

Chapter Three

1916

We made straight for the trenches, but we've had vile weather and I've been wet through for four days and nights... . We've had shells bursting two yards off, bullets whizzing all over the show but all you are aware off is the agony in your heels.

Extract from letter to Mrs Seaton: June 1916

...In spite of the most adverse weather conditions the men have kept up a remarkably cheerful spirit and have at all times done their work very well. They have been employed on patrol duty, wiring, digging, sentry duty and machine-gun work, and I trust that they will benefit from the experience gained. They have seen two mines fired, and have been shelled, trench mortared and rifle grenaded...

Extract from CO (Black Watch) describing the initiation of the 11th Battalion of the Kings Own Royal Lancasters into the trenches: June 1916

August 1914

*What in our lives is burnt
In the fire of this?
The heart's dear granary?
The much we shall miss?*

*Three lives hath one life—
Iron, honey, gold.
The gold, the honey gone—
Left is the hard and cold.*

*Iron are our lives
Molten right through our youth.
A burnt space through ripe fields,
A fair mouth's broken tooth.*

1916

Isaac sat hunched over a grubby sheet of paper. His efforts to protect it from the driving rain were proving less than successful.

On a break from repairing shell damage to a nearby support trench, he was endeavouring to improve the first draft of a poem completed only yesterday. The new version was so much better, he regretted having sent off the original holograph in such a hurry. He knew, however, that he had little choice in the matter. The combination of a poor memory and an alarming propensity to misplace things, forced him to despatch manuscripts almost before the ink had dried. Fear that fate might intervene and put an abrupt end to his strivings also provided a powerful incentive to act quickly.

All morning he and two companions had been shovelling gallons of mud into a massive hole in the trench wall, and forcing waterlogged sandbags back into place. The labour was heavy and unrelenting. Apart from being exhausted, soaked and covered in filth, he was convinced that the heel of his left boot was chaffing exposed bone.

His battalion had moved into this sector, north of Loos, for training “under fire” just over a week ago. Attached to a unit of the Blackwatch, the men were supposed to be acquiring survival skills from the battle-hardened veterans of Ypres, but, so far, Isaac had seen very little of them.

Approaching the front for the first time, Isaac felt as if he was crossing a spiritual as well as a physical boundary. In the ruined town of Hulluch, the low mist, hanging like a veil between two worlds, merely added to his growing sense of unreality. The rumble of distant shellfire sounded like the rumour of a storm that had passed over and moved on.

As the men marched past shell holes filled with stagnant water, and shattered buildings, pointing snaggle-toothed at the sky, Isaac felt death

had shuffled significantly closer. Beyond the margin of jumbled masonry, the devastation continued: jagged tree trunks, black and branchless, seemed frozen in final twists of anguish, while the earth, churned up into a vast ocean of mud, was traversed by a network of ruptured and semi-submerged duckboards. Petrol smeared the men's boots with its sickly colours and Isaac noticed countless items of scrap scattered all around. These ranged from mountains of tins to massive fragments of artillery equipment; the rusting detritus of an army dug in for a long campaign.

His dismay was not dispelled when he noticed soldiers at the front of the line plunging off the buckled walkways into a quagmire reaching up to their thighs. They had entered the intricate network of reserve trenches which the unseasonal weather had rendered almost impassable. This was not at all what he'd imagined, although it was hard now to visualise any other possibility.

He almost lost a boot, and was forced to grope around in the stinking, yellow ooze for a few moments before locating it. Since his footwear was two sizes too big—due to the constant friction he suffered—the incident was hardly surprising. Unfortunately, the CSM, anxious to keep the soldiers moving along, failed to sympathise, and ordered the private to stumble on without retying his laces properly. Inevitably, the boot escaped again, and the purple-faced sergeant major forced him to remain pressed against the sodden sandbags while the others struggled by.

A few hours later, squeezed into a dripping dugout with three other men, Isaac wondered how he was going to survive the next few days, never mind the end of the war. It occurred to him that looking too far ahead was inadvisable—the sensible approach being to deal with problems as they arose; only by living from moment to moment could one possibly retain a fix on things out here. Like a snail stripped of its shell, its soft innards exposed to stabbing beaks, he felt terribly vulnerable. Survival would require new strategies on his part. Although only a few miles removed from civilisation, he felt as if he was on a different planet.