

The Red Tunic

Kate Wiseman

UNCORRECTED PROOF

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*Imagine their skirts 'mong artillery wheels,
And watch for their flutter as they flee 'cross the fields
They would faint at the first drop of blood, in their sight.
What fun for us boys,—(ere we enter the fight)*

“The Women Who Went to the Field”

—Clara Barton, 1821-1912

Civil War Nurse, Humanitarian,
Founder of the American Red Cross

CHAPTER ONE

Near Passchendaele Village, Belgium, September 1917

Corporal Knowles is in full flow this evening, trying to get us to write letters to our loved ones, “just in case the worst happens”. He says this with a pursed-lipped smile, embarrassed at having to mention something so inconvenient. *Hello and welcome to the Western Front.* According to Knowles, we’re supposed to say that we’re happy to make the “ultimate sacrifice” for our beloved country, or some such rot. That’ll make our families feel better, won’t it?

Dying in battle is choked with euphemisms, I’ve discovered. It would be funny if it wasn’t so pathetic. They make it sound peaceful. Pleasant, almost. A well-aimed shot to the heart and you waft gracefully to the ground, your eyes nicely closed and arms already crossed over your chest. Amen and thanks for trying.

I’ve not been here long, but I saw through that comfortable lie within five minutes. This battle has been going on for months, and the men who’ve died instantly are lucky. Most aren’t so fortunate. Their dying has been drawn-out and messy.

Knowles says something or other that’s intended to give us heart, I imagine, but his words are drowned by the thunder. It’s a storm made by men—from shellfire, flying in both directions. We’ve been transported to the front line from the reserve trench and the bombardment that always precedes an infantry attack is in full force. Our enemy, out of sight across the craters and thickets of barbed wire of No Man’s Land, is returning the shellfire, waiting for ours to stop: a helpful signal that we are about to go over the top.

Two weeks ago, when we boarded the train at the huge military camp at Etaples to journey to the Front, we were full of bravado—sounding off about giving Kaiser Bill a good kicking. I was among the most boastful.

It wasn't long before the rumbling began, distant at first, but getting closer and louder. So what? We weren't scared of thunder; not the natural sort, anyway. This wasn't natural.

As the noise swelled, the landscape we were travelling through became more bleak. We passed villages where every house was devastated by shellfire, but people were still living in them. I saw two children—girls in clean pinafores—playing with a hoop outside a roofless brick shell. There was no glass left in the windows, yet fresh yellow curtains still billowed and a woman leant out of one of them to wipe the frame. Chickens were pecking for worms in gardens and streets. Pigs foraged. Cows were milked. Not much further down the line we saw forests blasted to matchwood and rain-filled shell craters so vast, you could go across them by boat. All the while, the thunder grew and grew.

When we stopped at the Belgian town of Ypres, I wondered whether we had been whisked to hell by some mischievous demon. It had been laid waste. An archaic phrase, but the right one. Centuries-old houses and the once-imposing medieval Cloth Hall were now charred and spiky ruins. Beyond it was a thin, green-tinted cloud that was, a seasoned sergeant told us, the final remnant of a gas attack.

“Don't worry: there's not enough to harm anyone,” he reassured us as we exchanged worried glances. “I daresay you'll get used to it, soon enough.”

Ypres wasn't deserted, though. A market was in full swing and housewives examined potatoes and apples. Tommies like us, were stretching their legs for a few hours before continuing their journey, gathered in noisy groups outside half-destroyed bars, swigging beer and wine in spite of the early hour. Horses and motor cars picked their tedious way through the rubble-strewn streets. And still the rumble of battle was getting louder.

By the time we reached the reserve trenches, the thunder terrified us and my bravado had shrivelled. It's monstrous; the clash of warring gods. First, it echoes in your brain. Then, your eyeballs begin to vibrate. Then, it surges through your whole body, and into the trembling ground. It's not just the water in the shell holes that vibrates, it's the mud that clogs your boots and legs and everything else. In the end, you *are* the noise.

Now, we only register the thunder when it stops.

Corporal Knowles is trying to grow a moustache. He thinks it makes him look manly and imposing, something certainly needs to. The moustache seems to quiver on his upper lip. It looks like a furry caterpillar with a touch of mange. It's adding nothing to his masculine image and I should know; I'm the expert. Maybe I should offer him a few tips.

"Of course, these letters are just a formality," Knowles clears his throat and repeats his words more loudly. "I'm positive that they won't be needed. In fact, I'd lay money on it." I assume he's talking about a gambling a shilling or two, not his life savings. That would be the height of stupidity.

There is an unexpected break in the shellfire and his voice blares out like a braying donkey.

"You can expect minimal resistance in the morning. The hard work's already been done for you. Their wire will be in shreds and the enemy will be grateful to surrender to you. It'll be a walkover!"

I lift my eyebrows and wipe my nose on my sleeve. "A walkover." The "walk" part is certainly right. We've been ordered to *walk* towards the enemy trench. If we run, we risk being shot by our own men, for failing to obey orders. I wonder if our commanders are in cahoots with the Germans; they seem equally dedicated to wiping us out.

The silence is scornful. I like the way Corporal Knowles bundles the entire German army on the Western Front into one figure. One enemy. That sounds much more manageable. One enemy should be easy to deal with. Anyone here should be capable of that. Even the rookies. Even me.

Knowles hands out pencils and sheets of paper made limp by relentless rain.

We slosh through yellow mud to collect them. Judging by the stench, it must have seeped in from the latrine trench. I perch on a wooden firing step and stare at my paper. What do I say? When you're faced with the prospect of putting down your final thoughts, no words seem adequate.

And who do I write to? Not Father; that would ruin everything, and anyway, he and I have never had much to say to each other. It will have to be my twin. The other half of me.

Dear N. What to say? I don't want to instil guilt. This was my idea, after all. I wore down every objection. I always do. I've always been the stronger one.

How are you? I hope you're settling into nursing life nicely. You'll make a MAH-vellous nurse, you know.

That's our shared word. Between us, things have always been MAH-vellous, even when they're not.

Now comes the hard bit. *Tomorrow morning, we're going over the top. We've been told that Fritz has had enough, so it shouldn't be too tricky. Let's hope our generals know what they're talking about.*

Better leave it at that. If I criticise the powers that be—suggest that no one believes for a second that we'll stroll unopposed into the German trenches—it'll be redacted. The censors watch like hawks for anything that might damage morale at home. I would also draw attention to myself, and that's the last thing I want. N will know to read between the lines; we've been communicating like this for as long as I can remember.

In a strange way, I'm looking forward to it. In the end, action is better than hanging around, thinking about what's coming, getting worked up over it. I've always believed that. It's better to live something once in reality than a thousand times in your head.

The words are coming more easily now.

In case the worst happens, (what was I saying about euphemisms?) I want you to know that nothing was your fault. We both know that I pushed you into certain things. It was all my idea. My responsibility. And I'm happy with it.

I'm glad things turned out this way. It's for the best, for both of us. Do you remember the very first time we dressed as a soldier and a nurse? That was ten years ago! Can you believe it? Ever since then, we've been preparing for these roles. We're destined for them, and you can't fight destiny.

I'm afraid it will be up to you to break the news to Father if I don't come back. I don't envy you that task. Whatever you choose to tell him (and I'll leave that up to you), we both know that he won't understand. I suggest that you say whatever makes your life easiest. To hell with the truth.

I blow on my chilled fingers. I'm finding it hard to hold my pencil and I grasp it more firmly. I don't want the lads to think I'm shaking.

Be happy, and with a bit of luck, I'll be seeing you soon.

Your loving brother (ha ha) A. xx

The ending might raise a censor's eyebrow but they'll just assume we're not that close. Or that we're not actually related at all—friends rather than siblings. I'm positive that they won't guess the truth.

I address the letter to Miss N Mullins, c/o The Royal Pavilion Hospital, Brighton. Around me, men's heads are lifting. They're looking but not seeing as they grasp for words to their wives, sweethearts, mothers. All those women, left at home to worry and wait; to dread the sound of someone in uniform knocking at their door.

Others try to catch someone's eye. If they succeed, they crack a joke. We greet even the lamest ones with loud laughter. I understand why. We all think that if we smile and joke like normal, Death will pass over us in search of those who are resigned to their fate. Men like that make easier prey.

I look at my pal, Liam. He has straight black hair and a nose like a bird of prey. I flick him an approximation of a smile and wonder who he's writing to. One of his girls at home, probably. He's a bit of a Jack the Lad. In Aldershot, if there was a group of Tommies eyeing up a barmaid, it was always Liam who sauntered over and got her smiling and chatting.

I try not to think about that too much.

Liam is a conscript, like me, but his experiences of life have left him better prepared for war than most of us. He's London born, a few years older than me and what Father would label "something of a ruffian". His mother and father are market traders and not exactly outstanding examples of parenthood, from the little he's said about them. They knocked him around a great deal and when he was twelve, he ran away for a while. He went travelling with a fair and got into lots of what he calls "scraps and scrapes". He went back after he'd learned to handle himself and his parents never touched him again.

We're so different: chalk and cheese, as Gertie would say. Liam is that rare being: a person who seems completely at ease with himself. I wonder what that must feel like. I often find myself wondering why he bothers with me, but I'm glad that he does. In my old life, I was never very good at making friends. The new me seems to get the best of everything. But I knew there would be a price to pay, and now it's time to pay it.

I get up and walk over to Corporal Knowles, drop my letter into his hands and walk off without a word.

Now there's only the night to get through.

And everything that the dawn brings with it.