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Opening extract from

Tilly's Promise

Written by

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For Yvonne Coppard

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Chapter 1

At War!



There had been talk and rumours for weeks, but now it was official – we were at war! My father put a notice in our shop window, and people outside stopped to read it.

Our customers talked of nothing else.

"Mr Milton's son's been called back from leave," they would say.

Or, "My Robbie's joining up."

Some were angry about the Germans starting the war. "That Kaiser Bill! Wants to run the whole world, if you ask me."

Others were gloomy and afraid. "The Germans are in Belgium! They'll be over here next, if we don't stop them. It's a short hop across the Channel."

I listened while I fetched things from the shelves and counted coins. I didn't know whether to feel excited or fearful. At war! What did it mean? Would German soldiers march down the street, aiming their rifles at everyone? Would they take over? I shivered. Life in this village was always the same, year after year. In fact, I'd often thought it was too much the same, and wished for a bit more change. But now ...

"That young man of yours will join up, I'm sure!" said Mrs Whitley, while I weighed a pound of sausages.

"Harry?" I felt myself go pink. "Will he?"

"Course!" she said. "All the boys want to do their bit."

I felt a small thrill to hear Harry Brading described as my 'young man' – Harry, with his quick dark eyes, and his shy way of looking at me. We'd always been friends, but of late that had changed. As we walked home from the Bank Holiday fair, he called me his sweetheart. We kissed, but it was quick and clumsy. Then he said he was sorry, as if I might mind. I didn't mind at all! I wanted to try again.

I thought I would feel proud, when I saw Harry in a soldier's uniform. But I didn't want him to go away.

Father closed the shop and cashed up, and I tidied the shelves and swept the floor. It was teatime, and my brother Georgie was home from work.

He was excited, banging his knife on the table. "War! I want to go to the war!" he told us.

"No, Georgie, no," Mother soothed. "You can't go. You're not old enough – thank goodness. And you've got your job. You like your job."

"Want to go." Georgie pretended to aim a rifle. "Fight. Kill some Germans!"

"You don't want to kill anyone," Father told him. "War isn't fun and games."

I spread honey on bread for him – he got into a sticky mess if he did it himself. "There you are, Georgie," I said. "Fruit bread, your favourite."

It was like having a much younger brother, even though Georgie was 16 now and taller than me. He was a big, strong boy, but he'd always been slow to learn. My parents had worried about what he'd do when he left school.

For a while he helped in the shop, where he only made muddles, and extra work.

Then Mr Milton offered Georgie a job at Brockbank Hall, working in the gardens. That solved the problem very well. Albert, the head gardener there, understood Georgie. He was kind to him and gave him simple jobs to do. Georgie loved to groom and feed Bramble, the fat pony who pulled the mowing-machine. He'd have spent all his time in the stables if he could, but the Miltons' other horses were too valuable, and needed expert handling. Still, Georgie loved Bramble and saw him every day, and was happy.

As the hot days of August went by, more and more of the village boys joined the Essex Regiment – those who were old enough, anyway. Harry was one of them. He and two friends went to sign up at the army barracks.

"I don't want to leave you, Tilly Peacock," he told me. "But I can't stay at home and pretend nothing's happening."

"I know you can't! *I'd* go, if I were a boy."

We stood by the churchyard wall and looked out at the fields. The trees threw long shadows, and pigeons cooed in the elms.

"Now you'll have the chance to cross the Channel," I said. In a way I wished I could go, too. Harry and I often talked of the countries we'd like to visit – China, India, Australia … Oh, there was the whole world! It was a game we played.

"I'll come back," Harry promised. "And – will you wait for me, Tilly Peacock?"

"Of course I will."

"It won't be for long," Harry said. "They say we'll have the Germans beaten by Christmas. I'll write to you – and will you write back?"

"You know I will!"

The kissing was a little better this time. Our arms tightened round each other. We only broke apart when old Mr Brownlee tramped along the path, calling for his dog.