was now that he had to grab the wounded legs of the man, there was a scream of pain and the Corporal stood dead still he was looking towards the German trench line in front of the village. Luck must have been with him as no lights lit up the sky nor did any machine-guns bark. He started back towards the British wire and lines and I accompanied him smiling as I knew my theory about staying with these men had been right. For as we walked towards the trench line I was not returned to the shell-hole as had happened before so I just tagged along with them.

I could hear the Corporal talking under his breath. "One foot in front of the other that's the way to do it one bit at a time. You lucky dog Dusty you will soon be tucked up in a nice clean bed with nurses looking after you." He stopped again as a moan came from his mate's lips. "Quite Dusty lad or it won't be the nurses looking after you and me but the angels." He set off again. "You'll be well out of this lot Dusty god knows what shit the brass has thought up for us next, no doubt we will have to try for another prisoner after this latest cock-up." He cut across at an angle and I followed him I could see a gap in the barbed wire that we were now approaching. The Corporal started talking again. "This is the hard part Dusty lad we don't want any trigger happy sentries blowing our heads off do we now." We were passing down the gap in the wire now when I heard. "Halt who goes there?" Then. "Cock Robin", was whispered in our direction. The Corporal answered. "Tipperary." Then I heard. "Pass through friend." We came to the edge of the trench and the Corporal said. "Give us a hand I've got Dusty here and he's wounded in the legs." I saw shapes materialize from the trench and unload Dusty from the Corporals back and pass him down into the trench. The Corporal followed and I came after him as we reached the bottom I heard the sentry say. "What was that?" The Corporal asked. "What is it?" I heard the sentry say. "I was sure that I caught sight of something coming down the ladder behind you." He looked at the ladder again in bewilderment and fear not knowing what had happened. The Corporal shook his head. "Never mind lad it will have been a ghost, their walking around tonight I'm sure one has been with me since I found Dusty." Then he laughed out loud a crazy kind of laugh that he stopped abruptly.

The sentry said. "The Captain wants to see you Corporal a.s.a.p. so if I was you I would get along there lickety spit you know what he's like. It's even worse now because the raid failed and the bloody brass is in uproar." The

Corporal got a cigarette off the sentry lit it and took a deep drag of it exhaling smoke through his nose and mouth with great pleasure then he turned and walked down the trench. I followed after him it was as I passed the sentry that he shivered. "Bloody ghosts why don't you bugger off over to the Huns." I had to smile at this as I made my way down the trench following the Corporal it was then that I noticed the god awful smell in the trench. This seemed to be made up of shit something that smelled of chloride and a sweet sickly cloying smell that I knew was something decomposing. You see I had once found a dead cat that had been lying around sometime that smelled just like this only this was a thousand times worse. I wondered how the men we passed could live in conditions like this, but for some reason it did not seem to bother them or they were used to it. On we went until we came to a wooden frame set into the trench wall the Corporal shoved a sheet back revealing light coming from behind it. He stepped through I looked round and then followed him then I heard. "Shut that bloody curtain someone." The curtain was closed behind me sealing the light once again.

The place we had stepped into was some kind of dugout lit by candles and a storm lantern, around a table in the middle stood two officers and a sergeant. They appeared to be studying a map and various sheaves of paper. One of the officers looked up and spoke. "Ah there you are Corporal Spring I thought we had lost you to the Hun." The officer smiled and handed him a cigarette the Corporal took it and lit it he blew smoke out spitting tobacco off his lip. The officer went on. "I know it went bad on the raid in fact it has gone bad on all the raids we have launched in this sector." The Corporal nodded. "It was as though they were waiting for us Sir; they must have known we were coming over either that or their bloody good guessers." The officer smiled. "Yes our luck hasn't been too good of late let's hope it changes for the better." The Captain who had been studying the map and documents looked at the man in front of him. "None of that matters anymore Corporal the staff has decided that we are going to launch a surprise attack later on tonight." He looked at the rest of the people round the table. "It would seem that we cannot allow the Hun to reinforce his line or to make a strong point of the village so an attack has got to go in."

The Corporal who looked older than time itself just stared at the Captain who coughed and carried on. "I know it's not perfect and we could have used a prisoner but brigade don't think the Hun has that many troops facing us as yet. He is busy in other places and this at the moment is just a tiny salient. However it will not be long before he moves more troops here so we attack tonight and catch him on the back foot." The Lieutenant spoke. "But surely Sir the raids tonight will have the enemy on their toes they will be expecting an attack." The Captain looked at the Lieutenant weighing up what he had said. "Yes they will expect an attack but they will think we are coming in the morning with artillery and whistles blowing all over the place. They won't expect us nipping over tonight in complete silence just imagine this as a big raid and things will be fine." The Lieutenant looked like he was about to say something else but kept his mouth shut and looked down at the floor. The Captain looked at everyone again. "Right here are your orders." He proceeded to brief the people round the table on their objectives. While this

was going on I looked round the dugout, besides the table and a rickety old chair there was a bunk bed that seemed to be made out of chicken wire and bits of wood. There was a smaller table off to one side with an old fashioned telephone on it bayonets shoved into the earth walls of the dugouts on which hung equipment and clothing. On top of all this was an aroma of wet wool, smoke, burning paraffin and candles the ever present smell of urine and excrement and what smelled like frying bacon.

The meeting was breaking up and I followed the Corporal and Lieutenant out into the trench as they walked along it the Lieutenant turned to him. "We have a hard nut to crack Corporal Spring but I think we are up to it." I saw the Corporal's face in the light of a fire we were passing and it didn't look like he thought they were up to it. He spoke. "That's all very well Sir but if we do get through and go all out for the German headquarters in the village the rest of the Regiment better get up bloody quick or we will be left hanging on the line." The Lieutenant with a grim face nodded. "Yes I know we will be out on a limb for a short time but we have been promised that the support will be there." Spring grunted in disgust. The Lieutenant went on. "Just think what a great honour we've been given the Colonel must think a great deal of us to trust us with this task." The Lieutenant stopped next to a hole excavated in the trench wall. "I just want to write a few letters Corporal you know before the off, you know in case." The Lieutenant shrugged and his words trailed off. Spring nodded and was turning to go when the Lieutenant stopped him. "Tell the men that I will have a word with them before we go over the top if you will just brief them on what we are doing I will fill in the details later." Spring nodded. "Right you are then Sir the lads will be ready and waiting for you at what time shall we say?" He thought about this. "Well the attack will start at 2 ack emma so shall we say 1 ack emma that will give us time for the details and to check equipment and so on." Spring saluted and started off back down the trench shaking his head as he went I followed.

I could hear him muttering to himself. "Stupid bloody Lieutenant, oh Corporal we should be honoured at getting this chance." He kicked at an abandoned steel helmet on the floor. "What's so honourable about getting your head blown off I'd like to know, the Colonel must think a lot of us, oh yes he thinks so much of us that he is sending us on a bloody suicide mission." Spring stopped dead he looked towards the top of the parapet and my eyes followed his though I wish they hadn't. Running along the top was what at first I took to be a cat but on second glance turned out to be the biggest rat I had ever seen in my life and believe you me I had known some big rats in my time. It stopped and glared at Spring its eyes glowing in the flickering light of the trench it was then I saw that it was carrying a human hand in its mouth. I wretched and felt sick to the pit of my stomach even though in my present state nothing obviously came up. The rat continued to glare at Spring but it had no fear it just watched and I heard him say. "Bloody rat's got the taste for human flesh have you." He laughed and his hand felt along the wall of the trench while he continued to watch the rat. I saw his hand stop and curl round a bayonet stuck into the wall. Then quick as a flash he pulled it and threw it at the rat shouting. "Get a taste for this whilst you're at it." The bayonet spun end over end towards its target but the rat was quicker and bounded away just as

it hit the spot where it had been. Spring laughed again. "Next time you bastard oh yes next time I will nail you if I survive tonight. If I don't maybe you'll be feasting on me come tomorrow you never know."

In the next part of the trench he came upon seven men all sat or sprawled on the fire step some smoking others talking and joking. One of the men said. "Well if it isn't Corporal Spring I thought the Huns had got you for sure this time." Spring looked at the man with contempt. "No but they got Dusty Miller Tattersall so don't you look so fucking smug you little shit." The Private started to stutter. "But I didn't mean anything Corporal it was just a bit of joshing with you." Spring grinned but there was no humour in it. "Well let's see how you're joshing a few hours from now when we go over the top, I reckon the laugh will be on the other side of your face then." The Private went white in the face and the rest of the men all started asking questions at the same time. Spring held his hands up and they all went quite except for a tall man who said. "Is it right Corporal we have a push on for tonight?" Spring looked at the man and gave him a wan smile. "Aye Sam its right enough the Regiment have to straighten the line out and that means taking the village over yonder and the Hun trenches along with it."

I watched as a young boy who didn't look sixteen asked. "Why us Corporal why do we always have to go over the top." His lower lip was quivering and he looked as though he was going to burst out crying. Spring looked at him and shook his head. "It's what we get paid for Anson somebody has to keep the Hun in check." But the young boy still didn't look convinced and he hung his head looking at the trench floor. Spring went on. "Now for the good news, we have been volunteered to push on to the village and take out the Hun H.Q." So once we get over his trench line keep going like the clappers and head for the village that is providing we even reach his trench line." There was a collective groan from the men and enough swearing to make a docker blush then everything quietened down as Springs bombshell began to sink in. The one called Tattersall shouted. "This is a fucking joke; it's a suicide mission that's what it is none of us will survive this." Spring laughed, "That's right Tattersall but look on the bright side you won't have to put up with these shitty trenches any more when you're dead. So stop squealing like a native bint that's lost her virginity and start acting like a soldier." Tattersall sat down on the firing step all the cockiness had been knocked out of him and he looked like a deflated balloon huddled against the trench wall.

Spring continued. "Right there will be a briefing and equipment check at 1 ack emma we go over the top at 2 ack emma. No artillery just a straight race for the Huns trenches and if we are lucky we may catch him by surprise hopefully." There were groans and laughter at this Spring carried on. "Alright no comedians please, if you can get some sleep get it now if not right a letter to your nearest and dearest I will be back later to check on you." With this promise Spring walked off leaving the men in a state of shock and muttering to themselves. I decided to go exploring by myself and leave Spring for a bit so I glided off in the opposite direction. The trench twisted and turned but finally ended where it had caved in, an explosion at some time must have caused the damage. As I stared at the wall of piled up dirt I noticed white

sticks jutting out from the soil it was only when I looked at them carefully that I realised they were bones. I recoiled in horror and a feeling of sadness passed through my body at the thought of these young men's deaths.

I started back along the trench to where Spring had left his men and I still could not believe that this was happening to me in a time that was not mine and in which I did not belong. I came upon Spring's section again as they were checking their equipment. As I came upon them a man who looked a lot older than the rest shivered he had a worn out face and sported a gravy-dipper moustache. He reminded me of a blood hound with his hound-dog expression as he said. "No good will come of tonight, you mark my words no good what so ever." He shook his head to emphasise the point. The man called Sam laughed. "Rest easy dad Spring won't let us down he will make sure were alright." The one called Tattersall snorted. "Spring be damned what good is he going to do us when the Hun machine-guns start rattling." Sam looked at the speaker with contempt in his eyes. "You just keep your trap shut Billy Tattersall; Spring knows more than you ever will and if you get knocked off it will be no great loss to anyone." For the second time that night Tattersall's face went white he looked like he might have liked to reply but like all cowards he turned away muttering to himself.

The rest of the group stood and put on their webbing shouldering their rifles some talking quietly while others seemed lost in thought. Cigarettes were lit and cupped in hands to hide the red ends of them from any hostile eyes. I heard a movement and then Spring came round the corner with two more young lads who were carrying a flat wooden box between them. They set it down and stood to one side Spring spoke. "Alright you bombers come on over here with your pouches and load up." He opened the top of the box with a bayonet and I could see grenades inside it, three men came forward with webbing pouches. Spring passed them grenades and they stowed them away inside the bags for later in the night, they then went back to where they had been standing. Another movement then I heard Spring say. "Attention men." I heard the reply. "That's alright Corporal the men can stand easy." it was the Captain I had seen earlier and Spring's Lieutenant who had turned up.

The men stood there moving their boots up and down in a sweeping motion in the mud at a loss of what to do as the Captain addressed them. "Now then lads this is a great honour that the Colonel has bestowed on you do him proud. I cannot state how important it is that you attack the Hun HQ Whatever happens you must get through and destroy it and the personnel who are there." A few of the men coughed most looked quite white in the face at the task they had been given. The Captain spoke again. "I will now hand you over to Lieutenant Timmins now for your final briefing and checks. However before I do the Colonel personally instructed me to wish you good luck and god speed and to this I add my own best wishes for a safe and successful outcome to tonight's attack." With this little speech over the Captain saluted the men and the Lieutenant stepped forward. "I am sure that we would wish to thank the Colonel and Captain Donaldson for their kind thoughts and to also wish them well for tonight." There was a low mutter of. "Speak for yourself." Then a laugh rang out which Spring put a quick stop to.

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