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Captain

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FOREWORD

December 1918

I dictate the lines you now read from a hospital bunk in Cairo, a few each day, or as many as Nurse has time for.

The bullet I tempted never got me. In the end only splinters of hot metal had my number. In the hectic, hollow days leading up to Damascus, I watched with reckless curiosity as my wound turned from red to green. I had tempted every bullet, but my life seemed charmed and it was only small splinters of hot metal that found their mark in me.

Now, a little each day, I relive the moments that give me no peace, and I dredge into this cruel desert light the memories, which are more blistering than any fever, more cankerous than the sepsis on my arm: the memories of a friend lost. I wince and cover my eyes, but I'm almost done. I was always clumsy with words, but my memory is good and I speak as honestly as I can bring myself to. Some of my friend's story I've guessed at, some he told me, in his strange, reluctant English.

Nurse is kind to me. Her pen moves across the page and she betrays no horror, neither has she yet put down her

pen or walked away. She raises her eyes to me, but I cannot read her thoughts, and her pen moves on across the page – I thank her for that and hope that you too, reader, will hear me out.

PART I

EGYPT

Alexandria

August 1915

It was in Egypt that I saw Captain for the first time. The others had gone out drinking at the Cap d'Or Café, determined to live it up on our last night. I wandered out, feeling very alone, with no friend to go to but the horses, the men's mockery still pinching a raw nerve. I was the youngest of us all by a long chalk and I took their ragging and teasing the wrong way. I had no whiskers to shave and didn't drink, so I'd toyed with my knife, wanting it to look as though I wasn't going to the Cap d'Or because there was still jam and bread on my plate.

'Come on, boy,' Lieutenant Straker had called. The Strakers had the Manor House at Bredicot back home. All of us Bayliss boys and Mother were a little in awe of Lady Straker, so I wished I were not in his platoon and that he wasn't so familiar and joshing with me. It made me uncomfortable, what with him being a Second Lieutenant and his family being neighbours and him probably knowing my age, and

anyway, I'd never had a drink.

'Have a beer, Billy,' Firkins said, then Merrick and Robins and Tandy and all of them joined in too.

'Have a beer, Billy, come on, have a beer.'

Until the Lieutenant said, 'Leave the boy alone. What does it matter to us if he doesn't drink?'

That morning too, when he was shaving, Robins laughed at me and called me 'girlie', and it had been just like the schoolroom at Bredicot again when I'd stood with Abel Rudge and the others, before Divinity, measuring our chests with wooden rulers to work out our chances of being recruited. None of us were old enough, not by a long way, but Rudge had said to pick cards to see who'd try for it. I'd turned up the knave of clubs, and Rudge had smirked and said, 'It's Billy, little Billy Bayliss's going to have a try.'

So I did have a try, you see – none of us Bayliss boys likes to let a challenge go by – and in the end it'd all been easy, being recruited. I'd half-inched my brother Francis's papers and left Bredicot. We'd lined up at the town hall, there'd been other boys there from school too in that queue, and we'd been stripped and examined, and I'd stood in line, standing up tall and wide as I could, trying to add two years to my chest to make me look Francis's seventeen.

'Put on your clothes. You'll do.'

There were three of us Bayliss boys – Francis, Geordie and me – and no one could tell us apart.

Francis had the right number of years, but bad feet, so I was all right and I passed muster, but none of the other boys from school did.

A Sergeant-Major had formed us into fours and marched us to the race track and I spent that night on a cement floor, wedged between lines of fold-up seats, trousers wrapped round our boots for a pillow.

I felt guilty about leaving home but I thought more about Abel Rudge's surprise when he knew I'd got through than I did about Mother. With Father gone, things were a bit tight at home and she'd find it easier with one less.

When the training was over and we boarded the *Saturnia*, the others had stowed their kit in the steerage quarters, then rushed up to the poop deck to wave goodbye to their families, but there'd been no one on the wharf to see me off. There had been a parcel, though, from Mother, just before we'd entrained for Avonmouth. In it was a pair of field glasses and a note.

> Dear Billy,
> I understand you are now 17 and for your unexpected coming of age I thought these field glasses might come in useful. They were your father's.
>
> Billy, I know there's no point trying to stop you. I've always said there's no point trying to stop a Bayliss. You are all just like your father – you

more than any of them – and there was never any stopping him.
Good luck, Billy.
Love, Mother.

I'd stayed below deck watching through a tight and greasy window as England ebbed away. She was always practical and brisk, Mother, in her letters, in everything really, as unfussing a sort of person as you could find anywhere.

There'd been no peace on the *Saturnia*, the food vile, the hammocks cheek by jowl, the heat fierce. We'd passed the snow-tipped mountains of southern Spain and the Algerian coast. No one knew where we were headed. 'Smyrna,' Robins said, and I'd taken little notice, such whispers changing as they did with each wind. We heard we were stopping at Alexandria and Lieutenant Straker said, 'It'll be Gallipoli then.' Firkins told me in front of all the men that Gallipoli was the rocky tail-end of Europe, a place of myth and legend. It was embarrassing in front of the men, the way Firkins always spoke to me as if I were in a History lesson. He could speak through a corner of his mouth without removing the pipe that was always clamped in there, even when he didn't have any tobacco to put in it.

We'd waited a long time in Egypt. We'd marched in sand and eaten sand till I was sick of the stuff. I'd seen the men who came back from Gallipoli – they'd

been Australians, mostly, big, well-made men. We'd unloaded them on the docks, the dead in the same tubs as the living, the green flies on their yellow-black wounds. But some of them joshed and asked for beers even as they lay there with their wounds all maggoty or their legs blown off.

Now I knew I was going to the place those men had come from and I was scared.

I was relieved, though, to be leaving Egypt, where I'd felt so alone. There were men in Egypt from all over the place: Indians, Gurkhas, Australians, Tommies, New Zealanders, Maoris, Sikhs, Frenchmen, and negroes from all our colonies, but I'd found no friend among them all. Somehow being in the army made me feel young and scared when I'd thought I'd feel manly and grown up. Living amongst men like Merriman and Merrick and all just made me more aware of the difference that the years make.

That last night in Egypt, as I walked towards the horse lines, the sun set and turned the sky to violet, and the sand to the pink of a Worcestershire apple. The sweetnesss of all that rosy light made me think of Bredicot. I'd write to Liza, I thought, because she'd keep a secret. I was the favourite of her brothers. She would've minded my going most, and I could remind her again how Trumpet was fond of apples and small wild strawberries and of being scratched behind the ears.

I stopped and turned. The lights of the camp were all twinkling and magical as fairyland, and I thought how I could tell Liza about our new issue of tropical kit: light shorts, shirts open at the throat, sleeves rolled up. I could tell her what fine men the Worcester Yeomanry were and that she'd read about us in the papers but I wouldn't tell her that I was going to Gallipoli, nor that we were leaving our horses behind. I was worried, you see, that I wouldn't look so good, to Liza or to Abel Rudge, now that I was going to fight on foot.

I don't remember everything clearly, or the days, or the order in which things happened later, but what happened next I remember as if it were yesterday. I walked on through the balmy Egyptian night, over the moonlit sand, past where the Gurkhas liked to fish with string and bamboo canes, past the natives loading and unloading, past rows of khaki tents and towards the transport lines.

There were all sorts in the transport lines, mules and what have you, but I never so much as looked at them as I passed. A horse man is a horse man and won't look at anything other than a horse, so I never gave the mules and suchlike a second thought.

I found the Yeomanry horse section and wandered idly from one horse to another. None of them stamped softly or snorted when I came to them in the way that Trumpet would, but I was glad Trumpet was

at Bredicot with Liza and hadn't crossed the sea in the stinking belly of a troopship, only to be abandoned here to the sand and flies.

I leaned against the neck of a tall bay horse that I liked the look of and blew into his nostrils. He lowered his head to me but didn't close his eyes at the blowing, like Trumpet would. As I leaned there and heard the cosy snuffling of horses and looked up into the strangely close, swaying eastern stars, I breathed the peace of a desert night.

I stroked the bay, feeling sorry that there was no grass in all of Egypt for him, but he snatched his head from me and gazed ahead, over the top of the long-eared mules, surveying, in the far-sighted way of all horses, the distance. The horses – not one of them – so much as acknowledged the presence of the mules who were right in front of them, mules and suchlike being so far below their own dignity.

I waited for the bay to drop his head to my hand again.

There was a noise somewhere beneath the palm trees: a man's voice raised in anger. Closer at hand, in the mule lines, there was a sudden darting shadow. The bay threw his head and whinnied. I glimpsed a slight figure, a boy, slim and naked to the waist, a pair of dark eyes, the whites of them bright as moons.

In the second that our eyes met, each assessed the other and knew, immediately and instinctively, that we

were, there or thereabouts, the same age. He glanced towards the palms, then back to me. Eyes wide and imploring, he raised a finger to his lips. He dropped his hand to the neck of the animal immediately in front of me and whispered to it. I looked at it for the first time, saw how its silver ears were longer than those of the other mules, and beautifully marked with dark wavering edges, as wobbly as if the boy, in some lonely quiet moment, had once inked in those tips, because they had a sweet, uncertain line to them, as though put there by the hand of a child. It was smaller than the others, too; a donkey perhaps. It brayed: a smiling sort of bark, merry and loud for so small a creature. The boy flinched, shied, like a wild animal. He ducked under the neck of the silver donkey and into the shadow.

A breeze rustled the palm leaves and I heard the man's voice again, still loud and angry. Two men stood beneath the flickering palms, one a Major, the other a Sergeant. The bay tensed and pricked his ears. He was like Trumpet, I thought: a horse who missed nothing, a horse full of heart; not at all the sort to eat while grown men argued and young boys hid. I scratched him. He nuzzled me then swung his head away.

The Major stretched out his arms and tore at the stripes on the Corporal's arm. I heard a stifled whimper and turned: there was the boy – clutching at

a young palm, a hand raised to his mouth.

'Sir, I do what you say, I do – I do everything you say,' said the Corporal in halting English. 'It was not me who stole the grain, sir . . .' He wore standard British service dress, the stripes of a Corporal on his arm, but his cap badge was a star within three circles and his voice was thick and foreign.

The boy dropped his head, fear outlined in the dark cringing curve of his shadow on the white sand.

'Not me, sir . . .'

'I trusted you.'

The boy recoiled. I could see his face and glistening eyes. He turned and made as if to intervene, just as the Major, in a surge of anger, lurched towards the Corporal. The boy shrank back.

'Damn you, Thomas, damn you for your thieving, you . . . Damn you – after all I've done!'

The Major grabbed the Corporal's arm and tore at the cloth of his sleeve. Explosive with rage and irritation at the stubborn cloth, the Major wrenched and pulled till he had what he wanted.

'You're lucky it's just your stripes I'm taking . . .' The Major hurled the torn stripes down and ground them into the muck of the horse lines with his heel.

The Corporal's face was wide with shock, eyes rheumy, arms outstretched.

'And you're lucky it's just this.' The Major's heels swivelled again, as if to murder the cloth. 'The official

punishment for larceny . . .' He thought better of whatever he was going to threaten, said, 'Damn you, Thomas!' then turned and swung furiously away.

The Corporal bent and nodded his head: once, very slowly, twice, then a third time.

The bay tossed and neighed. A good horse dislikes argument between men and I put a hand to his cheek to soothe him. The Corporal's head sank lower still. He remained bent and bowed for a long while, the boy and I waiting and watching, separately and secretly.

When the Corporal raised his head, he turned to the mule lines, paused, then went straight away to the silvery donkey in front of my horse, and stood at the creature's side a while, the boy staying hidden only feet away.

'Hey-Ho,' the Corporal whispered. 'Hey-Ho.' And there was the sadness of all the centuries in his whispering. He raised one hand to his arm, to where the stripes had been, fingers trembling there.

'My friend,' he said. 'The Major was once my friend.' He bent his head to the donkey's neck and said, 'Hey-Ho, even for you I would not steal.'

Something caught the old man's eye and dragged him from his reverie. He moved to the nosebag and checked it, surprise dawning on his wide face. He cast around, moved on to the next animal. Again he stopped, scratched his head, weighed the nosebag in his hand, and went to the next, and so on, checking

the knot and weight of each. He turned and walked back again along the line, again touching each animal, each bag.

'Strange . . . strange . . . all done.' He puzzled. He stopped and shook his head at the mystery of things, then the old man, for old he seemed to me, turned and walked, still shaking his head, till he was lost in the frond shadow.

After a minute or two, the boy crept towards the patch of sand on which the men had stood. His father was in the Army, I thought, watching, but the boy wasn't because he had no badge, no tunic. He crouched and picked up the torn cloth, shook off the dirt and sand, wiped it on his knees, wiped again, smoothed it and lifted it to his streaked cheeks.

'Father . . .' he whispered. 'Father, Apa, it was me . . .' His voice melted into the sigh of the wind and I didn't catch any more.

After a little while, he rose and went to the donkey and laid his head on the grey back.

'I will stay with you, Hey-Ho, with you and with Apa. I will look after you both, Hey-Ho. Better.'

I waited an instant, then stepped forward.

'Hello.'

He started, for he must've forgotten I was there.

'I'm Billy,' I said, and stuck out my hand in a very English sort of manner. He flinched and shrank away.

'You're not in the Army, are you?' I said.

He started, now doubly wary. I looked at his swollen eyes and the smears of dust and tears on his cheeks.

'Because if you were in the Army, you wouldn't cry. You never cry, however much you want to.'

At this he paused and searched my face, running his eyes over my uniform. He made an almost imperceptible movement with his head: difficult to say if it were a yes or a no.

'You have Hey-Ho,' I said. 'I wish I had my horse.'

He looked up at me briefly, then dropped his eyes to Hey-Ho, his fingers tracing the black rim of an ear.

'Hey-Ho's bark is like a smile or a laugh,' I said, because I could see the tenderness of the gesture and wanted to say something nice about Hey-Ho. 'But his eyes are so sad . . .'

The boy looked up again then, and he was steady and serious when he said, 'They have seen too many terrible things . . .'

His own eyes, too, I knew, must've seen those terrible things, but I didn't ask then what they were.

'I must look after him,' he said. 'After Hey-Ho and after Father.' He put a hand on Hey-Ho, and the donkey answered loudly with that joyous laughter running in his *hee-haw*.

'Hey-Ho? Why Hey-Ho?' I asked, amused by the quaint Englishness of the name tongued in the boy's foreign voice.

'They told me . . . where I come from . . . that

English donkeys go *Hey-Ho*.' His voice hee-hawed up and down as he said it. 'All other donkeys go *Hee-haw*.' His face was so solemn that I had to laugh. He looked more puzzled at that, and I was still laughing when I asked, 'Is he an English donkey?'

'We will go to England, one day, Father says, so we called him Hey-Ho.'

I was still laughing but he was still puzzled, so I put on a straight face and asked, 'What is your name?'

His limbs seemed to coil, as if he were readying himself to spring away. I caught him by the arm, wanting him to stay, this boy, with whom I didn't have to pretend I was not scared, from whom I did not have to hide tears.

'What's your name?' I asked again.

He studied me again, as if deciding whether to answer. When he spoke it was in his strange, faltering English.

'Before . . . before . . . my name was Benjamin . . . Here, they call me Captain. The English Major, he used to call me Captain.'

As if regretting he'd said so much, he tugged his arm away, sprang to his feet and sped away, barefoot and silent on the sand.