

Chapter 1 – A casualty of war

The oppressive sound of heavy ordnance from the German side crashing into the allied lines at Ypres had become a background to their existence for days, now. Each salvo – indistinguishable from the previous one, or the next – brought with it the danger of instant death, or perhaps even worse, maiming, to every man on the line.

Hunched uncomfortably over a makeshift desk in the wood-and-mud lined foxhole laughingly referred to as his ‘office’ in the forward trenches, the tall young man with grey eyes and brown hair shivered. It was cold – very cold – on that early morning of 22nd April 1915 and wet; the drizzle outside not helped by the fact he was sitting under several feet of sodden, worm-infested earth. It seemed worse during the darkest part of the night, just before first light heralded the start of another day of pure hell on the front line. A furrowed brow suddenly marred his handsome, not-quite symmetrical face as a rat the size of a rabbit nudged his right foot; they seemed so fearless they would climb over one whether he was awake or asleep.

Lieutenant Edgar Smythe was sitting alone, re-reading the letter he had written to his sister before consigning it to the somewhat erratic military postal system. There was seldom much of substance to say – at least, not which would escape the censor’s blue pencil. But he and Agatha – twenty months his junior – had shared everything, even their innermost thoughts, in a childhood blighted by the death of their parents. The loss had forced them closer together than was usual for siblings of their class and generation. Edgar always felt the need to communicate with her – to maintain at least some sort of contact; it kept him sane in a world gone mad. Even if she never received them, writing the letters was his anchor in the turbulent waters of this damned place.

Conditions were even worse for the men, he knew. In the slit trenches, infestations of frogs competed with red slugs and strange-looking beetles to climb up the mud embankments to get dry; and out of the mouths of those voracious rats. All this misery was compounded by the incessant noise of the German guns pounding their lines – shells undoubtedly going the other way too.

Grandmamma Williams had been a kindly enough woman, in taking them in as children. They had lived a comfortable life. But given her Victorian upbringing – she was born the same year the current king’s grandmother had ascended the throne – her attitudes were naturally rather more severe towards the children than had been that of their own, more liberal, parents. Edgar and Agatha had enjoyed far too little time with Mother and Father before they had succumbed to one of the many illnesses which pervaded India. Father – outwardly severe, yet actually generous and gentle – had been a senior civil servant, but that had not saved him or mamma from cholera. Fortunately, Edgar had been at school in England at the time, and Agatha was sufficiently young – or perhaps protected by her amah, Lajita – to have escaped unscathed. A pretty fair-haired child, she had been brought back to England by the nursemaid shortly afterwards. Despite the rigours of the journey from India – and the

intense cold she suffered on arriving at the family home in London – Lajita had stayed to look after her ever since, as well as supervising Edgar whenever he was at home. Her presence had provided a bulwark against the strictures of late Victorian family life. Now just over 20, Agatha no longer needed her ministrations; but Lajita represented a welcome link with the past for them both, so the former Amah somehow never seemed to move on – hoping, perhaps that one of her former charges might soon provide another generation for her to care for.

There had been none of the traditional separation of boys and girls in Lajita's domain, although whenever Grandmamma Williams was about, the usual proprieties were observed. As a result, the children had grown up remarkably close; particularly since on Agatha's return, Edgar had been taken away from his boarding school to study as a day-boy at the City of London School, near where they lived. Agatha was, of course, tutored at home, but Grandmamma was sufficiently wise to recognise that parentless children needed each other's support more than merely a formal education. Anyway, they were bright children and would do well whatever happened. There would be plenty of money to find a good husband for Agatha as well as to secure Edgar's future in his chosen career. War came just as Edgar had finished university. August 1914 was a wake-up call to the whole of Europe and Edgar had joined up alongside most of his fellow graduates, as well as many of the current students, entering the army without hesitation. As a former member of the Officers' Training Corps, he had been commissioned immediately; probably too quickly to learn about leading men, he sometimes worried. Yet the sappers under his command seemed to respect him. Or was that the benign influence of Sergeant Price, he wondered? Had he but known, it was his engineering knowledge and innate kindness which made him popular.

Now Edgar was sitting in the trenches facing the Germans, leading a small company of Welsh combat engineers. They had been sent to support the Canadians who were guarding the French flank, initially responsible for maintaining the trench system in their sector. But recently, the company had been dragged into combat positions to supplement the depleted front-line troops. Edgar tired of rereading his letter and put it in an envelope ready for later collection. He had long ago devoured the latest issue of the *Wipers Times*, sent across by his old commander, Major Falconer, from the main British lines. He was cold, he was wet through and – had anyone cared to notice – he smelled unpleasantly of mud and worse. But it was the boredom that really got to him. There was a limit to the number of times he could check on his men to ensure the posts were properly manned; and that those currently resting were as prepared for whatever might come as they could be. There were rumours of an impending German offensive. To be sure, the relentless bombardment seemed to have been heavier than usual recently so anything was possible. Edgar had lost track of time, only his reliable army watch telling him whether it was in the day or night.

Climbing out of his fox-hole into the main trench, Edgar saw his men were on station, the sergeant walking carefully along the rough wooden boards in a vain effort to avoid the detritus; keeping his charges up to the mark. The young lieutenant risked a peek over the wooden parapet – not too long, or you were inviting a sniper's bullet. The dark night was

giving way to a swirling mist over no-man's-land, making it difficult to discern individual features. Not that there were many to see. The ground was churned up by shell-holes and the marks of men running across the mud; no trees, or even bushes, remained standing. Edgar stood wondering what the countryside had looked like before man's hubris had turned it into an uninviting mess.

It took the slightly crouching lieutenant some minutes to realise the sound of bombardment, which had rained down on them for so long, was suddenly missing. The silence was almost as deafening as the shells had been. He turned and looked at his sergeant, wondering if he too had noticed. Catching the expression in the older man's eyes, he realised 'Ginger' Price certainly had. At the same moment, a whistle blew from further along the line and the dreaded words "Gaz, Gaz, Gaz" rang out across the French front trenches. Instantly, Edgar flew into action. He had not specifically been expecting something of this nature, but his training – and natural concern for his men – told him what to do.

"Sergeant Price," he shouted at the top of his voice, "Order the men to put damp rags over their faces, grab their guns and get onto the duckboards immediately. The Hun must be on his way." As his orders were replicated along the line – and immediately obeyed by hundreds of men who knew they were just about to come under attack even worse than the softening-up barrage which had been going on for days – everything went suddenly quiet again, men too busy covering their faces for chatter. They could not see the tell-tale yellow colour of gas wafting across from the German side, but knew it must be there.

"The bastards are probably close now, sir" reported Price, straining his eyes to see what was happening, a rather odoriferous wet rag over his mouth and nose. A battle-hardened former miner from the Rhonda Valley, Ginger had enlisted to get away from the pits – only to find himself now living in an interlocking set of trenches, underground passages and rooms similar in every particular to those he had himself had to construct half a year earlier on another part of the line. Now he was responsible for maintaining these trenches, under Edgar's supervision, because the Canadians had no relevant expertise. Not that Edgar had any experience of mining either, of course; but unlike most officers, he had at least read engineering at university, so he had some knowledge of the challenges they faced. "They will have stopped the barrage so as not to hit their own men. But surely they will wait until after the gas has passed over our line," he said.

"You would think so, wouldn't you, Ginger?" replied the officer. "But you never know with the Germans, they might want to surprise us under its cover. Keep your eyes peeled, I'm going to visit the men and make sure they are ready. You stay here in case we receive any orders." Edgar made his way to the extreme end of the Canadian line, where they abutted the French soldiers. Speaking to the lieutenant in command, he was told the Germans had released chlorine gas from their own trenches, intending that it should drift across the allied lines and cause maximum damage. The Second Battle of Ypres had started.

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Within ten minutes, thousands of French, Moroccan and Algerian troops lay dead and dying in their trenches without a single shot having been fired – killed by inhaling the toxic gas which showed no respect for rank or culpability. Unbeknownst to the allies, almost as many Germans were also dead from the way the gas was handled by them. Far from holding back, the attacking troops had started moving forwards immediately behind the gas. It was unclear whether this was a deliberate order based on an erroneous conviction their troops were somehow protected from its effects; or the deliberate sacrifice of troops to confuse the defenders; or simply the result of there being no orders for them to stand firm and let the deadly chemical do its worst. Whatever the reason, the impact on the Germans was as severe as on the French division and their supporters; soldiers on both sides were wheezing out their last breaths in exactly the same way – or lying dead before having had the chance to prove their worth in battle.

Waste of lives.

Finally, the German advance began in earnest and what remained of the French and Canadian forces could start fighting back. The battle was hard and unremitting, with horrendous casualties – both in terms of severity and sheer scope – on both sides. Hand-to-hand fighting brought out the best – and the worst – amongst those who had managed to avoid the gas attack, many by urinating on rags to create a primitive gas mask. But the onslaught proved too much for the allies. By the end of the afternoon, there was a gaping hole in the defensive line. Gasping slightly from the pervasive odour of the gas which was impossible to clear from his nostrils, Edgar looked out over the quietening battlefield. Their ammunition all but exhausted, his men were tired; but there was no longer any significant activity from the German side. It was possible for the allies to stand firm; unaware a lack of reserves had prevented the enemy from capitalising on its breakthrough.

Greater waste of lives.

Edgar reported to the Canadian major in command of the area as night fell at the end of a long and exhausting day. He was an experienced officer, perhaps ten or twelve years Edgar's senior. He and his men had served of the front line for many months, occasionally being rotated back for a period of rest.

"Lieutenant Smythe," he smiled warmly, his slightly accented English a result of living in the French-speaking province of Quebec. Edgar had met him several times during the last months and found him to be a fair and friendly officer. "Good to see you survived this mess. How many men have you?"

"About twenty-five, Major Gauthier," he replied to the tall salt-and-pepper haired Canadian – premature greying brought on, no doubt, by all he had endured at the front. Edgar's prompt action in ordering his men to improvise protection against the gas had saved many of them, although they had not really been positioned to encounter the bulk of the onslaught; they were, after all, primarily a support unit. "I only lost a couple of men, so we are in reasonably good order, but short of ammunition."

“We can lend you some; we were better provisioned than you,” replied the senior officer. His face was serious, hinting that what he was about to say would involve danger. “I have a task for you. We have been ordered to mount a counter-attack tonight – Kitchener’s Wood – and I will need your assistance. Get your men ready; no need to worry about your positions in the trenches, they are irrelevant at the moment. We are to try and plug the gap in our lines created by today’s assault.”

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By 23:00 hours, Edgar and his platoon were nervously positioned towards the rear of some 800 men as they started walking slowly from the moonlit fields into the pitch-black woods. Edgar recognised with gratitude that they were not closer to the front because they lacked battle experience. Without reconnaissance this assault was highly risky; but the senior commanders had felt there was little option but to take action to make good at least some of the day’s losses. Whatever the cost. As the front rank of infantry disappeared from his sight into the woods, Edgar could hear they had encountered stiff resistance; hand-to-hand fighting swiftly ensued; firing at close quarters creating carnage on both sides.

“Ginger,” Edgar said quietly to his sergeant, as he peered through the darkness, straining to see the melee ahead of them. “The Germans are putting up strong resistance. The Canadians make easy targets for them because of the muzzle flashes from their guns. Let’s try something different; a little Rhondda cold-steel, perhaps?” The sergeant smiled grimly. He knew how risky a bayonet attack would be, but it might be safer than firing blindly into the German lines and giving away their positions. Aim a foot higher than the last muzzle flash and slightly to the right, and you had a good chance of hitting someone. Provided they were right-handed, of course.

“Bayonets on, men; pass it on,” Sergeant Price ordered quietly into the blackness, so as not to give away their positions – or their plan. “And don’t forget your training: lunge, twist, withdraw, and move on. No time to look at your handiwork, or it will be the last thing you ever see. Now, no talking.” His steady influence was calming to the men who were more accustomed to a bar fight on Saturday night, than trying to kill people.

They moved tentatively towards the fighting, keeping slightly to one side so as not to become caught in the crossfire, which was erratic at best. They were able to identify German soldiers by the direction of the flashes from their guns; it would be time enough when they drew to close quarters to ensure from the colour of their uniforms that they really were enemies and not Canadians firing in the wrong direction. Going in so closely, they risked being shot at by their allies, but there was nothing to be gained by holding back; there was a job to be done and they did it with all the courage you would expect of men from the valleys. Two or three of the men dropped silently to the ground, bravely suppressing their cries of pain and despair as they were struck by stray bullets from the battle in front of them. Their comrades strode on past them, marking the place they fell in the hope of returning later to help them. Now was not the time. Gradually, they started to see results as the Canadians realised what they were doing and copied the technique, only firing when absolutely

necessary and thus becoming less 'visible' to the Germans in the darkness, now unrelieved by the moon.

Edgar's group was gradually depleted during the action; one man was shot at close range by an enemy corporal, his face disappearing in a mulch of blood and brains, another fell to a German private, just as he bayoneted the man in revenge for his friend's killing. Several more must also have been shot at some point, their bodies only being found later. At one stage, the lieutenant and Ginger Price became involved in some extremely vicious hand-to-hand fighting; guns blazing at close quarters and bayonets becoming increasingly bloodied. Ginger had run forwards to help three of the platoon who were in danger of being surrounded by a hostile group, firing his rifle as well as lunging with his bayonet. Discretion was important, but not as much as keeping his men safe. His brave solo effort was not quite enough to redress the odds and Edgar quickly recognised his sergeant was getting into difficulties. Armed only with his officer's pistol, he grabbed a rifle from one of the fallen Germans which was, by now, fitted with a bayonet like the British weapons. Running forwards to support his sergeant, he lunged at Ginger's attacker in time to save him from becoming embroiled in a hopeless situation; his additional momentum helping change the balance of this small melee within the greater battle. Just as they seemed to be winning this side skirmish, a German officer shot blindly into a rugby scrum of soldiers from both sides, apparently hoping to stem the apparent reversal. His un-aimed bullet found its mark, shattering the radius of Edgar's left arm. At first, the young lieutenant was unaware of the injury, knowing only that his arm had somehow been forced backwards and would no longer function. Dropping the rifle from his now useless arm, he grabbed his pistol from the holster hanging at his left hip with his still-functioning right hand, and looked round to identify his attacker. Ginger Price, ever aware of his officer, had already put a bullet in the German officer's head from short range. Avoiding firing to conceal his position was no longer an issue. He moved quickly to Edgar's side.

"You alright, sir?" he asked, looking at the limp arm.

"Yes, I'll be ok. Thanks for getting the bastard, Ginger," the officer replied. The wound was not yet hurting; but he knew it would soon.

The engagement lasted less than two hours; yet to those involved, the fierce fighting seemed both interminably long, and unbelievably brief. Eventually, the woods were cleared; but at the cost of more than half the total allied force. The Germans had been routed and it only remained to check for casualties – and any Germans who might be playing possum, to avoid capture.

Edgar and his men, by then reduced to fifteen or so souls – the number of survivors a miracle, given the intensity of the fighting – helped to look over the bodies. Ginger leant over to check a German NCO's body. As he did so, he noticed a small canister underneath the man's uniform jacket, slowly leaking a thick yellow vapour. A bayonet thrust must have pierced a chlorine gas container the man had been carrying; it couldn't have been a bullet or it would have exploded. Ginger immediately started coughing, bringing Edgar over to see what was wrong. Ginger turned towards him, violently pushing his officer away before collapsing on the ground, dying from the poison. Edgar had inhaled some of the gas before

the sergeant's action put him out of harm's way. He also fell to the ground almost unable to breathe. Totally unaware of his surroundings within seconds, his eyes misted over in a pale imitation of the yellow of the gas. So this is what it was like to die, Edgar thought.

Another wasted life: sorry, Agatha, you're on your own now.

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German intelligence message discovered in 1919:

From: Raptor

To: German Intelligence

Dated: 23-4-15

Subject: Attack on Ypres

Message: Attack failed due to several factors.

- 1. Location was correctly identified by me as a weak point in the defences, guarded by a mixture of nationalities including Welsh engineers with no battle experience. However, initial use of gas was followed up too quickly by German troops, who themselves became incapacitated by it.*
- 2. Your lines were apparently overstretched by the rapidity of their initial progress.*
- 3. Counter attack by French and Canadian forces late at night was effective because of changed tactics. The use of bayonets apparently initiated by Welsh Engineers in an attempt not to give their positions away.*

Will report again, when it is safe for me to do so without revealing my position.

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"You've had a fortunate escape, lieutenant" said the harsh, clipped tones of a British doctor in the black void somewhere above Edgar's head. He must be alive after all. "You were brought in by a Canadian major, who said you had been involved in a special operation overnight. Frankly, you are lucky to be alive. The chlorine gas affected your lungs, I am afraid, and your eyesight may never return," he said, with a total lack of compassion or bedside manner. Perhaps he thought brutality was the kindest way of communicating such unbearable news. "It's back to England for you, as soon as your breathing has stabilised. Your left arm will not be much use to you in future, either. I'm afraid the war is over for you, young man," he said slightly more considerately. "A pity. I understand you led your men with great valour. We need more men like you."

Edgar attempted to speak but was unable to do so; sounds refusing to form themselves in this throat. The doctor had apparently moved on to the next patient, his patrician voice sounding further away, because the next voice he registered was that of a young woman.

"Please don't try to speak, lieutenant, you won't be able to," said the gentle tones which he assumed must belong to a nurse. "My name is Mary Gosling; I'll be looking after you for a few days. I'm going to give you something to drink in a little while. It might hurt your throat because of the effects of the gas you inhaled; but you must have some liquid inside you."

She returned after an indeterminate interval during which Edgar drifted into and out of sleep, the morphine preventing the pain in his arm from keeping him awake. He was roused by her presence at his bedside, as a surprisingly strong arm beneath his back gently lifted him forwards and she placed a cup of lukewarm liquid to his lips. Coughing at the assault on his damaged throat, Edgar idly wondered what sort of woman she was that she could lift him so easily; must have muscles like a weightlifter – and no doubt a moustache to match – he managed to joke to himself. Yet he was sufficiently aware to feel the subtle pressure of her firm breast against him as she guided the cup towards his mouth and realised that she must be quite slender. The tenderness of the young nurse – she had a youthful voice, anyway – made him think of his sister, who would never receive his last letter. It must have been lost; he had left it in his trench office when the fighting started and hadn't had the opportunity to look for it afterwards. And then, of course, there had been the battle in the woods. Would he ever be able to write again? The thought of Agatha – or possibly the pain in his throat – made him gag on the warm drink and the nurse made a few soothing noises and withdrew the cup. He shook his head and opened his mouth to indicate that she should give him more.

“There's a good boy,” she said kindly, ignoring his rank as she did with everyone, including the doctors (well, except Matron; nobody ignored her status). “A little more will make you feel better.” It did, as its warmth – and the morphine – lulled him back to sleep.

During the next few days, the passing of which he could only estimate by the increasingly solid meals he was given by the patient Nurse Mary Gosling and her colleagues – few of them had her tenderness, so he could tell the difference – Edgar felt his breathing easing and his voice starting to return. The doctor told him that he was lucky; most people who had inhaled chlorine either died or suffered from chronic lung conditions.

“Frankly,” the doctor had told him, “were it not for the swift action of your sergeant in pushing you away, and the major who had brought you in, you might not be here at all. I was able to get some oxygen into your lungs and that seems to have flushed out the chlorine quite effectively. Even so, you have been remarkably lucky. Your eyesight is a different matter. I'm afraid that there is nothing I can do here. The gas has clearly damaged your optic nerves, although I do not fully understand how, so no prognosis is possible. I would like to get you back to England as soon as possible, although it's unlikely to be for a week or so, because those with life threatening injuries have to take precedence. There's a specialist eye centre in Folkestone, close to where you will be landing and they will see what they can do. But in the meantime, please make no effort to remove your bandages; just follow all medical instructions. We have set your arm as best we could, but you will have to be careful with it. The muscles were badly damaged by the bullet, so you are unlikely to recover its full use.” This was the most he had heard the doctor say in one consultation. Perhaps his loquacity was an indication that Edgar was effectively being written off as a patient – and as a soldier.

He had left before Edgar even realised it and was able to say something to the doctor in gratitude for his attention – and that of his colleagues. Deep in thought, lying back on his bed, he wondered what the future would hold for him now, unable to see his engineering drawings

– or anything else. Money was not an issue – never had been. But he could hardly sit around doing nothing for the next fifty or sixty years. Nurse Gosling found him in what appeared to be either state of light sleep – or some darker place of his own. Not surprising, she told herself, given what he must be feeling. She wondered if he understood how bad his injuries were. Such a shame; he seemed a nice young man.

“Is there someone I can contact on your behalf,” she said tentatively, not knowing whether he would hear, or would want to reply if he did. “A wife or sweetheart?” she added, hoping not. He was a handsome man, as she had seen when his facial bandages were removed for changing; but perhaps not a good prospect as a husband now, given his disabilities.

Rousing himself from his black reverie, Edgar replied.

“Only my sister, Agatha,” he replied, unable to see the smile which suddenly spread attractively across her pretty face. “She is a little younger than me, but we grew up together. I ought to let her know I’m alright. I was due to write to her anyway; she will become worried if she doesn’t get a letter soon,” he added, thinking again of the one which had been lost.

“Would you like me to write for you?” offered the nurse. “I am at the end of my shift now, so sister won’t mind.” Edgar thanked her and she went off to get writing implements.

Dear Agatha, (he dictated)

Please do not be alarmed that this letter is not in my handwriting. I am perfectly safe, and away from the fighting. I’m afraid that my sergeant, about whom I have previously written, didn’t make it; he saved me from very severe injury even though he was already dying. A French-Canadian major brought me to hospital, where a nurse is kindly writing this for me.

I cannot tell you any of the details of how I was injured, of course, but it was a rather bloody action – in every sense of the word – and I am not sure whether we won or lost this round. Soldiers seldom have any knowledge of the overall picture, of course – which is probably as much as I am allowed to say.

*My injuries are not life-threatening, but neither will it be possible for me to return to the front. They are talking about sending me back to England – Folkestone, which is where we all embarked for France – to recuperate. There are a few issues they need to resolve, (**no need to mention my eyesight, nurse**) but I am expected to make a decent recovery.*

Perhaps you might come down to visit me as soon as you are able. Have you managed to join the VAD as you wanted to, or is Grandmamma insisting that you limit your activities to fundraising with the Red Cross and St. John’s? Whatever you do, I am sure we will be together again soon.

You are always in my thoughts,

Your loving brother,

“Can you give me your pen so that I can sign my name, please, Miss Gosling,” he said, using her name, rather than occupation, to make the experience more personal than professional. “Just put it in my hand and guide me to the right place. Thank you,” he added, as she did so, experiencing a frisson of pleasure at the feel of her soft skin against his rougher hand. He told her their address in London and she promised it would go in the next post. What a lovely letter, thought Mary to herself, wondering what sort of girl this Agatha might be. Any young woman would appreciate such a thoughtful brother.

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Days passed during which his breathing eased considerably and his arm seemed to hurt less; but Edgar still had no sense of sight and remained unable even to distinguish even between light and darkness. Nurse Gosling, who always seemed to be on duty when he was awake, told him this might simply be the effect of the bandages and cotton wool padding; blocking out any light and applying disconcerting pressure to his eyeballs. He thought this was probably kindness on her part, to prevent him from fretting about his loss of vision – a generous, if short-sighted, impulse on her part since he would have to come to terms with it sometime. Yet he seemed unable to feel frustration with her.

Other than his left arm, Edgar’s limbs all seemed to work normally, although he was forbidden from rising from the bed to try walking and was therefore becoming increasingly bored.

“Perhaps I might read to you?” said a much-loved voice, close to his ear, as he lay wondering how to pass the time. For a moment he thought he had started to hallucinate.

“Agatha,” he finally stammered, unable to believe his sister was actually there, at his bedside. “Can it possibly be you?”

“It can, and it is,” she replied. “I have brought Lajita to see you as well.”

“Mrs Williams would not allow your sister to travel alone to France, so I accompanied her,” added the old amah’s sing-song voice. “And in truth, I would not have let her come alone, either.” She is far too beautiful, with her blond hair, pale complexion and alluring figure, to be allowed alone near all these men, she might have added; but didn’t for fear of making the girl conceited. There was no real danger of the girl developing such emotion; she was aware men always looked admiringly at her, but vaguely assumed they did the same to every girl.

“What Lajita means is that she wanted to see you for herself,” added Agatha, a smile lighting up her voice so much Edgar could almost see her animated face for himself. She made no reference to his eyes, although she could see they were closely bound; Nurse Gosling had told her the position as soon as she had identified herself. “I have spoken with the doctor and he says we can take you back to England with us very soon. It’s all agreed. Well, actually, he was ordered to allow it; apparently Grandmamma has some very important friends in the General Staff. She is waiting for us in Folkestone. Who was that rather pretty young nurse who brought us over?” she added with a pleasing lightness to her voice. “Was

she the one who wrote your letter? She seemed most upset to learn you were to be moved so soon. What have you promised her?"

"Absolutely nothing," he replied to her schoolroom banter; adding with artificial grandeur, "anyway, I have no idea to whom you are referring."

"No," said Agatha more seriously, her tone dropping as if addressing a sensitive subject; which she was. "I know you've not seen her, which is unfortunate, because she is really rather your 'type', darling." It was a risk, talking about his blindness, felt Agatha. It hurt her even to think about it; but it was a subject which had to be challenged head on.

"I didn't know I had a type," answered Edgar, a slight edge in his voice blunting the obvious pleasure he felt at having his sister present. His reaction was not the result of any concern about his disability, rather that Agatha's comment about a young woman who had shown him only kindness seemed unfair; the nurse did not deserve to become the butt of Agatha's humour. But he could never be cross with her for long, he realised as a smile spread across his face simply because she was his sister – and she was there with him when he needed her support.

"Stop bickering, children," cut in the amah's gentle voice. "If you can't play nicely, I will send you to your rooms." The old injunction almost brought the three of them to tears at the memory of happier times; but it also reduced them to helpless, and inappropriately raucous, laughter at the relief of their reunion, even under these circumstances.

"I met a rather nice-looking major, as we came in," said Agatha innocently, as soon as she was able to speak after the mixed emotions of their reunion had subsided somewhat. "He seemed to know you, and wanted to talk, so Lajita and I will go to our hotel to prepare for the journey home. We leave at nine o'clock in the morning, so don't be late! Perhaps I should ask if that young nurse can accompany us home," she added over her shoulder, safely retreating out of range of any fraternal retaliation.

"Lieutenant Smythe," said the voice of Major Gauthier, silently approaching his bedside. "I am glad to see you looking so well, given your experience. And to meet your sister."

"Thank you, sir," replied Edgar. "Sorry I cannot stand up to greet you, but I'm forbidden any movement for some reason. I can't even salute, as I've no hat on." It was not formality that made him speak thus, but the hope that his words would demonstrate his wellbeing. The major had, after all, acted sufficiently quickly to save him from far worse than the injury he had actually suffered. Recognising the debt which he owed the other officer, Edgar nevertheless found himself incapable of expressing his thanks. Perhaps, he later wondered, this was because he could not see the other major's face to gauge his reaction.

"I wanted to see you to thank you and your men for their efforts in the woods, that night," said the major, unaware of – or perhaps understanding – Edgar's dilemma. "We managed to plug the hole alright, but I am not sure how long it will hold. You had better not repeat that to anyone, though. I understand you are off to England tomorrow. I wonder if I might ask you to carry a letter for me. It is to someone who will be pleased to hear from me. I will give it to your sister when I see her at the hotel, this evening."

It did not occur to Edgar to wonder why the usual post was inadequate for the major's purposes – or how the major happened to be seeing Agatha later on – but he naturally agreed. He had instinctively liked Gauthier when they had first met. His confident manner had soothed the young officer in the field and his memory of the Canadian's strong, trustworthy face made it easy to see how women might like him. Should he warn Agatha to be careful? No, not if he valued his life!

"I should tell you that you have been recommended for a medal as a result of your actions on the 22nd," said the Major, cutting across thoughts he couldn't possibly divine. "I fully endorsed the award and hope that it will be some recompense for the injury you have suffered in the service of your country. You could have held your men in reserve and nobody would have thought any less of you," he added, conveniently forgetting he had given Edgar no such option at the time.

How could a medal compensate for the loss of one's eyesight, mused Edgar as he finally managed to thank his Canadian friend? But others had lost far more; he should be grateful. And he was.

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"Nice evening?" Edgar asked his sister (with a friendly-malicious tone in his voice) when she and Lajita arrived at half past eight to prepare him for his journey. It was to be an arduous one, with an ambulance driven by a woman volunteer taking them to the local train station, where they would board the slow service to Calais, before being loaded onto the steamer to Folkestone.

"What do you mean?" she replied, somewhat shame-facedly, glad he could not see her blushing. "We simply had dinner and retired for the night," her memory of the major's dark brown eyes and sensitive mouth filling her mind with imaginings she would rather not share, even with Edgar.

"Dinner with whom?" he asked, affecting an air of innocence which she didn't believe.

"Well, if you insist," she admitted, "it was with Maurice ... Major Gauthier. But don't worry, Lajita was with us all the time. Mind you, he is rather attractive."

"Down, girl," said her brother. "He is probably married and certainly too old for you." Neither of which was true, as far as Agatha was concerned; she had asked about the addressee on the letter and the Major had said it was his sister, virtually his sole relation, who was currently living in Zürich. She hadn't thought to ask why she was there, rather than at home in Quebec.

As they prepared Edgar for the journey Agatha spoke of inconsequential things, trying to keep from their minds the overriding fear that Edgar's eyesight might never return. They spoke of holidays shared on the continent in happier times, visits to their cousins in Germany – something it was better not to talk about too loudly these days – as well as family outings with their rather aged Grandmamma to Brighton, to visit the Pavilion.

"Do you remember the Crystal Palace?" Edgar asked, suddenly. "You were rather young when Grandmamma took us there – the year the old Queen died."

“Not really,” replied Agatha absentmindedly, as she ensured his few belongings were packed in the bag she had brought with her. “I was only five and all I really recall is Grandmamma going on all the time about how it was ‘nothing like as good as it had been at the Great Exhibition’ when she was fourteen. Didn’t we go to see an art exhibition, or something? Oh, but I *do* recall the train journey there. Lajita was surprised at how fast the engine pulled us along; much faster than in India, she said.”

“I am still here, you know,” interjected the old amah mildly, her constant – usually silent – presence something of which the children were always aware, but occasionally forgot. She was making sure Edgar’s bandages looked secure. “And it was *very* fast. Trains in India move at a more sedate pace, especially in the countryside, where there are frequently wild animals on the lines. And they usually had ‘cow-catchers’ on the front. Cows are sacred in Hindu tradition, because they are a source of food and a symbol of life. They must never be killed,” she added, in her deliberate, almost pedantic, way of speaking. They continued to talk about old times as they prepared for the trip.

“I’ll be changing your eye dressings on the journey,” Agatha told Edgar, as they finished. “Your little nurse has shown me how to do it without hurting you and given me all the salves I will need for the next three or four days. That should easily be enough to cover the journey.”

“She’s not *my* little nurse,” said Edgar, rather more sharply than he had intended. Fortunately, he was unable to see the wicked smile which spread from his sister’s delicate mouth to her eyes.

“Then why is she standing in the corner crying her eyes out at the thought of your departure?” she asked with an innocent-sounding voice. An exaggeration, Edgar assumed.

*

Accompanied by the not-really-crying Nurse Gosling, although she did look to Agatha to be slightly downcast, Edgar was carefully carried on a stretcher to the waiting ambulance. He felt he could have walked – might have preferred to – but was under military orders. Anyway, Agatha and Lajita were enjoying fussing over him.

“Now, you are sure you know what to do, aren’t you, Miss Smythe?” asked Mary Gosling. In truth, she became attached to all her charges and was pleased to see any of them leaving in one piece, especially those who would not be going to war again. Nevertheless, this one seemed rather special. Such a pity she would never see him again. Mother had said there would be times like this, nursing soldiers; difficult partings. And she should know, mother’s sister had married a junior officer who had been killed in action during the Second Anglo-Afghan war. Nurse Gosling was aware that Edgar was a son of the Raj – had managed to find out that much from talking with Agatha – and would be unlikely to ally himself with a mere builder’s daughter. But one might dream.

“Thank you, Mary,” replied Agatha. “We will be perfectly alright. If I have any problems, Lajita has some nursing experience from her time in India. She will be able to help me.”

“Then I must wish you goodbye and a safe journey,” came the slightly wistful response; the only thing Mary Gosling could say, really, given the catch in her voice which she didn’t want her erstwhile patient to notice.

The ambulance made the short journey to the railway station in relatively good time, given the volume of other official traffic and the troops being marched from one point to another – for reasons only the generals (presumably) knew. At the station, Edgar was transferred to the luggage compartment of a train that should take them directly to Calais.

“I still don’t see why I can’t travel with you in First Class,” complained Edgar, who was clearly feeling much better, but highly frustrated with so much inactivity. “If I don’t get up soon, I will lose the use of my legs, as well as my eyes.”

“Please don’t say that, even in jest,” said Agatha quietly, a chill piercing her heart at his words. It pained her to see her beloved brother suffering so. “There are so many men far worse off than you. You must be positive.”

“I am sorry, darling,” replied Edgar, reaching out for her hand and finding it instinctively, guided by the position of her voice. He was mortified that he had hurt his sister with his black humour, trying to make the best of his circumstances. “I didn’t mean it. And I really am grateful for you having come out to fetch me back home. Otherwise, I might have had to rely on Nurse Gosling; and who knows where that might have led?”

“I have a very good idea,” she said cryptically. “She was pumping me for information about you, yesterday evening, before I went back to the hotel.” Leaving Edgar to ponder what the nurse might have wanted to know – or been told – Agatha asked Lajita to sit with him while she went to find their seats. The women had agreed to take turns with him during what promised to be a slow journey northwards and Lajita had insisted on the first hour; she wanted to talk with her former charge.

“You must not worry about your sister,” she told him as soon as they were alone. “She was in no danger from the Major, I watched him closely. He found her attractive, but had other things on his mind. I suspect he was worried about his men. He lost very many, as you must know. He has been writing letters to as many of their families as he could, and I think he has not yet finished that task. He has no time for chasing after young women.” Her tone lightened and she continued: “now, how is your arm? The dressing looks alright, but if it hurts too much, you are to tell me.”

After chatting about many shared experiences, they settled down to a companionable silence. The difference in rank had never been an issue for them. The relationship between amah and charge was as close as that of nanny and child; it transcended age and status in a way that few others could. She knew as many of his secrets as his batman had – probably more. Edgar suddenly realised he had no idea what had happened to Private Jones, his personal servant. That he had not been to visit suggested he was either dead or wounded. Edgar had not thought to ask after him, which now hurt him deeply; how could he have been so forgetful of the attentive service he had received from the Welshman ever since joining them? As he drifted off to sleep, he resolved to write to Major Gauthier and enquire after him – or get Agatha to do so on his behalf.

The regular clanking of the train's movement over the rails started to lull Edgar to sleep. Even the sudden jerks, as they crossed countless points along the way, had little impact on him. He was still exhausted by his experiences, but whether these were limited to the recent action and his injuries, or went deeper to the pounding he and his men had suffered from German guns for so long, was uncertain. Whatever the case, the soothing and previously unforeseen presence of his sister and amah had created a release of tension in him which drove him to a sleep so deep he failed to notice any of the stops, changes of attendant, or even his removal onto the steamer that would take him to Blighty.

*

From: Raptor

To: German Intelligence

Dated: 30-4-15

Subject: Communications

Message: This is my last message using existing courier – critically injured in last attack. Will now adopt agreed alternative, which should prevent my detection by the military authorities.

Chapter 2 – The White Cliffs

The towering chalk faces of the ‘White Cliffs of Dover’, are clearly visible as vessels approach Folkestone harbour. But not to Edgar; not on this occasion anyway. He could see nothing at all – unlike on his previous crossings when returning from the continent. Then, the sight had always provided a ‘welcome home’; the indication of a return to normality after the freedom from routine offered by a holiday. Such trips had usually been with Agatha, but sometimes with school or university friends instead.

Lying in his cabin for the three-hour crossing – longer than usual as they navigated the minefield laid to impede German shipping passing through the straits of Dover – Edgar felt, for the first time, slightly sea sick. This was, he imagined as he strained to avoid retching, probably due to his inability to focus on the horizon.

“Don’t worry, darling,” said his sister, hearing the moan which escaped his lips and divining its cause. She was standing by the porthole of their cabin looking out towards the east, where she could see Dover Harbour, the place they usually landed. “It is just a gentle swell. It probably feels more to you because you cannot see the waves to account for the motion. Shall I describe to you what I can see?”

“I don’t mind rough weather usually,” he replied, abashed at his unaccustomed reaction to the sea. “But being blind makes the other senses more acute. I’m sure I can hear the fish laughing together at humanity’s hubris in thinking it can build anything strong enough to withstand the strength of the sea. And probably at our stupidity in fighting wars, too.” He was far from being a pacifist; one had to do what was necessary to serve one’s country. But neither was he totally sure he understood the reasons for this particular war; for the loss of so many lives – and more to follow, without doubt. “But perhaps all I can hear is the waves lapping against the side of the ship. Yes, please; tell me what’s out there,” he added, suppressing his darker thoughts with an effort.

“The cliffs look rather dirty, now I come to look closely at them,” she complained. “I suppose the chalk is vaguely ‘white’, sandwiched between the dingy water and green fields above. But vegetation is growing down its face giving it a somehow ‘unwashed’ appearance, if you know what I mean. The sea is a dirty greyish-brown colour; and although there are patches of blue sky behind us towards France, the clouds over the sea and Kent make for a dismal scene.” She paused as the throb of the engine altered slightly. “We are veering away from Dover now, towards Folkestone. Grandmamma has leased a house there for us to stay in while you are being treated. I rather like it, it is not as large as the London house, but the layout is more convenient. It is almost square, over four floors, rather than the narrower shape of the Knightsbridge town house. It is near to the Grand Hotel, on the cliff top; where the late King used to take that Keppel woman.”

“Did you know she had been his mistress even before he ascended the throne?” asked Edgar. This sort of topic would normally have been taboo between a man and young woman of their class, even siblings. But their relationship was sufficiently close – and Agatha’s

education so liberal – that few subjects could not be discussed. She even knew (some of) the details of his few amorous adventures while at Oxford; at least, she thought she did. But everyone had some secrets, she supposed. Edgar had been one of the third intake at the new Department of Engineering Science under Professor Jenkins and she was prodigiously proud of having a brother who had studied something so useful to society.

“No, I only knew she was one of the few women who could cope with his mood swings right up to his death in 1910,” she replied. “She must have been ‘quite something’ to hold his interest for so very long.”

“Oh, dear,” said Edgar. “You must have a very poor opinion of men if you think we cannot be constant for more than a decade. But then to be fair, he did have other mistresses. And a wife.” They remained comfortably silent for some time, each thinking about relationships from their individual perspectives.

“I don’t think I could ever accept a husband of mine having a mistress,” Agatha said suddenly, after a pause of several minutes during which she could see, but did not have the vocabulary to describe, the changing aspect of the seascape as they manoeuvred for mooring against the long quay arm which reached out like a slender finger into the channel. “Would *you* be able to live with just one woman do you think?”

Edgar smiled. “Well, having largely lived with three of you for the past decade,” he replied, some of his old humour surfacing, “I think it would be rather a relief only to have to live with the demands of one. For the moment, I would be happy for that woman to be you. Thank you so much for coming to fetch me,” he added quietly, with deep feeling.

A tear sprang to Agatha’s eye in response; she quickly wiped it away. “If I hadn’t, you might have had to stay with that young nurse for ever,” she managed to joke.

“Tell me about her,” asked Edgar, quietly. “Although I have not seen her, I certainly felt her presence for many days. I feel as if I know her; but not, really, if you know what I mean?”

“Well, there isn’t really much I can say,” she replied, “I don’t really know what men look for in a girl. She’s very pretty, not as tall as me, and has a nice figure without being ‘busty’, if I might be slightly vulgar?” Agatha noticed her brother nodding assent and was ridiculously pleased at seeing a reaction which a sighted person would have given; a non-verbal one. It seemed somehow to make him more ‘normal’. She continued to paint a word-picture. “Her hair is dark blonde and her complexion naturally fair, I would say. Of course, her lack of colour could be the result of spending so much time indoors at the hospital. Well brought up; she accepted Lajita readily enough, so must either have lived in the east, or knows people who have. Not everyone is accustomed to seeing Indian servants. All in all, she is someone whom I would not mind having got to know better.” She added this not just because it was true, but because she wanted her brother to know that she was prepared to accept any woman he might choose; especially one who would be so well qualified to cope with a blind husband. “Anyway, I like her and promised to write to her so she can visit us in London when she comes to England. Although I don’t suppose she will be able to do so for some time.”

The phrase ‘comes to England’, combined with a healthy jolt which had shaken the entire ship, announced to Edgar that they were docking and the next stage of the journey was about to begin – thus saving Agatha from any riposte her brother might have offered to her having extended such an invitation.

The narrow concrete-and-stone quayside was throbbing with humanity. Vehicles, mainly ambulances and staff cars, were drawn up close alongside the quay. Those passengers who could walk were allowed to disembark first and then the injured brought off strictly in order of rank, not degree of incapacity. Edgar felt that he could easily walk, but the doctor’s instructions had been very specific. Being blind was no problem, but the damage to his lungs was still far from cleared – however much better he may have felt – and there was no point in taking risks that might delay his recovery. In any case, his arm needed to be kept as still as possible to promote knitting of the bones and recovery – as far as possible – of the muscles.

One reason for recuperating in Folkestone was the mild climate it enjoyed, particularly in winter. Positioned on the south-east tip of England, it had its own micro-climate which saved it from some of the worst excesses of the British weather. It was also a focal point on the transport network between London and France. This situation also, however, presented something of a challenge. The harbour was an incredibly busy place with a railway station actually built on its wall. The clamour of a significant fishing fleet, with all the smells and sounds associated with that trade, was compounded by both military vessels and the smoke of the steam engines, as they clattered over the swing bridge which allowed boats entry to the inner harbour.

This activity was further intensified by the tens of thousands of soldiers who trooped down Slope Road, which led to the harbour from the higher part of the town, where many of them were encamped. Cries of ‘step short’, as sergeants at the top of the hill instructed their charges to shorten their pace to make marching down the steep incline safer, sounded across the harbour. The presence of all the vehicles needed to move stores and munitions down to the ships increased the sense of congestion which Edgar could feel without Agatha having to describe it.

The lieutenant and his companions had a long wait – though not as long as that suffered by the other ranks – before they were moved onto the quay. Once ashore, Agatha found the horse-drawn ambulance Grandmamma had arranged to take them to the house in Sandgate Road, which stood on the cliff top on the western side of the town. Given her connections, it had been agreed the doctor would visit him, not the other way round. That he was of relatively junior rank, compared with the medical officers, might have rankled with some, but none made any comment. He was, after all, ‘one of them’ by birth; unlike some of the new generation of more senior officers, these days.

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Dressed in his uniform, as he had been for the entire trip, Edgar lay silently during the short, steep ride up to the higher part of the town. As the climb started, he had to brace

himself to avoid sliding down the stretcher shelf he occupied. He had not previously visited the town, but didn't feel curious about it. Instead, he sank into an unaccustomed reverie; thinking about what, Agatha – cramped with Lajita on the bench opposite – had no idea. There was so much which might make him contemplative. He brightened only when she announced they had arrived.

“Tell me about the house, Agatha,” Edgar pleaded, after having been welcomed by Grandmamma and installed in his room; he propped up on the bed, his sister on one of the chairs. “I feel I need to get some perspective on where I am.”

“Alright,” she replied. “We are on the main road out of Folkestone towards Hythe, which is where the military canal built to repel Napoleon starts, and runs westwards. Grandmamma thought any closer to town might be too noisy.”

“No, I don't need a history lesson,” he interrupted, rather more shortly than he had intended. “Remember I studied engineering at Oxford – and the military canal was required study material for OTC members,” he added more mildly. “What about the house itself.”

Agatha obliged him with a description of the rooms on each of the four floors, even the servants' quarters; although those would be sparsely populated, since so many of the men had joined the forces and the women recruited to replaced others in the factories. Domestic servants were difficult to find – particularly good ones. “Grandmamma thought you would like a room on the south side of the house, overlooking the gardens and sea. They are communal gardens, largely laid to lawn with herbaceous borders on each side and low hedges alongside a path which runs away from the houses towards the cliff-top. Even if you cannot enjoy the view, sitting in your window will enable you to benefit from the early summer sunshine. And I can take you for walks, when you are ready.”

“Thank you for saying that, Aggie,” he said, reverting to the diminutive she had enjoyed as a child. “I don't want to avoid talking about my condition; at least not between you and me.”

“That's alright, Eggy,” she replied, hoping he could not hear the tear in her eye as she used her beloved brother's nursery nickname in return. “I am here for you whatever happens.”

“What, just you; not Nurse Mary?” he joked, lightening the slightly depressed mood which had crept uninvited over them. “Now, what about some tea and sandwiches? I'm hungry.”

“Grandmamma says you must come downstairs for that; and for all meals,” said Agatha, so concerned for this imposition on him, she forgot to react wittily to his mention of the pretty girl he had left in France. Edgar heard the layers of her dress rustle together as she bridled at their grandmother's unwelcome injunction. “I am sorry, but you know what a stickler she is,” she added.