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For Brian Farrelly

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In a few years' time, when this war is a romance in memory, the soldier looking for his battlefield will find his marks gone. Centre Way, Peel Trench, Munster Alley, and these other paths to glory will be deep under the corn, and gleaners will sing at Dead Mule Corner.

– John Masefield, *The Old Front Line*

(First published 1917)

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PART ONE

Your Country Needs You

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I

The Angel of Death, looking to call his roll in Picardy on the morning of September 27th, 1918, would have been hard-pressed to find the village of Fontaine-du-Bois.

It had never been very big, just a little church and a few houses set in a pattern of fields on a gentle slope. But then one day, as the rumble of gunfire to the south grew louder, a German staff officer noted its convenient contour lines and marked out his trenches across it and all around it. And now, viewed from the heights of Heaven, it was as though it had never been: the church and the houses were a formless scar in a moonscape of craters and even the line of its one road was broken and indistinct. Between them the British and the Germans had reduced it to a map reference.

Yet if Fontaine-du-Bois was no longer visible from above, the same was not true of the leading company of the West Hampshires who were attacking it. Advancing in the open with the rising sun behind them they showed up all too clearly as pale blobs with long tails of shadow pointing towards their objective.

Less obvious, but still clear enough, were the three small groups of blobs – blobs with no shadowy tails – which were waiting patiently for them, snugged down in shell-holes just behind the empty front line: the Hampshiremen had only a few more steps in the mud and a few more breaths of life before they ran into the hidden machine-guns of the German

rearguard. In half an hour all this vital outwork of the Hindenburg Line would be in British hands, but thirty minutes would be a thousand years too late for the assault company.

Mitchell laid aside his magnifying glass sadly, listening in the silence to the sound of the machine-guns in his imagination.

This was one of the bad moments when the absolute peace of the Great War Documents Room of the British Commonwealth Institute for Military Studies turned sour on him. When he had first established himself in the furthest corner of the room, concealed behind the very material through which he was burrowing, it had seemed the ideal hole for him. Not even the loudest London noise could penetrate such defences, losing its way hopelessly among the bookshelves of the Douglas Haig Library next door, which barred its way.

Yet it was here that he had discovered the difference between silence and tranquillity. He had been prepared for the dull days, when never a thought came to him unstamped by its passage through some other brain, and by now he was far too old a hand at the game to hope for anything spectacular. What he had not expected and what still ambushed him were the moments like this, when the weight of death and pain in the piles of dusty papers and long-forgotten diaries suddenly closed in crushingly on him, destroying his critical ability and breaking down his discipline and training.

This ought not to have been such a moment. Outside, the autumn sun had returned after a week of rain, slanting down through the high window to cheer him up. He had known from the start that the letters of General Sir Henry Chesney contained nothing of interest beyond the much-quoted passage about the Fontaine-du-Bois success, when the West Hampshires and the 401st United States Infantry had in the end performed together so creditably, to read the General's own meticulous

copperplate was more an act of piety than an essential piece of research.

And then, at the very bottom of the box, he had come upon this faded air photograph.

There was really nothing very special about it; the inscribed date and the map reference pinned it down exactly to an event about which everything was already known. He had seen others like it before. Yet for some unfathomable reason it had altogether destroyed his peace of mind.

There was no doubt in his mind that this was where the machine-gunners had cut down the attackers, right in front of the village. A few seconds after this photograph had been taken they had opened fire, only to be outflanked and killed in their turn by the second wave a few minutes afterwards. For all the little blobs on the photograph, British and German, this was the last hour of the last day of their war, and this their corner of the foreign field. And it was pointless to mourn men whose fatherless children were now grandfathers.

He pushed the photograph to one side and drew towards him the Fontaine-du-Bois map, with its tracery of trench lines in red and blue. With maps like this he was safe; it had been just such a map, illuminated by a single flash of pure intuition, which had launched him on this project and had won him one of the Institute's coveted grants. He had been congratulating himself on his ability to distinguish at a glance a British trench system from a German, despising the haphazardness of the former and admiring the interlocking logic of the latter. And then, out of nowhere, it had dawned on him that he'd got it all back-to-front –

'Mr Paul Mitchell?'

Mitchell looked up in surprise at the two strangers who had appeared without a sound in the gap between the filing cabinets. Yet it wasn't so much the stealth of their approach which astonished him as their ability to reach him unaccompanied by

a messenger. Ever since the outbreak of arson at the Imperial War Museum the Institute had locked its doors and screened its visitors with care, and neither gold nor threats overawed the ex-Guards sergeant-major who patrolled the entrance hall.

‘Mr Paul Mitchell?’

Number Two spoke this time. And whereas Number One was a huge, rumpled soft-spoken Oxbridge type, Number Two had ‘soldier’ written all over him, from his carefully cropped red hair and the mirror-shine of his shoes to the bark of his voice.

‘I’m Mitchell, yes.’ Mitchell stood up slowly. It was odd that no messenger accompanied them and even more odd that the sergeant-major should have allowed anyone to disturb him against his express instructions. In fact the more he thought about it, the odder it became. ‘What do you want?’

‘If you could spare us a few moments, Mr Mitchell, I’d be grateful,’ said Number One.

That shift into the first person singular marked Number One as the senior partner. But then he would have guessed that anyway, and it had nothing to do with either the man’s words or his size. If Number Two radiated the confidence of his profession, schooled both to command and obedience, Number One’s confidence existed on a higher plane, subordinate only to his own will.

A soldier and a professor, maybe. But though neither was out of place in the Institute, together they made an incongruous pair, and also a curiously disquieting one. Momentarily Mitchell found himself looking down at the photograph; it was almost as though the last quarter of an hour had been a premonition of their arrival, the barometer falling before the storm’s appearance.

‘My name is Audley, Mr Mitchell, and this is Colonel Butler,’ the large man took possession of the silence before Mitchell had decided how to react. The Imperial War Museum people have

directed us to you. We think you may be able to help us with a small problem we have.'

'The Museum?' Mitchell frowned, irritated with himself for having missed the point where he could object.

'That's right. A Mr Crombie there told us where to find you.'

Curiouser and curiouser. Alex Crombie knew where he was to be found, sure enough. But Alex was as scrupulous as the sergeant-major about the 'Do not disturb' rule, and only the direst emergency would cause him to bend it.

He eyed Audley cautiously. That 'small problem' hardly sounded like a dire emergency, but then neither of these two had the look of men who concerned themselves with small problems anyway.

'He said you were an expert on the First World War, Mr Mitchell – the 1914–18 War,' continued Audley smoothly.

'Hardly an expert.'

'But you are writing a book on it.' Audley's eyes took in the littered table.

'On one piece of it – I'm gathering material for a book, that is,' Mitchell nodded. It was flattering to be classed as an expert, even by a Second World War man like Alex, but he was still far from reassured about the circumstances of the recommendation.

'Just so . . . Well, you see our little problem relates to your war, Mr Mitchell.' As he spoke Audley unzipped a dark blue plastic case. 'We rather hoped you might be able to tell us something about this –' He offered Mitchell a single sheet of paper.

An ancient childish memory stirred in Mitchell as he reached forward with instinctive curiosity – *Never take anything from a stranger, Paulie. You never know what he'll want in exchange* – but it was too weak to stop his fingers closing on the paper. Whatever Mother thought, Paulie was a big boy now.

No paper though, but a photocopy of a charred rectangle of

map. Or, more precisely, a photocopy of a photocopy, with the gradations of each copying as telltale as the irregular burnt edges of the original.

And no very big problem either, but just a little one, like the man said.

‘If you can’t identify it, then perhaps you know who could, anyway,’ murmured Audley.

‘Oh, I can identify it easily enough.’ Mitchell dropped the fragment carelessly on the table. ‘But what exactly is the little problem?’

Audley regarded him silently for a moment, with a cool, appraising look which made it abundantly clear that he knew he was being needed. ‘You know what it is then?’

Mitchell smiled. ‘It’s a piece of German trench map.’

Again the big man paused before speaking. ‘Yes . . . well, we did get that far – since the only words on it are in German that was within our powers of deduction.’

Mitchell made an elaborate pretence of examining the fragment again. ‘Quite so . . . *Schmutziger Graben* – “Dirty Trench” – almost certainly a masterly understatement.’

‘And the words in the corner?’ Audley’s patience was remarkable.

‘*In die vorderen?* That’s just part of a standard exhortation on this type of map – *Diese Karte darf in die vorderen Stellurlgen nicht mitgenommen werden* – “This map must not be taken into the front lines”.’

‘That’s it. But in this instance someone was careless.’

‘This map was captured, you mean?’

In face of such patience Mitchell’s resolve to be as bloody-minded as possible evaporated. Besides, there was something just a little daunting in such restraint in the big man when he could sense a rise in the blood pressure of the red-haired colonel.

‘It was, yes. Central Somme, October 1916. The railway track

is the Albert-Bapaume line and the stream beside it is the Ancre – those trenches at the top lead to Thiepval, if I remember correctly.’

Audley relaxed. ‘You know the actual map?’

‘I’ve seen it, certainly,’ Mitchell shrugged. ‘The Somme isn’t my special field, but I’ve done some work there in the past.’

‘While you were Professor Emerson’s researcher?’

Mitchell stared at him in surprise. ‘That’s right. How did you know?’

‘They told us at the War Museum,’ said Audley casually. ‘And as a matter of fact I rather think I know your old tutor at Cambridge – Archie Forbes.’

‘Yes, he was – my tutor.’ Mitchell’s caution reasserted itself. There definitely was something not quite right, or at least not quite academic, about Audley which cast doubt on his first impression without completely contradicting it. But he couldn’t put his finger on it. ‘You’re at Cambridge, are you?’

‘No. Now about this map –’ Audley brushed the question aside ‘– have you a copy of it here?’

‘There may be one somewhere, but I’ve not seen it. Your best bet would be the Museum.’

‘I see. But what could you tell us about it in the meantime?’

‘It all depends what you want to know. We lost one hell of a lot of men trying to take this bit of ground – this is just about where the Ulstermen attacked on July 1st, or maybe they were a little to the north.’ Mitchell glanced down at the fragment again, struck as he had been so often in the past with the impossibility of computing how much any one piece of that muddy chalkland in Picardy represented in British and German blood and treasure. More than the choicest sites in Piccadilly and the Unter den Linden, certainly.

‘Is this anywhere near Beaumont Hamel?’ asked Colonel Butler suddenly.

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‘Not very far. But then nowhere’s very far from anywhere on the Somme. It’s a very small battlefield, you can walk from one end to the other in a day quite easily –’ Mitchell stopped as he marked the shadow on the red-haired soldier’s face. ‘Why, do you know Beaumont Hamel?’

Butler shook his head slowly, still staring fixedly at the map. ‘My father was there on July 1st. He was with the Royal North-East Lancashires.’

‘The Royal Lancs?’ Mitchell paused as the textbook facts assembled themselves in his memory. Beaumont Hamel had been another pure nightmare, with the Hawthorn Ridge mine exploded too early and the open slope swept by machine-gun fire from end to end. He couldn’t place Butler’s father’s regiment in that holocaust, but the very fact that Butler was here established his father as one of the lucky ones.

‘They never got past the wire,’ said Butler.

Mitchell knew exactly what he meant, and what he had left unsaid. Like so many other units that terrible morning, the East Lancashiremen had left their dead hanging on the unbroken barbed wire among the dud shells and unexploded Stokes mortar bombs to mark the high tide mark of their hopeless attack: the memory, passed from father to son, was written on Butler’s face.

Audley cleared his throat. ‘So there’s nothing very special about the map, it’s not a rarity?’

‘Not a rarity, no. More a curiosity . . . But I’m not an expert on the Somme – you’d do better to read Farrar-Hockley’s book, or the Official History if you’ve the time.’ Mitchell paused. ‘Or if you really want to know every last detail you should talk to Professor Emerson. He knows that ground backwards.’

Audley grinned at him suddenly in a lopsided, surprisingly boyish way. ‘Well, if you’re not an expert then he really must know every inch of it.’ He reached down for the map and

slipped it back into his case. 'I'm most grateful to you and I'll try not to bother you again like this.'

That was a curious way of putting it, thought Mitchell quickly: it was almost as though Audley was deliberately leaving the door ajar for a further visit – again like this. And what was plain was that the man had taken quite a deal of trouble to find out more about him than was strictly necessary for the solution of his little problem.

'I doubt if I could help you much more anyway,' he replied guardedly. 'I only know that map because I've seen Professor Emerson use it – he's your man for the Somme. He's only just come back from there as a matter of fact –'

'From the Somme?' Audley's movement towards the corner of the shelves slowed and then stopped. 'He's been over there?'

Mitchell began to feel slightly guilty about throwing Emerson's name back into the conversation, thereby exposing him also to such equivocal characters.

'Professor Emerson has just returned from France, you mean?' Audley rephrased the question casually.

The guilt increased. He knew nothing about them because he hadn't really tried to find out, but had let himself be overawed all too easily.

'This is the best time of year to see the ground, after the autumn ploughing,' he began, groping for a way of bringing Audley back within range of the unasked questions again. 'But exactly what is it that interests you about the Somme, Mr Audley?'

The disarming grin was switched back on. 'I'm not writing a book about it, don't worry.'

'I'm not worrying. But I'd still like to know what you are doing – and who you are, come to that.'

Audley considered him equably. 'Let's say I'm just someone with a piece of German trench map, that's all.'

He nodded and turned away, leaving Mitchell no alternative but to ask the same question of the red-haired colonel, who as yet showed no sign of following him.

Yet before he could re-formulate the question Butler himself spoke, gesturing to the maps and papers on the table. 'What makes anyone want to write about – all this – nowadays?'

'Anyone?'

'You then.'

Coming from Butler it seemed a strange question, and he hardly knew how to handle it.

'Curiosity, maybe.'

'Curiosity? You mean morbid curiosity?'

'No, I wouldn't say that.'

Butler frowned at him. 'We lost sixty thousand men on the first day of the Somme . . . But of course – you're not interested in the Somme, I remember. So what are you interested in?'

'The Hindenburg Line.'

'Why that?'

'My grandfather was killed breaking through it, near Bel-lenglise on the St Quentin Canal. He commanded the 1st/6th West Mercians.'

Butler looked at him for a moment. 'This professor of yours, Emerson – where would he be at the moment?'

The abrupt change in questioning wrong-footed Mitchell. 'Why do you want to know?'

'You say he's the expert on the Somme. And you say you aren't.' Butler's voice was expressionless. 'Is he at home?'

The man was as bad as Audley. 'You tell me why it's so all-fired important and I'll tell you where he is, Colonel.'

Butler shook his head. 'We can find out easily enough, you'll simply be saving us time, that's all.'

'You sound like a policeman, Colonel.'

Butler's lip curled. Then perhaps I am one, Mr Mitchell.'

‘But you don’t intend to tell me?’

‘Our business is official, not personal – will that do?’

Emerson would curse him, thought Mitchell impotently, but there was no point in refusing. Anyone who could penetrate the Institute would make short work of tracing someone.

‘His telephone number is Farley Green 21242.’

‘You mean he’s at his home?’ The colonel’s eyes were as devoid of expression as his voice. ‘You’re sure?’

‘There’s a call-box in the entrance hall . . .’ The hell with it, though; he was tired of being interrogated. ‘He was at home this morning. He said he was going to work there all day.’

‘Thank you, Mr Mitchell.’ Butler half-turned, and then stopped just as Audley had done. ‘Your grandfather commanded the West Mercians in 1918 . . . What did your father do in the last war?’

Again an abrupt change in the direction of the question. Only this time Mitchell had the feeling it wasn’t accidental; indeed, that none of the questions had been unplanned, but that the whole script had been planned with some obscure objective of their own in mind. And how many of the answers had they known in advance?

‘He worked on a farm in Wiltshire,’ he replied evenly, trying to match Butler’s tone. ‘He was a conscientious objector – a pacifist.’

He stood for a time, staring at nothing. Then he picked up the phone on the windowsill.

‘Can you get me Farley Green 21242, please?’

There had been a question on Butler’s face at the end, but he hadn’t turned it into words, so there was no telling whether it was the right one. But then when he thought about his grandfather, a colonel at twenty-six and a dead hero at twenty-seven, and his father, who’d reached the rank of under-cowman at

the same age, he wasn't sure what the right question was. Or that the answer would be in any book, even the one he was writing.

The phone rang.

'Your call, Mr Mitchell – there's no answer. It sounds as though the phone's out of order. The line's dead as a doornail, sir.'

As he invariably did when he came home by train, Mitchell finished the last lap of his journey by the short-cut along the towpath.

Actually it was no longer a short-cut, because he had outgrown his schoolboy habit of cutting through the goods yard, squeezing between the last line of hoarding and the beginning of the iron railings, and sliding down directly on to the path by way of the river bridge embankment. But it was still the coolest and most pleasant route in summer and the quietest and most relaxing one in winter, giving him an undisturbed quarter of an hour in which to consider the day's events and the evening's possibilities.

This evening was ideal for short-cutting: dark, but not too dark, with the towpath lamps catching the mist as it rose from the dark river like steam and picking out the puddles ahead; in fact just light enough to walk and think without fear of stepping off into the water, just dark enough to discourage casual walkers, and just chilly enough to drive courting couples under cover.

Only for once he regretted the reflexes which had automatically taken him along it, rather than among the bright lights and distractions of the town, because the day's events had been disturbing and the evening, like all evenings since his arrangement with Valerie had broken up, was very likely to be a drag.

And the bloody inescapable thing about this was that the drag was neither his nor Valerie's, but entirely in Mother's mind,

probably because her married life had been such a succession of contrived tragedies that she was no longer able to identify a happy ending when she met one. For Mother, boy meets girl had to be one extreme or the other – happy ever after or paradise lost. She just couldn't accept that rather than get married, girl wanted to become a publishing tycoon and boy wanted to write a book on the Hindenburg Line.

But that was not what was worrying him now – in fact it was not even important, only irritating. What was important was his failure so far to raise Professor Emerson at Farley Green in order to warn him about the afternoon's mystery men, and to apologise in advance for his big mouth. It might not matter at all, because Emerson wasn't the sort of man to take offence so easily, but that only made him feel more guilty. So if the phone was still dead he'd just have to get the car out and drive over there himself after supper, no matter how much it offended Mother.

As it undoubtedly would offend her. And as he'd now reached the first of the weir bridges he had only another five minutes in which to frame an explanation . . .

He moved to one side to allow a wide berth to two men he could see approaching from the other side of the bridge, the first he had seen since he had come down to the riverside. The water, he noticed, was not quite as high as might have been expected after the previous day's rain, with no more than half the curved weir gates raised. But then it had been a dryish autumn so far.

He needed an explanation for Mother – it would be no good telling her about the enigmatic Dr Audley and his uninformative colleague, because she'd only make a great dramatic production of it straightaway. But a mention of the professor would be like a red rag to her; she was quite irrationally jealous of the poor man.

'Mr Mitchell?'

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One of the two men checked his stride as they came alongside him.

‘Eh?’ Mitchell looked at him in surprise, fearful for an instant that he was about to be asked for the price of a cup of tea. But the educated voice and respectable overcoat reassured him. This was evidently a day for strangers.

‘It is Mr Mitchell, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. But I don’t believe – *ooooof*.’

Two hands grasped him from behind simultaneously, the first gripping his arm at the elbow and pulling him towards the railings while the other, in the small of his back, turned him sideways, face to the river. Their combined force slammed him into railings brutally. His briefcase was wrenched from his fingers.

Oh, God! he thought despairingly, terrified not for the £20 in his breast-pocket, but for the three months’ work in the briefcase, *muggers – mindless thugs who would as soon empty its contents into the river as give it back to him once they had found it all to be valueless –*

‘Please don’t –’ he gasped. But the words were cut off as the man who had spoken to him grabbed his free arm, bending him double over the top rail so that his feet almost left the ground.

The hold on each of his arms tightened, but the pressure on his back slackened as the hands there shifted down his body to the inside of his thighs. He found himself staring down uncomprehendingly at the olive-green water six feet below him, where it first rippled against the closed weir gate on his left and then slid in a smooth cataract into the open one directly beneath. The roar of the weir was deafening.

Even before the hands on his thighs betrayed his assailants’ intention the sight and sound of the water had sounded an alarm signal in his brain, tensing his body into rigidity.

Not his briefcase – oh, Christ! Not his briefcase and not muggers –

Then he was flying up and over, arms and legs released, flailing and kicking wildly against nothing, darkness and light whirling

and the water and noise coming up to meet him – exploding in his face – dragging him downwards. His knees struck the concrete lip of the weir spillway and he was instantly swept over it, his shoulder striking the first leg of the bridge with a bone-cracking shock. He felt himself tumbling and rolling helplessly, and then something slammed into the pit of his stomach – one moment he had been part of the torrent, and the next it was bursting over him, battering him and filling his eyes and nose and mouth. He fought the unbearable pressure on his lungs until his chest seemed full of fire and consciousness was only pain.

Then, unbelievably, he could breathe and breathe and breathe, each breath a wonderful burning agony. He was still somehow suspended in noise and darkness and water, but in an incomprehensible bubble of air.

Where am I?

There was a slimy hardness under his cheek and under his fingers. He groped slowly over the slime until he felt a solid object – a stanchion of some sort? A pillar?

God! He was still under the bridge – under the bridge and wedged in the angle of a supporting pillar and an iron cross-girder, wedged like a piece of river flotsam. The lower half of his body was held against the upright by the solid cataract of water racing through the open gate, a stream now buffeting him and cascading over him in a great arch of spray. But the upper half was lying in the protection of the closed gate, in the mere trickle coming from underneath it; it had been that diverted spray caused by his own body which had been drowning him as he struggled instinctively to raise his head above it, and only in beginning to lose consciousness had his mouth and nostrils dropped into safety below it.

Slowly he tested the pieces of his body. Each piece moved,