The Soldier's Return

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Extract

PROLOGUE

She got an atlas in the reference section of the library and sought out Burma. In the poky little room above the fire station in the Council yard, she stared at the name and tried to imagine what it was like to be there. She was not allowed to take it home but she returned to it more than once, willing it to yield up comfort.

Later she found a book which had a few dull pages on Burma but the photographs engrossed her: exotic-looking birds, houses built of wood, gigantic tropical forests – she could tell their size because there was a picture of elephants in a clearing – lovely smiling women in beautiful clothes, and pagodas, all sizes, some as big as the tower on Highmoor.

She mentioned the elephants and the pagodas in her letters.

He kept the letters deep in his kitbag, wrapped in a square of yellow oilskin. Every day he touched the wad of them: every morning. He knew that if he failed to do that, his luck would go.

The boy could not truthfully remember his father, not at all, but she referred to him in everyday ways and there was a presence in

the child's mind which became like a memory as the years went by.

He had not thought the war would take him away for years, and so far away. Nor had she, but they were in an old island story, centuries of the men going across the sea to fight, leaving the women to weave the days, waiting at home. Yet sometimes she was glad for her new independent life. She doused her guilt by telling her son that his father would be home soon.

If he fought for any one thing it was to get back to her. And now the battles were over.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

What was he frightened of, she wondered, as he burrowed his knees into her thighs and clutched at her through the cotton nightgown. She had been awake for some time, trying not to cough. In the hollow of the mattress, swaddled in too many blankets, the young woman felt a film of sweat on her brow and on her throat. The child had been uneasy all through the night; twice he had called out and prodded her with small soft fists. She, too, prickled with restlessness.

She tried to shift away from him, needing to stretch, but he held on more fiercely and even moaned a little. Perhaps they had had the same fearful and excited dreams, she thought, as the boy nuzzled his face between her shoulder blades.

Despite herself she began to cough, a barked, repressed sound which shook through her. The boy flung away and rolled over, leaving a narrow channel between them – a sword's width. The young woman turned on to her back, breathed in as deeply as she could and felt relief ripple through her body. Her hands ran down it, as if smoothing it out, making it ready.

After a while she reached across to touch her son and closed her

eyes to meet the comforting slow surge of dark colour and swirl of movement, a universe of its own in her mind. She would travel there until it was time to start the big day. What time he would return she had not been told, but the day had been named. After the years, it had come so suddenly she felt breathless.

About two hours later, less than a mile outside the town, the black iron locomotive broke down again and stood inert in the bare Northern landscape. A groan ran through the carriages crammed with soldiers on the last lap of their odyssey. Still more patience demanded, even so near the end.

Sam was next to the window. He looked out and lit up. His batch would be first off. The train was headed for the west coast, calling at all the small towns and villages along the way, decanting soldiers. These men had made the longest journey back from the war.

Beside him were the rest of the solo whist school which had been in continuous session for almost six weeks, since the last sighting of the shores of India. A few miles back, in Carlisle, the regimental city, they had finally put the game to bed. Sam had vowed never again to play solo whist as long as he lived.

After the stop, the men dozed again. They were as practised in catnaps as they were in drill. Only Jackie was wide awake, rarely taking his eyes off Sam. He had not been part of Sam's section in Burma but, on the boat, he had used the fact that they had known each other back in the little town as an excuse to tag along. Sam smiled at him and said 'I'm browned off with this'. The stopping and queuing and the many

unexplained halts had been just about bearable until now. With their town only a few fields away, a rush of frustration strained at his practised tolerance.

'I went mushrooming in a field over there one time,' Jackie said, nervously pointing it out. 'Never seen the like. Thousands. Whiter than white. Stripped the lot. Straight up to "King" Haney's in Water Street for him to get them off to Newcastle on the nine o'clock train. Made a fortune. Took the lot.'

Jackie's prattling had aroused a couple of the others and all of them now stared out of the motionless window looking at the dawn light stroking their native fields.

They were home. They really were. They were home. They could let the expectation loose now. Just across those fields, hidden over the hill whose rim was being more and more firmly pencilled by the steel light, was their town. They had made it back.

Sam stared hard. His mother had worked on the farm over there. He had courted Ellen in a lane which twisted down to this railway line from the Carlisle road. Abruptly he yanked the leather strap and let the window fall down. The air was so very sweet, the sounds, the farmyard, hedgerow, a light wind in the wires, just as seductive.

'Let's walk!' It was spoken like an order.

They followed him. It would be for the last time, and they knew it. Ex-corporal (once busted) Samuel Richardson, late of D Company, Ninth Battalion, The Border Regiment, 17th India Division, 14th Army. Late, too, of the war against the Japanese in Burma, and an awesome victory, sometimes fought out hand to hand, ancient warfare in sub-tropical violence against the fanaticism of a cruel warrior race. Now finally he was leading men home.

Kitbags were shouldered, presents, souvenirs and bush hats carried carefully. They set off along the railway line, soon hitting the sleepers, soon in step.

Jackie looked behind and saw others deserting the marooned train. 'All the Wigton lads are with us!' he said. He was fearful of the consequences. 'They'll have kittens up top.'

'We're out of the army now,' Sam soothed him. 'They can't touch us any more, Jackie.'

He led the men towards a long field which would take them to the very edge of the town. Cattle and a few sheep stumbled and scampered out of the way of the half-dozen men who had scaled out and now moved, from deep discipline, in martial order. In that placid Cumbrian field, in the whitening light of first morning, Sam saw lines of the same men, many thousands of miles away, in their dark jungle-green uniforms, bayonets fixed on short Lee Enfield rifles, the vicious Gurkha kukri in their belts, fifty rounds, two grenades apiece, walking steadily into fire, never breaking step. He had felt such a total love for those men, their matter-of-fact heroism and humour in a savage, disregarded war against an enemy barbaric beyond their understanding. It would be hard to beat. For a few moments he was there again and the silhouettes marching between the docile beasts were a dawn patrol swiftly sweeping up the hill to take the town.

Sam grabbed a strand of barbed wire to press it down and the points jabbed into his palm. A terrible image disrupted his mind, pumping through it, straining at his skull so that his mouth opened to cry out. Never to think of that. He had to control that. It had got worse since they had joined the ship in India. He had to learn to blank it out. The past must be buried or it would bury him. He took a deep breath.

'Come on marra!'

Jackie's use of the warm local dialect word for friend helped unlock him. He licked his palm. Pin-pricks.

On top of Howrigg bank, Sam stopped to look across the town, from the mock-Venetian bell-tower on Highmoor on the south side to the tall, grim chimney clearing chemical smoke from the factory on the north, and between those two the huddle and accretion of centuries. Narrow, twisting alleys, weavers' cottages, medieval archways, runnels slit between unsteady houses, Nonconformist sandstone chapels, the church in which his son had been baptised, quaint Victorian shops and hidden strips of land whose lie and use pre-dated the Conquest. The lives of near on five thousand souls, many from families dug in for generations, were penned together in the small fertile bowl less than a mile from the remains of the most remote military road in the Roman Empire.

With the barest of farewells the others hurried past him as the sun rose and warmed their backs. It was the completion of the circle which had plucked them out and taken them halfway across the world to fight in a place and against a people they had scarcely heard of.

Sam hesitated, trying to settle in himself the disturbing confusions of his return. The dreams of home were tinged with dread. The place below could suck him in, the old world close over him. Nothing had changed in the town that he could see. Yet his whole world had changed.

He looked to his left—

'They're building new houses,' he said to Jackie, who had sat down on a low garden wall.

'They won't be for the likes of thee and me, Sam. They've forgot about us.'

Sam looked at Jackie and saw the old terror. But they were back now and he had carried him for long enough.

'Let's move on, Jackie.'

'We're not due 'til breakfast time.'

'C'mon, Jackie. We'll surprise them.'

'Not before I'm due. I'll bide here.'

To emphasise his resolution he took out a cigarette.

Sam paused and then, suddenly, he had not a second more to waste. It was as if he were being reeled in, furiously, down past St Cuthbert's church, over the bridge at Burnfoot, across Market Hill and there, the early sun flat on the whole terrace of tall houses, there at last and for sure would be his wife and son, waiting for him.

There were five steps up to the front door. He took them in two bounds and hammered against the brown painted door with his fist. He stood back, smiling apologetically. That knock could have raised the dead.

What if one of the others answered? He had never imagined that. But it was Ellen who threw back the door, knowing it was him, it had to be him, four years, more than four years, how many letters? The loneliness, the fear, there he was, brown and smart in his demob suit, his arms reaching out the moment he saw her, the strain of wonder and such a smile on his face. She in the plum dressing-gown, no time to get ready, looking so lovely, he thought, how could he have

forgotten how lovely? The eyes dark, almost as black as the hair which smothered his face as he closed his eyes though he wanted to see all of her, touch all of her, knowing he would remember for ever the force of those arms flung around his neck. Only this could block out everything bad, the wetness of her few tears, squeezing the life out of each other on top of the five steps with no one to see, thank God, she thought, holding without even murmuring, scarcely breathing, just standing welded as so long ago in their first months when they were not much more than children, but Ellen now such a woman, so much time to mend, absence like a wound.

Joe in his pyjamas scrambled and squirmed among their legs, fighting to part them, wanting his share, straining his neck, his face pivoted up at the double-headed swaying couple locked above him. 'Daddy! Daddy!'

Sam pulled himself away from Ellen, almost dazed from the crush of her body against his. He went back down the steps and held out his arms. 'Jump,' he said. 'Jump!'

Joe looked at his mother, who nodded. He looked at his father, fractionally hesitating.

'Jump!'

And then the boy launched himself, arms spread like wings. Sam caught him, a small bundle of boy, under the shoulders, taking the contact gently, and with one easy spring of movement, he flung his son high into the air. The boy's arms and legs splayed out, the pyjamas flowed and he yelled aloud with fearful pleasure and down and once more the strong hands – the feel of them imprinted in memory – caught him and hurled him high, so that the boy remembered being suspended for an instant, perfectly still in the sky in the white

morning light with his mother waving at the top of the steps and his father looking up, laughing, ready to catch him safely, and the world, at long last, as it should be.