FLANDERS LITERATURE

Post for Mrs. Bromley

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An extract

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Part 1: The home front

Martin had changed. That was the first thing that struck me when he appeared in the doorway, excitedly announcing that the war had begun. It was Wednesday morning 5 August 1914, and I was reading *Paradise Lost*. His arrival was more of a shock than his news. I did not know what to say.

'Damn good, don't you think?' he asked, surprised at my failure to share in his enthusiasm. As though to convince me, he added: 'We'll teach those Germans a lesson!'

His voice had become deeper, and his accent was even broader than before. He also had more colour in his face, and the cap on his head was new to me. The mouse-grey, sleeveless vest was familiar, but it was a much tighter fit now than when I passed it on to him – his chest and shoulders had widened considerably from hard work in the docks. But apart from that he still had the same small stature as the last time I saw him a year or so ago. Since then I had dropped by at his house a couple of times, but never found him in.

'Gone off with those Cunningham fellows again I shouldn't wonder,' his mother would say by way of apology on his behalf. 'He's bound to come home covered in bumps and bruises, as usual. He's not a bit better than Shakespeare.'

Shakespeare was the dog Martin had fished out of Wenlock Basin one cold day. The only puppy of a litter to wriggle free from a sack, just before it sank to the bottom. At the risk of his own life Martin had jumped into the water to rescue the creature from drowning. Shakespeare was raised on milk from Martin's mother, who had just given birth to Molly and Poppy. Each time after suckling either twin Mrs Bromley held a coffee spoon under her nipple to catch a few drops of milk, with which Martin and I ran to feed the fist-sized pup. Contrary to all expectation Shakespeare survived, and grew into a knee-high, wayward mongrel who vanished once or twice a year for weeks on end only to turn up again limping and mangy.

The dog's name had been my idea. Neither Mrs Bromley nor the children had ever heard of Shakespeare. They thought it a funny name, and Nelly, who was four at the time, took to crying 'Shaky! Shaky!' at every opportunity.

‘Has Shakespeare got back yet?’ I asked Martin, who appeared undecided whether to stand where he was or to step inside. The last time I had called at the Bromley house the dog had just gone off again.

‘Why bring up Shakespeare?’ spluttered Martin. ‘There’s a war on, man! What do I care about that stupid mutt!’

‘I was just wondering, that’s all,’ I said calmly. I was surprised to notice how calm I was. Martin’s excitement was undiminished.

‘I was at Buckingham Palace last night,’ he burst out. ‘Oh, you should have been there, John! There were thousands of us! And at eleven o’clock, when the... the...what’s-its-name...’

‘The ultimatum?’

‘Yes, that’s it. When it ran out everybody started cheering and shouting. We’ll cut them to pieces! We’ll give them what for! And when the King and Queen came out on the balcony in the middle of the night it was like a great party was going on. It was wonderful!’ He took a breath and then resolutely declared: ‘John, I’m going to volunteer. They say the Minister will soon be launching a recruiting campaign. But I shan’t wait for that! People are already queuing up to join the Fusiliers.’

‘Martin, you’re only...’ I had to stop and think how old he was. Nearly two years younger than me. ‘You’re seventeen . You have to be over eighteen.’

‘I don’t care a toss. I’m not going to miss this, not likely! You don’t expect me to go on slaving at the docks for a pittance while all the others are fighting, do you?’

Don’t get so carried away, I was going to say, but Martin beat me to it.

‘And besides, every girl loves a uniform!’ he said gleefully.

I smiled, which Martin took as his cue to put the question uppermost in his mind.

‘John, will you come with me?’

He pushed up his cap, baring a tousled blond forelock, and looked at me with faintly pleading eyes. I knew that look. It was the look he used to give me at school when he felt threatened by the bigger boys in his class and needed my help. So now he needed me again all of a sudden. No doubt he thought he would stand a better chance of being accepted if I went with him. But that was the last thing I wanted. After the summer I was going to study English – and there was nothing and no one that could stop me. Not the war and not Martin either. I shook my head. Martin’s expression clouded a moment, but he was not ready to give up.

‘Come on, John, the two of us together in the army, that would be terrific.’

‘I don’t think so,’ I said firmly.

‘But we’ve always done everything together.’

‘Those days are long over, Martin.’ I could not conceal a certain irritation. ‘I mean, I haven’t seen you for ages, and … and, here you are, asking me out of the blue if I’ll go and join the army with you. It’s madness.’

The last word sounded harsher than I intended, and I saw Martin’s face tighten.

‘Madness? Madness?’ he cried. ‘I’ll tell you what’s madness! Burying your nose in books all the time like you do – that’s madness! And all this stuff everywhere …’ he went on, sweeping his arm over the walls, which were lined with books from floor to ceiling. ‘That’s madness, John! Sheer madness!’

His vehemence made me think of our last parting.

‘Look here, Martin,’ I said appeasingly, ‘all this is a bit sudden, you know. Just let me think about it, all right?’

‘There’s no time for that. Next thing we know we’ll have the Germans barging in here.’

‘It won’t be that quick, don’t you worry. Give me a couple of days, Martin.’

‘Tomorrow, John. I want to know tomorrow.’

‘All right then, tomorrow,’ I said.

‘Right, tomorrow,’ he echoed, and after a nod to me he turned on his heel and walked out of the door. In the set of his shoulders and back I suddenly recognized the strong build of his father. So he was beginning to resemble him physically, too.

Through the door, which had been left ajar, I could hear the noise from the street. There was a lot of shouting and the clatter of horses’ hooves, and from Bishopsgate Goods Station came the paperboy’s cry of ‘War! War declared on Germany! Read all about it in the *Daily Mail*!’

I closed Milton’s book with a sigh, and ran my fingers over the cover. But instead of thinking about the war I could only think of what Martin’s mother once said to me: ‘Milk is thicker than blood, John.’

Martin was my milk-brother. I was breast-fed by his mother for eighteen whole months. Her firstborn son died when he was barely four weeks old, just one day before my birth on 5 October 1895, and I, like a parasite, eagerly drank up all the milk intended for him. That infant had been named Matthew, which is what Mrs Bromley often called me, consciously or not, during the early months of my existence. For instance, she said ‘Matthew has been a good boy’ to my father when he came to fetch me.

Martin was born on 15 July 1897. He only survived by a hair’s breadth. The size of a piglet at birth, he was deemed by the midwife to be a hopeless case. But he pulled through. A fighter even then.

After him his mother put five girls on the world in the space of seven years: Mary, Nelly, Trudy and the twins Molly and Poppy. The final baby was another boy, but he only lived for a few minutes, so Mrs Bromley decided to sell her precious milk again. The beneficiary this time was Jürgen Kohlmann, the newborn son of a German watchmaker who had migrated to London ten years

previously. Unlike me, Jürgen was left with Mrs Bromley at feeding times only – his own mother had no milk – and once he was weaned he did not return. I still saw him occasionally, when his parents paid me a penny to watch him while they were out, but neither Martin nor I ever bonded with him the way we did with each other. He was too young, and besides, a sickly child.

'I bet the milk he drank had gone sour,' said Martin. 'My mother was almost thirty years old when she nursed him.'

After my own nursing days were over I continued to spend more time with the Bromleys than at home. Martin's mother took me under her wing when my father went to work, and as he often had to leave at four in the morning I would spend the night in Hoxton, too, in a bed that became ever more cramped as the family expanded.

When I was old enough to be left on my own I still went over to Mrs Bromley's almost every day, much to the displeasure of her husband, since my father had stopped paying for my care.

'What's that brat doing here?'

'Not so loud, Richard.'

'Can't seem to get rid of him, dammit! A cuckoo in the nest, that's what he is!'

I did not know what he meant until later.

Fortunately Mr Bromley was often away from home for extended periods, so I was able to continue frequenting the shabby little abode in Allerton Street, where the atmosphere, ever lively and bustling, was so different from anything I knew at home. Day after day the five girls raised a clamour worthy of ten, with Mrs Bromley's clear laughter rising above it like a seagull. Although an only child I was not lonely, and enjoyed being on my own at times, especially once I began to read, but sometimes I felt a craving to snuggle down with Martin or his sisters like a young puppy in a warm nest. I also always liked it when Mrs Bromley gave me a hug or brushed her lips against my cheek or forehead, tokens of affection that I missed at home. My father did not much favour physical contact, and when as a child I sought out his arms he more often than not made a gesture of avoidance, or stood up with some excuse and sat down elsewhere.

Martin's father was even more unapproachable than mine, and moreover expressed his reserve in a manner that matched his uncouth appearance. 'Martin, go and hang on to your mother's skirts instead!' he would sneer. Or: 'Poppy, don't cling so – you've got plenty of sisters to hold hands with.' Whenever he did touch his children he did so harshly, and preferred a leather belt for the purpose or a switch made of dried date-twigs, which he had brought home from one of his voyages.

Mr Bromley was a stoker in the Merchant Navy, and each time he returned after weeks at sea had a fresh prize to show for it. Often they were the kind of objects only rich people could afford, which he, so he boasted, had either nicked or wangled out of the owner by various degrees of cunning. At the sight of those exotic acquisitions Martin's mother would shake her head, grumbling 'What's the use of bringing us tea from Ceylon or paper from China? I can't feed the children on those,' whereupon Martin's father, angered by this show of ingratitude, would fling the gift across the room or trample it underfoot before making off to the pub in search of more congeniality.

'I'd rather have Shakespeare coming back,' Mrs Bromley was heard to sigh more than once.

For a long time I thought Martin did not take after his father, but when he reached the age of about twelve and exchanged the Hoxton Primary for a trade school in the East End, things changed. His mates from the new neighbourhood roused in him traits of character that had until then seldom come to the fore. He flew into a rage when his mother needed his help or told him not to stay out after a certain hour, and his sisters, too, came in for rough and unkind treatment. He began to adopt the same coarse language as his father, who, however, punished him for the same by making him wash out his mouth with soap. I caught Martin telling lies about where he had been and with whom, and we quarrelled umpteen times about the most banal things. And then one day, when his mother invited me to stay for supper, he made a comment in which I could hear the echo of his father, who had often remarked, loud enough for me to hear, 'Plenty of food in his own home! Let him go and beg there.'

His mother would always insist I should stay notwithstanding her husband, but I was at pains to swallow a morsel of food, for all that Martin, back then, was still in the habit of sliding the platters of meat or potatoes in my direction to show there was more than enough to go round. On the day that Martin himself criticized me I stayed for supper as well, but after that I avoided being there at mealtimes.

When he left school at the age of fourteen to work in the docks he changed even more. Money became all-important to him. The first time he received his wages he came to see me, pleased as punch.

'Look, John! My first very own pence!'

He showed me the shiny coins in the cup of his hands, but I only had eyes for the sores on his fingers.

One day I happened to notice that he was not putting all his earnings into the household moneybox as he was supposed to do.

'I sweated for that money,' he said. 'It's rightfully mine, and nobody else's.'

'Things aren't easy for your mother,' I objected.

'She chose me, John. I didn't choose her. Not my sisters either.'

I never told Mrs Bromley about Martin's deceit, although I had to clench my teeth when she slipped him a penny saying he deserved it after all his hard work. The first time I saw Martin accepting the coin without batting an eyelid, I was enraged.

'You ought to be ashamed of yourself,' I hissed.

'Mind your own business – or else....' he warned, wagging his finger at me.

In the beginning I still thought he was jealous because we were better off than him, but gradually it dawned on me that there was more at stake. He started accusing me of being boring, as dull as ditchwater. True, since he had started work and I was determined to pursue my education whatever the cost, we had little to talk about. Nor did the pastimes he enjoyed, such as playing rugby, watching football games or roaming the streets and parks, hold any attraction for me, and whenever I suggested going to the library together, or to a picture gallery, he reacted with horror.

‘How boring can you get, John? You’ll never find yourself a bird at this rate.’

Although he was two years my junior, he was earlier than me to take an interest in the opposite sex. Whenever we came across a girl he fancied he would either leave me high and dry or, worse, make me look foolish.

And so I had to resign myself to the fact that we were steadily drifting apart, and the image that always came to mind when I thought of this was of him sailing out of a harbour while I was left standing on the quay.

Yet I still felt responsible for him in an older-brotherly way, and was ever concerned about him coming to any harm. That was probably why I went on calling at his mother’s house, even if he was never there.

The day he told me about wanting to join the army I kept wondering whether I ought to inform his mother. She would not let him go, that was for sure. But it would mean betraying him, and I had never done that before, however bad his behaviour. So I decided to wait. He might still change his mind. It might be a phase he was going through – nothing new there – and besides, perhaps things weren’t as bad as they seemed, perhaps the war would be over before it had begun.

[...]

'I pulled it off, John. You can go to Poperinge. The major has agreed.'

Lieutenant Ashwell was more pleased than I was at first. I was mainly astounded.

'What did you tell him, sir?' I asked with some misgiving.

'According to the records you haven't had a single day's leave for the past year and a half. Even the major was astonished by that. About time that young man had a bit of fun, he said.'

Before he bites the dust, I thought to myself.

The lieutenant had made further arrangements. 'There's a hospital train leaving from Arras tomorrow morning.'

'A hospital train?'

'They have priority, John, so it's the quickest way for you to get to Hazebrouck. And from there you can take any of the troop trains to Poperinge. What d'you want to go there for anyway?'

I thought for a moment. 'To visit a friend, sir.'

'Must be a very good friend then.'

'He is, sir.'

After this the lieutenant gave me some practical information about my journey, and finally handed me my leave pass and a form signed by the major giving me safe conduit to Poperinge.

As I made to put away the documents, I noticed that there were some Belgian banknotes among them. I looked up, but the lieutenant had quietly disappeared.

It took me an hour on foot to reach the train station in Arras. I set out at the crack of dawn, to the accompaniment of the sound and light show of our artillery, which was treating the German line to a continuous bombardment with mortars and howitzers, probably as a prelude to the battle lieutenant Ashwell had spoken of. The weather was mild. No rain. No bitter cold.

The station reminded me of a plundered honeycomb. All that remained of the large covered entrance was the metal skeleton, divided into hundreds of small rectangles from which all the glass had vanished. The roof consisted only of metal struts and wooden beams, while parts of the walls had been shelled so repeatedly that the debris had turned to dust.

My train was waiting on one of the few still serviceable tracks. The wounded were embarking, some relying on their own strength, others with the aid of someone's hand or arm, or of one or two crutches, while others were hoisted out of wheelchairs and carried on board. Many of them were amputees, or had one or more limbs in bandages or plaster. On the platform was a row of stretchers with the most seriously wounded, waiting in turn to be transferred to a carriage equipped with beds.

I found a seat by the window in a carriage that was half full of soldiers, mostly with injuries to the upper body. Opposite me sat a corporal gunner, whose head was largely covered in bandages.

'Shrapnel,' he said, making a gesture as if a chunk of his skull had been lopped off.

The train ran from Arras to Boulogne-sur-Mer, and would make several stops, including one at Hazebrouck, to pick up more wounded men. The top speed was never more than a few kilometres per hour. I stared out of the window throughout, as the slowly passing landscape alternated with images projected by my memory onto the glass in front of my nose.

Gradually, the view from the window changed, with more and more bushes and trees appearing, some of which were covered in blossom. The houses began to show less damage, and here and there clothes and sheets were hanging out to dry. A farmer was ploughing his field, and further along stood a windmill with turning sails. Now and then children stood by the track waving at us.

The trip lasted fifteen hours. The train's priority had not amounted to much, as we had frequently been at a standstill to allow trains laden with ammunition and artillery guns to pass through on their way to Arras.

'Fifteen inch,' the corporal gunner said as a wagon freighted with three huge, upright grenades rolled by.

At the planned stops, too, it took a long time for all the wounded to be loaded onto the train. During those intervals I pretended to be asleep.

Due to all the delays it was the middle of the night by the time I arrived in Hazebrouck, which was nonetheless still a hive of activity. Trains were being readied on all the tracks; locomotives were fired up and wagons coupled and uncoupled; soldiers were thronging the platforms. In a nearby field an entire battalion lay sleeping in the open, another battalion was approaching on the march. I found myself in the heart of the war, from whence fresh blood was being pumped in all direction.

I managed to squeeze myself into a low-sided, open coal wagon, one of many forming a string of wood-and-metal beads drawn by a light type of engine. There were forty of us, closely packed together. We proceeded northwards at a snail's pace, while the sun began to rise in the east.

As I emerged from the station at Poperinge, I had a sense of coming home after a long journey, not because I recognized the surroundings in any way or smelt anything familiar, but because I had a strong feeling that Martin could appear round the corner at any minute, turn up out of nowhere, like in the old days back in the alleys and squares of Hoxton. During the entire journey from Arras I had tried my best not to think of him, but now I was overwhelmed by the realization of being in the very place where he had got off the train and had heard, for the first time, the rumbling drone of the western front. As I was hearing it now.

SAW NO HUNS YET, DID HEAR BOMBS.

It was high summer then, seven seasons ago, and nothing had changed, except for the weather.

The battalion I had been with on the train set off eastwards, via the rue d'Ypres, for a ten-day stint in the trenches. I took the same road, but in the opposite direction, into the town and straight to the Grote Markt, the main square, which I had seen marked on a map outside the station.

It was close on eight o'clock and both sides of the road were filled with columns of men, some on foot and some on horseback. I shuffled along with the soldiers returning from the front, who were visibly longing for a bath, a bed, and some distraction. The names of the establishments mentioned by Sergeant Higgins went round and round in my head.

The rue d'Ypres narrowed as it penetrated deeper into the town. The buildings here had suffered little damage, unlike those around the train station. Several inhabitants had set up small businesses. I went past a souvenir shop, a grocer, a fishmonger and especially a lot of bars, none of which were open yet. The names were foreign, but all the notices and advertisements, large and small, were in perfect English, as if I were truly back in London.

I recognized the Grote Markt by the sheer size of it, by the large building with the slender tower, and by the step-gabled houses. I found myself right in the middle of the postcard Martin had sent me, and even more so in the one sent by Jack, because the whole square was filled with army vehicles and soldiers.

I AM ALL RITE.

I began to feel cold and hot at once, and caught myself searching among the soldiers around me for Martin's face. He would look different now, of course: older, more manly. And although I realised I would not find him here, I felt an impulse to shout his name over the crowd.

Martin!

But I did not shout. I took several deep breaths to control my emotions and when I was more or less myself again I cast my eyes over the names on the buildings, some of which were damaged by bombs: La Fabrique, A la Poupée, L'Espérance, Hotel du Grand Cerf, A la Maison de Ville. The square was lined on all sides with bars and hotels, but nowhere did I see a sign saying The Red Roses, Fancies, or Talbot House.

I addressed a couple of soldiers, who promptly saluted.

Fancies, The Red Roses. One of the soldiers looked at his watch and said that I was far too early, and that tonight around seven I'd have more luck. However, Talbot House – his companion called it 'Toc H', the same name as Sergeant Higgins had used – was quite close, and bound to be open by now.

'Down that street over there,' he said, pointing to the far side of the Grote Markt.

I crossed the square and turned into the rue de l'Hôpital, which was as busy as Old Street on a weekday morning, with a steady stream of lorries, motorcycles, cars, an ambulance, and carts making for the centre.

Talbot House stood in a bend of the street. It was a tall, white townhouse in a row, with a conspicuous sign over the handsomely carved double doors.

Talbot House

1915 - ?

Every-Man's Club

1915. So it was quite possible that Martin had been here.

The door was ajar. From behind it came piano music. I also heard someone singing, a sonorous voice which reminded me of William, and I felt a twinge of nostalgia. From one of the downstairs windows came more voices, cheerful and merry, as though some game were being played.

I pushed the door open and stepped inside. The hall was bright and spacious, with light pouring in through the open doors at the back, which was where the singing came from. I looked about me, wavering. On my left I discovered a room where a game of billiards was going on. There were about ten men surrounding the table, privates mingling with officers, their eyes fixed on the green baize.

On my right was a broad wooden staircase leading to the upper floor. Just then someone came thumping down the stairs: a somewhat stunted figure, too short to be a soldier, with a childish face, neatly combed hair with a very straight parting, and round spectacles on his nose, just like the ones Willie Hobbs used to wear. As soon as he saw me he came up to me, extending his hand to shake mine. His dark eyes shone behind his glasses like ripe cherries.

'Well, my friend, why are you just standing there, flirting with the doormat are you? Come in, come in. Welcome to Talbot House.'

He clasped my hand firmly with both of his. My eyes were drawn to his starched white collar and the badge on his jacket. This had to be Tubby, the almoner mentioned by Sergeant Higgins. I doffed my cap and bowed my head.

'No need for formality, my friend. You aren't in the trenches here, although you might come across a rat or two. We try to keep them house-trained. Tell me, did you come straight from Ypres?'

'I came straight from Arras, padre. I left yesterday morning.'

'All the way from Arras? Has my reputation travelled that far already?' His hollow laugh was utterly disarming. Letting go of my hand he made a sweeping movement with his arm. 'This house is your house. The canteen is over there. Tea and cake are served, though you'll have to take the singing in your stride. They're rehearsing for the performance tonight: Stainer's oratorio, *The Crucifixion*. Do you know it?'

I shook my head.

'It's Good Friday, in case you've forgotten,' the padre continued. 'Do you sing? They could still do with a few more voices in the choir.'

'I think most of the soldiers have been through enough as it is,' I said with a smile.

The padre chuckled. 'You could well be right there... Your name, I quite forgot to ask – what did you say? John Patterson. Well now, John, if you like you can still attend morning service, upstairs in the chapel. But you're free to go out into the garden and laze around all day if you prefer. Or, assuming your brains haven't turned to rust in those watery trenches, there's a library upstairs where you can borrow books. It's entirely up to you. I'll see you later.'

And with quick, short steps he made off, leaving me feeling more pleased than I had felt in a very long time. The hallway itself made the same agreeable impression on me as the padre's welcome had done. There were easy chairs to lounge in, vases with daffodils on tables and windowsills, and on the walls hung atmospheric pictures and various plaques with house rules, all phrased with a touch of humour. Written in large on a sign pointing to the door were the words 'To Pessimists: way out'.

Halfway down the hall I discovered a notice board labelled 'Friendship's Corner', with long lists and numerous file cards pinned to it. Beneath the label it said 'This notice board is for the use of those wishing to make contact with friends. Messages may be placed here.'

With more than a passing interest I ran my eye down the lists, upon which the messages of the past three months had been typed and collated, all from soldiers in search of other soldiers. There were hundreds of names. Sergeant W.E Bullock of the 2nd Devon Regiment, for instance, was looking for his brother; private G. Jones of the 1st London Welsh wanted to meet other men from Wales; gunner James Flintham had submitted only his name and regiment, while private K.J. Thompson of the Northumberland Fusiliers was hoping for news of private W. Mullen of the 225th Tunnelling Company. To this last name had been added in the margin, in pencil: *Killed in Action*.

That note gave me a bitter taste, but there were other, more hopeful annotations. Some names had been marked *Blighty*, which meant that they had gone home for good, albeit wounded, and other names were followed by the regiment in which the man concerned had recently been seen. I studied all the lists from top to bottom. Was I checking for Bromley's name? Yes I was, against my better judgement, although I was also on the lookout for Jack Cunningham. But I did not come across either name on any list, nor on any of the handwritten cards bearing the most recent messages.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, Tubby appeared at my side.

'If you're looking for somebody, John, feel free to post a message. You will find blank cards over there.' He indicated a box on a side-table with his hand, in which he held his pipe.

'May I ask you something, padre. Do you still have the lists from 1915 by any chance? August 1915?'

'August? I'm afraid not, my friend. We didn't open our doors until December of that year.'

His reply smothered the first stirring of my optimism. This was not lost on Tubby.

'But don't let that stop you leaving a message,' he said encouragingly. 'I can't promise miracles, but small wonders may be worked now and then. Last year a lance corporal like you turned up here, I can see him before me now, his name was Quinn. He was stunned to discover, thanks to our notice board, that his brother had been here the day before. They hadn't seen each other in two years, and could I possibly wangle some way for them to meet. I had to move heaven and earth, John, but I managed it in the end. Those two lads met the next day, here in Talbot house. And believe me, they had plenty to talk about.'

He was lifting his pipe to his mouth when he paused with his hand in mid-air, adding: 'Which was as luck would have it, because one of the brothers died shortly afterwards. No roses without thorns, eh?'

After this he put his pipe in his mouth and spun round to greet a small party of soldiers entering the hall.

In spite of the padre's story, I was disinclined to take a blank card from the box and write down the message I had in my head. Because what was the point? It was highly unlikely that I would ever set foot in this place again. But then I saw how the newly arrived soldiers, before proceeding to the canteen or billiards room, all stopped by the notice board to take a quick look at the lists and cards, and my reluctance evaporated. I sat down at the table, took a card and a pencil and began to write. I had no illusions whatsoever, but nothing to lose either.

There were more than twenty soldiers in the canteen, most of them holding a sheet of paper as they stood around a shiny black upright piano, which was being played by a corporal. They were at choir practice.

I adore thee, I adore thee! Thankful at thy feet to be.

A gunner was keeping time with one hand, while using the other to signal to those who had to raise or lower the pitch, or who, like one second lieutenant, was painfully out of tune.

For all that it was only a rehearsal with frequent stops and starts, the singing moved me, especially when a sergeant of the Field Ambulance began his solo. It was the bass voice I had heard earlier coming from the back.

Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?

My hands shook as I drank my tea, and when the rehearsal was over, the pianist went on to play some far jollier tunes for general entertainment. A young private of the Northumberland Fusiliers, whose voice could still reach the highest notes, came to sit opposite me. I guessed him to be not much more than seventeen. He came from Croydon, south London, and would be going to the trenches for the first time the following day. When I told him that I had come from the front he asked me what it was really like. He had heard so many stories, he didn't know what to believe. I thought of Jimmy and how scared he had been, and so I said it wasn't too bad.

'Just don't put your head above the parapet,' I said, 'and steer clear of grenades.'

He burst out laughing, and that laughter more than made up for my unease at having lied.

A gong announced that morning service was about to begin. The house had filled up in the meantime, and everyone moved towards the staircase in the hall, which creaked under the weight of all those boots. The lad from Croydon asked if I was coming too, but I said I had not been baptised.

'That doesn't mean you can't attend the service,' he said. 'You must have heard the harmonium, anyway. A rather extraordinary instrument.'

He succeeded in persuading me and I followed him through the hall, where I stopped to glance at my card on the notice board. Nothing had been added to my message. The chapel was in the attic, which was reached by a narrow, steep flight of stairs on the second floor.

'It's like climbing up to heaven,' the lad from Croydon said.

The attic was filled to capacity. There were more than a hundred men, it seemed to me, and I even saw a colonel. I was surprised to find the space immediately below the roof of the building converted into a proper chapel, complete with an altar, a canopy, a crucifix up above, carpets on the floor, candlesticks, a banner, and a small porcelain font. In the left foreground stood the harmonium, which was little more than a wooden case on wobbly legs and a small keyboard. But the lad from Croydon had been right about it being extraordinary. The corporal, who had also played the piano downstairs, took his seat at the harmonium and placed his feet on the pedals and his fingers on the keys, and from the very first note he played the sound from the box possessed such a melancholy, touching quality that many men closed their eyes and bowed their heads in reverence.

After the opening movement, Tubby, standing behind the altar in his cassock, led the singing. Nearly everyone joined in, including the lad from Croydon with the angelic voice. The blend of song and harmonium was heart-wrenching.

The service itself was not long, but the words spoken by Tubby of Christ's suffering, which had become so recognisable to so many, made a profound impression. He prayed to God that He might bestow comfort, strength and courage on all those present, and when he began to pray for those who had died, I followed him in prayer, which was something I had never done before.

During Communion I remained seated. The others lined up to receive the host from the padre. From my seat I peered at each face in turn, but not one of them was familiar.

Meanwhile the harmonium started up again.

'The Old Hundredth,' whispered the lad from Croydon in my ear, and began to sing in the high register of a choirboy.

When the service came to an end, he leaned over to me and said confidentially: 'I think I'm ready for it now.'

I said nothing.

We descended by the same steep flight of stairs, and on the first floor the lad pointed me to the library, which was in a small room at the back. Through the open door I could see a lance corporal in a Scottish forage cap sitting behind a low desk. My curiosity was aroused.

I crossed the landing and looked inside. There were books everywhere. The walls were covered with them, from floor to ceiling. I heard the lance corporal ask me whether I was looking for anything in particular, but I was too overcome to speak. As I shuffled slowly into the room I let my eyes wander over the countless spines. The books were not in any kind of order, with studies on science, historical works, theological treatises, biographies, and literature, plenty of literature, all jumbled together. I saw Boswell side by side with Tennyson, McCarthy's *Modern England* with *Practical Physics for Beginners*, a book titled *How to Pray*, a study of psalms and a history of Belgium, but I also noted *Bleak House*, Kipling's *Collected Stories*, and the poetical works of Keats and Milton.

As I stood there staring, I suddenly felt dizzy. It was as though the books were moving. A march of books, in an ever quickening rhythm, turning around me, whirling. My throat grew so tight I could hardly breathe.

'Are you alright?'

The lance corporal stood up and held out his hand to steady me. But at that moment my knees buckled and everything went black before my eyes.

When I regained consciousness Tubby was standing over me, peering through his round spectacles. The sergeant from the Field Ambulance was on his knees beside me, holding my wrist. He gave a reassuring nod to the padre.

Tubby winked at me and said: 'Perhaps I should consider putting up a sign by the door saying "enter here at your peril". What do you think, John?'

I spent a further hour or so in the garden of Talbot House, sitting on a bench among the rose beds with a cup of tea to recover. The lad from Croydon came over to bring me a slice of cake.

He told me that he was nervous about the performance that evening. He had never sung the oratorio before. Would I be coming to listen?

I said that I had to be back in Arras the following day. I explained where it was and how long it would take me to get there. By the time he was singing his high notes, I'd be on the train to Hazebrouck.

He wanted to know why I had travelled all the way to Poperinge for such a short time. Was there no entertainment to be had in Arras?

'I was hoping to hear some news about a friend of mine,' I said truthfully.

'About Matthew Bromley?'

'What?'

'I saw your message on the notice board,' he said. 'But I don't know him. I'm sorry. Have you heard anything yet?'

I shook my head.

A short time later I said goodbye to him.

'Good luck,' I said.

'It'll be fine. I practised a lot.'

It wasn't the oratorio I was thinking of.

I went looking for the padre in the canteen and in the hall, but did not find him, whereupon I cast a final glance at the card with my message and left the house. It was half past eleven and I had no idea where I should go.

Outside, the traffic was still moving steadily towards the Grote Markt, as was a column of soldiers passing along the houses across the way. It had been dry all morning, but now it looked as if it would rain at any moment. I turned up the collar of my coat and began to follow the stream of vehicles.

After about fifty metres, walking mechanically as in a treadmill, I was overtaken by a motorcycle, which stopped a short way ahead. The driver did not dismount, but waited with the engine running until I caught up with him. Then he addressed me.

'John.'

His voice seemed more familiar than his face, which was partially hidden by his goggles.

'Is that you, Jack?'

'Hop on, John,' he said, indicating the back of his motorcycle with a wave of his arm.

I hesitated.

He insisted. 'Come on, I can't stop here. Get on the back.'

'Why?' I asked, although I had a suspicion.

A lorry that was being held up now blared its horn without pause. Jack signalled to the driver that he was about to move on, turned back to me and said, looking me straight in the eye: 'Martin.'