
Opening Extract from...

Everyone Brave is Forgiven

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PART I

PRESERVATION

War was declared at 11.15 and Mary North signed up at noon. She did it at lunch, before telegrams came, in case her mother said no. She left finishing school unfinished. Skiing down from Mont-Choisi, she ditched her equipment at the foot of the slope and telegraphed the War Office from Lausanne. Nineteen hours later she reached St Pancras, in clouds of steam, still wearing her alpine sweater. The train's whistle screamed. London, then. It was a city in love with beginnings.

She went straight to the War Office. The ink still smelled of salt on the map they issued her. She rushed across town to her assignment, desperate not to miss a minute of the war but anxious she already had. As she ran through Trafalgar Square waving for a taxi, the pigeons flew up before her and their clacking wings were a thousand knives tapped against claret glasses, praying silence. Any moment now it would start – this dreaded and wonderful thing – and could never be won without her.

What was war, after all, but morale in helmets and Jeeps? And what was morale if not one hundred million little conversations, the sum of which might leave men brave enough to advance? The true heart of war was small talk, in which Mary was wonderfully expert. The morning matched her mood, without cloud or equivalence in memory. In London under lucent skies ten thousand young women were hurrying to their new positions, on orders from Whitehall, from chambers unknowable in the old

marble heart of the beast. Mary joined gladly the great flow of the willing.

The War Office had given no further details, and this was a good sign. They would make her a liaison, or an attaché to a general's staff. All the speaking parts went to girls of good family. It was even rumoured that they needed spies, which appealed most of all since one might be oneself twice over.

Mary flagged down a cab and showed her map to the driver. He held it at arm's length, squinting at the scrawled red cross that marked where she was to report. She found him unbearably slow.

'This big building, in Hawley Street?'

'Yes,' said Mary. 'As quick as you like.'

'It's Hawley Street School, isn't it?'

'I shouldn't think so. I'm to report for war work, you see.'

'Oh. Only I don't know what else it could be around there but the school. The rest of that street is just houses.'

Mary opened her mouth to argue, then stopped and tugged at her gloves. Because of course they didn't have a glittering tower, just off Horse Guards, labelled 'Ministry of Wild Intrigue'. Naturally they would have her report somewhere innocuous.

'Right then,' she said. 'I expect I am to be made a schoolmistress.'

The man nodded. 'Makes sense, doesn't it? Half the schoolmasters in London must be joining up for the war.'

'Then let's hope the cane proves effective against the enemy's tanks.'

The man drove them to Hawley Street with no more haste than the delivery of one more schoolmistress would merit. Mary was careful to adopt the expression an ordinary young woman might wear – a girl for whom the taxi ride would be an unaccustomed extravagance, and for whom the prospect of work as a schoolteacher would seem a thrill. She made her face suggest the

kind of sincere immersion in the present moment that she imagined dairy animals must also enjoy, or geese.

Arriving at the school, she felt observed. In character, she tipped the taxi driver a quarter of what she would normally have given him. This was her first test, after all. She put on the apologetic walk of an ordinary girl presenting for interview. As if the air resented being parted. As if the ground shrieked from the wound of each step.

She found the headmistress's office and introduced herself. Miss Vine nodded but wouldn't look up from her desk. Avian and cardiganed, spectacles on a bath-plug chain.

'North,' said Mary again, investing the name with its significance.

'Yes, I heard you quite well. You are to take Kestrel Class. Begin with the register. Learn their names as smartly as you can.'

'Very good,' said Mary.

'Have you taught before?'

'No,' said Mary, 'but I can't imagine there's much to it.'

The headmistress fixed her with two wintry pools. 'Your imagination is not on the syllabus.'

'Forgive me. No, I have never taught before.'

'Very well. Be firm, give no liberties, and do not underestimate the importance of the child forming his letters properly. As the hand, the mind.'

Mary felt that the 'headmistress' was overdoing it, rather. She might mention it to the woman's superior, once she discovered what outfit she was really joining. Although in mitigation, the woman's attention to detail was impressive. Here were pots of sharpened pencils; tins of drawing pins. Here was a tidy stack of hymn books, each one covered in a different wallpaper, just as children would really have done the job if one had tasked them with it in the first week of the new school year.

The headmistress glanced up. 'I can't imagine what you are smirking at.'

'Sorry,' said Mary, unable to keep the glint of communication from her eyes, and slightly flustered when it wasn't returned.

'Kestrels,' said the headmistress. 'Along the corridor, third on the left.'

When Mary entered the classroom thirty-one children fell silent at their hinge-top desks. They watched her, owl-eyed, heads pivoting. They might be eight or ten years old, she supposed – although of course children suffered dreadfully from invisibility and required a conscious adjustment of the eye in order to be focused on at all.

'Good morning, class. My name is Mary North.'

'*Good morning Miss North*.'

The children chanted it in the ageless tone exactly between deference and mockery, so perfectly that Mary's stomach lurched. It was all just too realistic.

She taught them mathematics before lunch and composition after, hoping that a curtain would finally be whisked away; that her audition would give way to her recruitment. When the bell rang for the end of the day she ran to the nearest post office and dashed off an indignant telegram to the War Office, wondering if there'd been some mistake.

There was no mistake, of course. For every reproach that would be laid at London's door in the great disjunction to come – for all the convoys missing their escorts in fog, for all the breeches shipped with mismatched barrels, for all the lovers supplied with hearts of the wrong calibre – it was never once alleged that the grand old capital did not excel at letting one know, precisely, where one's fight was to begin.

SEPTEMBER, 1939

Mary almost wept when she learned that her first duty as a schoolmistress would be to evacuate her class to the countryside. And when she discovered that London had evacuated its zoo animals days before its children, she was furious. If one must be exiled, then at least the capital ought to value its children more highly than macaws and musk oxen.

She checked her lipstick in a pocket mirror, then raised her hand.

'Yes, Miss North?'

'Isn't it a shame to evacuate the animals first?'

She said it in full hearing of all the children, who were lined up at their muster point outside the empty London Zoo, waiting to be evacuated. They gave a timid cheer. The headmistress eyed Mary coolly, which made her doubt herself. But surely it was wrong to throw the beasts the first lifeline? Wasn't that the weary old man's choice Noah had made: filling the ark with dumb livestock instead of lively children who might answer back? This was how the best roots of humanity had drowned. This was why men were the violent inbreds of Ham and Shem and Japheth, capable of declaring for war a season that Mary had earmarked for worsted.

The headmistress only sighed. So: the delay was simply because one did not need to write a marmoset's name on a luggage tag, accompany it in a second-class train compartment

and billet it with a suitable host family in the Cotswolds. The lower primates only wanted a lorry for the trip and a good feed at the other end, while the higher hominidae, with names like Henry and Sarah, had a multiplicity of needs which a diligent bureaucracy had not only to anticipate but also to meet, and furthermore to document, on forms which must first come back from the printers.

'I see,' said Mary. 'Thank you.'

Of course it was that. She hated being eighteen. The insights and indignations burned through one's good sense like hot coals through oven gloves. So, this was why London still teemed with children while London Zoo stood vacant, with three hundred halfpenny portions of monkey nuts in their little twists of newspaper waiting unsold and forlorn in the kiosk.

She raised her hand again, then let it drop.

'Yes?' said Miss Vine. 'Was there something else?'

'Sorry,' said Mary. 'It was nothing.'

'Oh good.'

The headmistress took her eye off the ranks of the children for a moment. She fixed Mary with a look that was not without charity.

'Remember you're on our side now. You know: the grown-ups.'

Mary could almost feel her bones cracking with resentment. 'Thank you, Miss Vine.'

This was when the school's only coloured child, sensing an opening, slipped away from the muster and scaled the padlocked main gate of the zoo. The headmistress spun round.

'Zachary Lee! Come back here immediately!'

'Or what? You'll send me to the countryside?'

The whole school gasped. Ten years old, invincible, the negro boy saluted. He scissored his skinny brown legs over the top of the gate, using the penultimate and the ultimate wrought-iron

Os of LONDON ZOO as the hoops of a pommel horse, and was immediately lost to sight.

Miss Vine turned to Mary. 'You had better bring the nigger back, don't you think?'

It was her first rescue work of the war. Coppery, coltish Mary North searched the abandoned zoo using paths that were still well tended. On her own, she felt better. She sneaked a cigarette. She massaged her brow with the other hand, confident that frustration could be persuaded not to settle there. All downers could be dispatched, as one might flick ash off one's sleeve, or pilot a wayward bee back out through an open window.

She had already checked the giraffes' paddock and the big cats' dens. Now, hearing a cough, she tiptoed into the great apes' enclosure through a gate that swung unlatched. She kicked through the straw, raising a scent of urine and musk that made her heart rattle with fright. But she hoped it was not easily done, for a zookeeper to miss a whole gorilla when he was counting them into the evacuation lorry.

'Come on out, Zachary Lee, I know you're in here.'

It was eerie to be in the gorilla house, looking out through the smeared glass. 'Oh do come on, Zachary darling. You'll get us both in trouble.'

A second cough, and a rustle under the straw. Then, with his soft American accent, 'I'm not coming out.'

'Fine then,' said Mary. 'The two of us shall rot here until the war is over, and nobody will ever know what talent we might have shown in its prosecution.'

She sat down beside the boy, first laying her red jacket on the straw to sit on, with the rosy silk lining downwards. It was hard to stay glum. One could say what one liked about the war but it had got her out of Mont-Choisi ahead of an afternoon of double

French, and might yet have more mercies in store. She lit another cigarette and blew the smoke into a shaft of sunlight.

'May I have one?' said the small voice.

'Beautifully asked,' said Mary. 'And no. Not until you are eleven.'

From the muster point came the sound of a tin whistle. It could mean that heavy bombers were converging on London, or it could mean that the children had been organised into two roughly matched teams to begin a game of rounders.

Zachary poked his head up through the straw. It still amazed Mary to see his brown skin, his chestnut eyes. The first time he had smiled, the flash of his pink tongue had delighted her. She had imagined it would be – well, not brown also, but certainly as antithetical to pink as brown skin was to white. A bluish tongue, perhaps, like a skink's. It would not have surprised her to learn that his blood came out black and his faeces a pale ivory. He was the first negro she had seen up close – if one didn't count the posters advertising minstrelsy and coon shows – and she still struggled not to gawk.

The straw clung to his hair. 'Miss?' he said, 'Why did they take the animals away?'

'Different reasons in each case,' said Mary, counting them off on her fingers. 'The hippopotami because they are such frightful cowards, the wolves since one can never be entirely sure whose side they are on, and the lions because they are to be parachuted directly into Berlin Zoo to take on Herr Hitler's big cats.'

'So the animals are at war too?'

'Well of course they are. Wouldn't it be absurd if it were just us?'

The boy's expression, suggesting that he had not previously taken the matter under consideration.

'What are two sevens?' asked Mary, taking advantage.

The boy began his reckoning, in the deliberate and dutiful manner of a child who intended to persevere at least until he ran

out of fingers. Not for the first time that week, Mary suppressed both a smile and a delightful suspicion that teaching might not be the worst way to spend the idle hours between breakfast and society.

On Tuesday morning, after taking the register and before distributing milk in little glass bottles, Mary had written the names of her thirty-one children on brown luggage labels and looped them through the top buttonholes of their overcoats. Of course the children had exchanged labels with one another the second her back was turned. They were only human, even if they hadn't yet made the effort to become tall.

And of course she had insisted on calling them by their exchanged names – even for boys named Elaine and girls named Peter – while maintaining an entirely straight face. It delighted her that she could make them laugh so easily. It turned out that the only difference between children and adults was that children were prepared to put twice the energy into the project of not being sad.

'Is it twelve?' said Zachary.

'Is what twelve?'

'Two *sevens*,' he reminded her, in the exasperated tone reserved for adults who asked questions with no thought to the expenditure of emotion that went into answering.

Mary nodded her apology. 'Twelve is jolly close.'

The tin whistle, sounding again. Above the enclosures, seagulls wheeled in hope. The memory of feeding time persisted. Mary felt an ache. All the world's timetables fluttered through blue sky now, vagrant on the winds.

'Thirteen?'

Mary smiled. 'Would you like me to show you? You're a bright boy but you're ten years old and you are miles behind with your numbers. I don't believe anyone can have taken the trouble to teach you.'

She knelt in the straw, took his hands – it still amazed her that they were no hotter than white hands – and showed him how to count forwards seven more, starting from seven. 'Do you see now? Seven, plus seven more, is fourteen. It is simply about not stopping.'

'Oh.'

The surprised and disappointed air boys had when magic yielded so bloodlessly to reason.

'So what would be three sevens, Zachary, now you have two of them already?'

He examined his outstretched fingers, then looked up at her.

'How long?' he said.

'How long what?'

'How long are they sending us away for?'

'Until London is safe again. It shouldn't be too long.'

'I'm scared to go to the country. I wish my father could come.'

'None of the parents can come with us. Their work is vital for the war.'

'Do you believe that?'

Mary shook her head briskly. 'Of course not. Most people's work is nonsense at the best of times, don't you think? Actuaries and loss adjusters and professors of Eggy-Peggy. Most of them would be more useful reciting limericks and stuffing their socks with glitter.'

'My father plays in the minstrel show at the Lyceum. Is that useful?'

'For morale, certainly. If minstrels weren't needed I daresay they'd have been evacuated days ago. On a gospel train, don't you think?'

The boy refused to smile. 'They won't want me in the countryside.'

'Why on earth wouldn't they?'

The pained expression children had, when one was irredeemably obtuse.

'Oh, I see. Well, I daresay they will just be awfully curious. I suppose you can expect to be poked and prodded a little, but once they understand that it won't wash off I'm sure they won't hold it against you. People are jolly fair, you know.'

The boy seemed lost in thought.

'Anyway,' said Mary, 'I'm coming to wherever-it-is we're going. I promise I shan't leave you.'

'They'll hate me.'

'Nonsense. Was it minstrels who invaded Poland? Was it a troupe of theatre negroes who occupied the Sudetenland?'

He gave her a patient look.

'See?' said Mary. 'The countryside will prefer you to the Germans.'

'I still don't want to go.'

'Oh, but that's the fun of it, don't you see? It's a simply enormous game of go-where-you're-jolly-well-told. Everyone who's anyone is playing.'

She was surprised to realise that she didn't mind it at all, being sent away. It really was a giant roulette – this was how one ought to see it. The children would get a taste of country air, and she . . . well, what was the countryside if not numberless Heathcliffs, loosely tethered?

Let us imagine, she thought, *that this war will surprise us all*. Let us suppose that the evacuation train will take us somewhere wild, far from these decorous streets where every third person has an anecdote about my mother, or votes in my father's constituency.

She imagined herself in the country, in a pretty village of vivid young people thrown into a new pattern by the war. It would be like the turning of a kaleidoscope, only with gramophones and dancing. Just to show her friend Hilda, she would fall in love with the first man who was even slightly interesting.