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Opening extract from

The War Game

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Chapter 1
Soft, short shirts

Northern France – December 1914

Albert Watson sang at the top of his voice as he marched along the crumbling roads of France. The other soldiers liked to sing '*It's a long way to Tipperary*'. But Albert didn't even know where Tipperary was. He didn't care if it was a long way or a short way to Tipperary.

They had sung themselves silly with, '*Forward Joe Soap's army, marching without fear.*' He knew that 'Joe Soap' meant 'dope', a dummy, and he didn't like to think he was in an army of dopes.

Albert hated the song,
'I don't want to be a soldier,
I don't want to go to war,
I'd rather stay at home,
Around the streets to roam.'

It just wasn't true that he'd 'rather stay at home'... though he did miss home on the coldest nights. And of course he missed his mum's cooking when he chewed on the stew at the army canteen. Even the plum and apple jam was tough.

No, Albert could bear the homesickness. He was proud to be on his way to fight the Germans. And he was happy now the troop were singing his favourite marching song.

He chanted the words to the beat of a thousand boots.



'Yes, Sister Susie's sewing shirts for soldiers,
Such skill at sewing shirts my shy young sister Susie shows,
Some soldiers send epistles, say they'd sooner sleep on thistles,
Than the saucy, soft, short shirts for soldiers sister Susie sews.'

He could always manage the tongue-twisting words while his mates tangled their tonsils. He remembered the time Charlie Embleton tried to sing, 'soft, short shirts' and managed to spit out his false teeth. They fell in the mud and he had to scramble to collect them before the man behind stepped on them. Charlie knew he'd never get new teeth in the battlefields of France and Flanders.



As Charlie had stooped to collect the teeth, the man behind had fallen over him and twenty troopers ended up in a heap on the rutted road. The sergeant was furious. Mind you, it didn't take much to make the sergeant's moustache bristle, his face turn red and his throat roar like Barney's bull.

The sergeant punished Charlie by placing him on guard duty from midnight till sunrise at eight the next morning. Charlie kept himself happy by singing rude songs about sergeants.

'If the sergeant steals your rum, never mind;
For he's just a drunken sot,
Let him have the ruddy lot,
If the sergeant steals your rum, never mind.'

Albert liked old Charlie. Albert's dad had died in a coal-mine when Albert was nine. Charlie was a bit like a dad to him, now they were so far from home.

When the Sister Susie song had finished Albert made sure the sergeant wasn't looking, and turned to Charlie, marching by his side.

'I didn't hear you singing *soft, short shirts*, Charlie,' the young man teased.

Charlie glared at him and pointed to the sharp blade on his belt.

'See this bayonet, sonny boy?

'Yes, Charlie.'

'Then shut up or I'll stick it in your backside.'

'Shut up about what?' Albert asked.

'About me singing *soft, short shirts*...' Charlie tried to say.



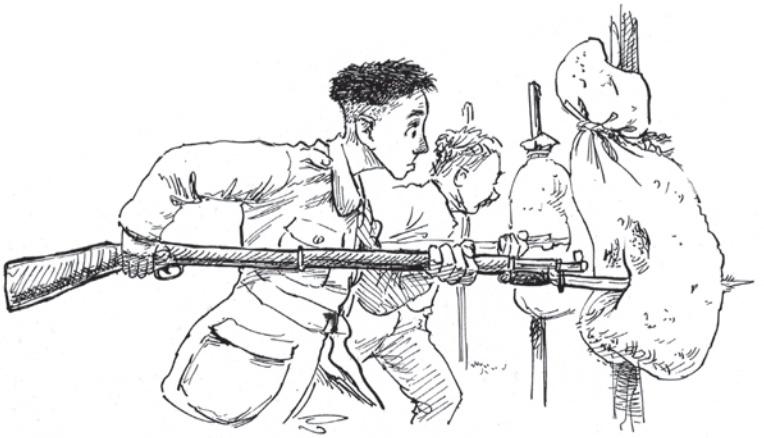
But before he could finish Charlie's teeth had flown over Albert's head and into the ditch at the side of the road.

Chapter 2
Pawns and practice

The first days in France were spent training. Albert spent a lot of time having his ears battered by the Barney's-bull bellow of the big, bruising bully of a sergeant. The lad ran up and down the camp training ground. His bayonet was fixed to the barrel of his gun as the troop took it in turns to stab at straw-stuffed dummies.

'Stick it in as far as it will go... twist it... pull it out,' Sergeant Carter shouted.

As they rested with a tin mug of bitter tea, Albert turned to Charlie. 'You were in the last war, in South Africa.'



Charlie's back went straight. 'I was. Out in the heat of South Africa. Not like this freezing mud. We was fighting for old Queen Victoria in them days. Till she died, of course. Then we was fighting for King Edward.'

'But did you stick your bayonet into many men?' Albert pressed. 'I mean... I can stick it in a dummy. But a real man, that's different.'

Charlie chewed on a piece of tobacco. 'No, son. These days you can't go charging

at your enemy with bayonets. Not even back in Queen Victoria's day. I never stabbed anyone. They shoot you before you get to fifty yards. With the machine guns them Germans have, they'd wipe us all out before we got over their barbed wire. No, son, bayonets aren't a lot of use in this war.'

Albert nodded. 'So why are we practising with them?'

'Because that's what the officers want. Have you ever played chess?'

'You want to play chess?' asked Albert. 'Now?'

Charlie sighed. 'I'm just saying, do you know what chess is?'

'Of course I do, Charlie. I'm not daft. I went to school till I was thirteen.'

'You move your men around a chess board, right? Well, our General French has a big board like that. He has two armies

– the First and Second Armies. And our friends in France and so on have their own armies. And the generals move us around like pawns on a chess board, see?'



'And the Germans do the same?'

'Exactly.' Charlie nodded.

Albert stamped his feet to warm them on the cold, hard earth of the parade

ground. Everything was grey and brown. The sky was the colour of a coal-miner's bath water but not so warm. There was a steady rumble like thunder as the big guns on each side sent their shells down like steel hailstones.

'When do we join this game then, Charlie?' he asked.

Charlie looked up at the sky where the flashes from the guns lit the low clouds. 'We're not far from the fighting, son. We'll be there this time next week.'

Albert nodded slowly. 'That's Christmas in the trenches for us, then?'

Charlie blew out his cheeks. 'Christmas? In a war Christmas Day is the same as any other day.'

But for once Charlie Embleton was wrong.