

DRY FEVER

A Short Story

by

Norman King Lloyd

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2013

No one knew what was going to happen. After all, it was war.

The men were relaxing in the Spring sunshine. Cigarette smoke drifted into my dugout; a smell I found quite disgusting even though I smoked myself. There had been a lull in the bombardment and the trenches were the driest they had been for weeks. The bloke who used to play ragtime at his local picture palace was quietly singing a song about a bagpiper, a bag of flour and a girl from Marseilles. I knew it to be vulgar and promised myself if ever I got back to nice Blighty in one piece, I'd sing it to my wife. I could see the shock on her sweet delicate features; the way I would place my hands on her shoulders, gently stroking downwards over the thin lacy blouse, bending down, kissing the two little moles on her neck. The way she would say: 'I'm a new wife, dearest, so be kind.' Then my fingers would slide under the high lace collar... and she would close her eyes, my knee thrust under her dress and into her petticoats... Better not think like that, I told myself and went outside to see the men.

The poet was mumbling something about the his feet being full of electricity, the butcher was talking about cooking rats and the bell-boy from a London hotel was doing imitations of wealthy guests. The rest of the blokes were lolling about writing home or redoing bandages and everyone bar the soap salesman was smoking like bloody chimneys.

'Men!' I said, saluting: 'No ceremony, please. Just a bit concerned that this fug might worry the Boche.' Finishing rather lamely, I added: 'And they could target us.'

'The breeze, such as it is, be blowing it away from them,' the poet said, refilling his pipe, 'and I did take a peep, half-hour back and there was the same sort of haze coming from their trenches. The boys were a bit noisy though so...'

'Yes, Private?'

'I told the lads to keep the everyday chap banter down, a bit of *sotto voce*.'

A strong lad who used to work at Billingsgate, shouted: 'I'll sotto you, poet! You ain't a sodding Corporal yet! Come to think, you took a chance sticking that precious bonk of yours above the parapet.' The man put on a posh voice: 'Sauté'd poet's brain, ain't that extra nice for a rhyming luncheon or what about a tasty fricassée of officers' offal. Pick it up easy pie in No-Man's-Land. Better than bully beef, don't you think, Captain?'

The shock of these words was an immediate intact of breath right along the trench. The men looked down embarrassed. The kindly sergeant got to his feet. 'That'll be more than enough from you, Williams. You don't speak to officer's like that. Apologise immediately.'

'No need, Sergeant,' I replied. 'If the soldier's that keen on No-Man's land, he'll be first over the top next time. But don't judge the man too harshly. We've all been through the mill the last few weeks.'

I asked that the poet join me for help in writing a report. In the dug-out, I was showing him a photo of my wife when there was a sudden whistling. We covered our ears but the explosion was still thunderous. The pots fell off the table, the candles flickered and went out. My guard came running in. 'All seems in order, this end, Captain.' The sergeant appeared. 'Sodding whiz-bang got 'em in the secondary trenches. Them boys have copped in right good and proper. Telephone's down but I'll try the signallers' up Piccadilly.'

'You might send our Billingsgate man to see what's happened. Is he up to it?'

'Have to be, Captain.' The sergeant laughed and wiped his brow. 'Even though he's a proper haddock. Pity we haven't got some meaty old Smithfield bugger to go see.' The sergeant frowned: 'Begging your pardon, Captain, that sort of talk seems to be catching today.'

'Are we going over the top tomorrow night?' The poet asked, after the sergeant had trundled off.