



A Lot of Old Codswallop

The dog was whining at the kitchen door. "Let Jack out for me, will you?" said the old lady. "There's a dear. I'll tell you what, I'll fetch down the kite Bertie made for me, shall I? You'd like to see it, wouldn't you?" And she went out.

I was only too happy to let the dog out and shut the door on him.

She was back sooner than I expected. "There," she said, setting the kite down on the table in front of me. "What do you think of it then?" It was huge, much bigger than I had expected, and covered in dust. It was made of brown canvas

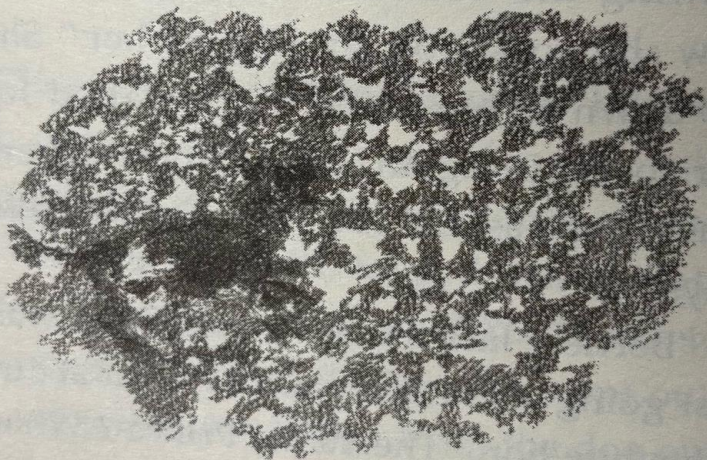
stretched over a wooden frame. All the kites I had seen had been more colourful, more flamboyant. I think the disappointment must have shown in my face.

"She still flies, you know," she said, blowing the dust off. "You should see how she goes. You should see her." She sat down in her chair and I waited for her to begin again. "Now then, where was I?" she asked. "I'm so forgetful these days."

"Bertie's last letter," I said. "He was just going off to the war. But what about the white lion, 'The White Prince'? What happened to him?" I could hear the dog barking wildly outside. She smiled at me. "Everything comes to he who waits," she said. "Why don't you have a look out of the window?"

I looked. The lion on the hillside was blue no more. It was white now, and the

dog was bounding across the hillside, chasing away a cloud of blue butterflies that rose all around him. "He chases everything that moves," she said. "But don't worry. He won't catch a single one. He never catches anything."



"Not *that* lion," I said. "I meant the lion in the story. What happened to him?"

"Don't you see? They're the same. The lion out there on the hillside and the lion in the story. They're the same."

"I don't understand," I said.

"You soon will," she replied. "You soon will." She took a deep breath before she began again.

For many years Bertie never spoke about the fighting in the trenches. He always said it was a nightmare best forgotten, best kept to himself. But later on when he'd had time to reflect, when time had done its healing perhaps, then he told me something of how it had been.

At seventeen, he'd found himself marching with his regiment along the straight roads of northern France up to the front line, heads and hearts high with hope and expectation. Within a few months he was sitting huddled at the bottom of a muddy trench, hands over his head, head between his knees, curling himself into himself as tight as he would go, sick with terror as the shells and

whizzbangs blew the world apart around him. Then the whistle would blow and they'd be out and over the top into No Man's Land, bayonets fixed and walking towards the German trenches into the ratatat of machine-gun fire. To the left of him and to the right of him his friends would fall, and he would walk on, waiting for the bullet with his name on which he knew could cut him down at any moment.

At dawn they always had to come out of their dugouts and "stand to" in the trenches, just in case there was an attack. The Germans often attacked at dawn. That's how it was on the morning of his twentieth birthday. They came swarming over No Man's Land out of the early morning sun, but they were soon spotted and mown down like so much ripe corn. Then they were turning and running. The whistle went, and Bertie led his men over the top to counter-attack. But as always

the Germans were expecting them, and the usual slaughter began. Bertie was hit in the leg and fell into a shellhole. He thought of waiting there all day and then crawling back under cover of darkness, but his wound was bleeding badly and he could not staunch it. He decided he had to try to crawl back to the trenches whilst he still had the strength to do it.

Hugging the ground, he was almost at the wire, almost back to safety, when he heard someone crying out in No Man's Land. It was a cry he could not ignore. He found two of his men lying side by side, and so badly wounded that they could not move. One of them was already unconscious. He hoisted him onto his shoulders and made for the trenches, the bullets whipping and whining around him. The man was heavy and Bertie fell several times under his weight, but he got himself to his feet again and staggered on,

until they tumbled together down into the trench. The stretcher-bearers tried to take Bertie away. He'd bleed to death, they said. But he would not listen. One of his own men was still lying wounded out there in No Man's Land, and he was going to bring him in, no matter what.

Waving his hands above his head, Bertie climbed out of the trench and walked forward. The firing stopped almost at once. He was so weak himself by now that he could scarcely walk, but he managed to reach the wounded man and drag him back. They say that in the end both sides, German and British, were up on the parapets and cheering him on as he stumbled back towards his lines. Then other men were running out to help him and after that he didn't know any more.

When he woke up he found himself in hospital lying in a bed, with the two friends he had rescued on either side.

He was still there some weeks later when he was told that he was to be awarded the Victoria Cross for his bravery under fire. He was the hero of the hour, the pride of his regiment.



Afterwards Bertie always called it a "lot of old codswallop". To be really brave, he said, you have to overcome fear. You have to be frightened in the first place, and he hadn't been. There wasn't time to be frightened. He did what he did without thinking, just as he had saved the

white lion cub all those years before when he was a boy in Africa. Of course, they made a great fuss of him in the hospital, and he loved all that, but his leg did not heal as well as it should have. He was still there in the hospital when I found him.

It was not entirely by accident that I found him. For over three years now there had been no letter, no word from him at all. He had warned me, I know, but the long silence was hard to bear. Every time the postman came, I hoped, and the pang of disappointment was sharper each time there was no letter from him. I told all to Nanny Mason who dried my tears and told me to pray, and that she would too. She was sure there'd be a letter soon.

Without Nanny I don't know how I would have gone on living. I was so miserable. I had seen the wounded men coming back from France, blinded, gassed, crippled, and always dreaded seeing

Bertie's face amongst them. I had seen the long lists in the newspapers of all the men who had been killed or who were "missing". I looked each day for his name and thanked God every time I did not find it. But still he never wrote, and I had to know why. I thought maybe he had been so badly wounded that he could not write, that he was lying in some hospital alone and unloved. So I determined I would become a nurse. I would go to France, and heal and comfort as best I could, and just hope that somehow I might find him. But I soon discovered that amongst so many men in uniform it would be hopeless to go looking for him. I did not even know his regiment, nor his rank. I had no idea where to begin.



I was sent to a hospital some fifty miles behind the lines, not too far from Amiens. The hospital was a converted chateau with turrets and great wide staircases, and chandeliers in the wards. But it was so cold in winter that many of the men died as much from the cold as from their wounds. We did all we could for them, but we were short of doctors and short of medicines. There were always so many men coming in, and their wounds were terrible, so terrible. Each time we saved one it was such a joy to us. In the midst of the suffering all around us, we needed some joy, believe me.

I was at breakfast one morning – it was June of 1918. I was reading a magazine, the *Illustrated London News*, I remember, when I turned the page and saw a face I knew at once. He was older, thinner in the face and unsmiling, but I was sure it was Bertie. His eyes were deepset and gentle,

just as I remembered them. And there was his name: "Captain Albert Andrews VC". There was a whole article underneath about what he had done, and how he was still recovering from his wounds in a hospital, a hospital that turned out to be little more than ten miles away. Wild horses would not have kept me from him. The next Sunday I cycled over.

He was sleeping when I saw him first, propped up on his pillows, one hand behind his head. "Hello," I said.

He opened his eyes and frowned at me. It was a moment or two before he knew me.

"Been in the wars, have you?" I said.

"Something like that," he replied.

