



Le temps des armes



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Extrait

CHAPTER ONE

It was shortly after three in the afternoon. Joseph Reavley was half asleep in the April sun, his back to the pale clay wall of the trench, when he heard the angry voices.

“They be moi boots, Tucky Nunn, an’ you know that well as Oi do! Yours be over there wi’ holes in ‘em!” It was Plugger Arnold, a seasoned soldier of twenty, big-boned, a son of the village blacksmith. He had been in Flanders since the outbreak of war in August. Although he was angry, he kept his voice low. He knew it carried in the afternoon stillness when the men snatched the three or four hours of sleep they could.

The German trenches were only seventy yards away across this stretch of the Ypres Salient. Anyone foolish enough to reach a hand up above the parapet would be likely to get it shot. The snipers seldom needed a second chance. Added to which, getting yourself injured on purpose was a court-martial offense.

Tucky Nunn, nineteen and new this far forward, was standing on the duckboards that floored the trench. They were there to keep the men’s feet above the icy water that sloshed around, but they seldom worked. The water level was too high. Every time you thought it was drying out at last, it rained again.

“Yeah?” Tucky said, his eyebrows raised. “Fit me perfect, they do. Didn’t see your name on ‘em. Must ‘ave wore off.” He grinned, making no move to bend and unlace the offending boots and hand them back.

Plugger was sitting half sideways on the fire-step. A few yards away the sentry was standing with his back to them, staring through the periscope over the wire and mud of no-man’s-land. He could not afford to lose concentration even for a moment, regardless of what went on behind him.

“They’s moi boots,” Plugger said between his teeth. “Take ‘em off yer soddin’ feet an’ give ‘em back to me, or Oi’ll take ‘em off yer and give yer to the rats!”

Tucky bounced on the balls of his feet, hunching his shoulders a little. “You want to try?” he invited.

Doughy Ward crawled out of his dugout, fully dressed, as they all were: webbing and rifle with bayonet attached. His fair-skinned face was crumpled with annoyance at being robbed of any part of his few hours of sleep. He glared at Joseph. “ ‘Thou shalt not steal.’ Isn’t that right, Chaplain?”

It was a demand that even here in the mud and the cold, amid boredom and sporadic violence, Joseph should do his job and stand for the values of justice that must remain, or all this would sink into a purposeless hell. Without right and wrong there was no sanity.

“Oi didn’t steal them!” Tucky said angrily. “They were . . .” He did not finish the sentence because Plugger hit him, a rolling blow that caught the side of his jaw as he ducked and struck back.

There was no point in shouting at them, and the sound would carry. Added to which Joseph did not want to let the whole trench know that there was a discipline problem. Both men could end up on a charge, and that was not the way for a chaplain to resolve anything. He moved forward, careful to avoid being struck himself, and grasped hold of Tucky, taking him off balance and knocking him against the uprights that held the trench

wall.

“The Germans are that way!” he said tartly, jerking his head back toward the parapet and no-man’s-land beyond.

Plugger was up on his feet, slithering in the mud on the duckboards, his socks filthy and sodden. “Good oidea to send him over the top, Captain, where he belongs! But not in moi boots!” He was floundering toward them, arms flailing as if to carry on the fight.

Joseph stepped between them, risking being caught by both, the worst part of which would be that then a charge would be unavoidable. “Stop it!” he ordered briskly. “Take the boots off, Nunn!”

“Thank you, Chaplain,” Plugger responded with a smile of satisfaction.

Tucky stood unmoving, his face set, ignoring the blood. “They ain’t his boots either!” he said sullenly, his eyes meeting Joseph’s.

A man appeared around the dogleg corner. No stretch of the trench was more than ten or twelve yards long, to prevent shellfire taking out a whole platoon of men—or a German raiding party making it through the wire. They were steep-sided, shored up against mud slides, and barely wide enough for two men to pass each other. The man coming was tall and lean with wide shoulders, and he walked with a certain elegance, even on the sloping duckboards. His face was dark, long-nosed, and there was a wry humor in it.

“Early for tea, aren’t you?” he asked, his eyes going from one to another.

Tucky and Plugger reluctantly stood to attention. “Yes, Major Wetherall,” they said almost in unison.

Sam Wetherall glanced down at Plugger’s stockinginged feet, his eyebrows raised. “Thinking of creeping up on the cook, are you? Or making a quick recce over the top first?”

“Soon as Oi get moi boots back from that thievin’ sod, Oi’ll put ’em on again,” Plugger replied, gesturing toward Tucky.

“I’d wash them first if I were you,” Sam advised with a smile.

“Oi will,” Plugger agreed. “Oi don’t want to catch nothin’!”

“I meant your feet,” Sam corrected him.

Tucky Nunn roared with laughter, in spite of the bruise darkening on his jaw where Plugger had caught him.

“Whose boots are they?” Joseph asked, smiling as well.

“Moine!” both men said together.

“Whose boots are they?” Joseph repeated.

There was a moment’s silence.

“Oi saw ‘em first,” Plugger answered.

“You didn’t take them,” Tucky pointed out. “If you ‘ad, you’d ‘ave them now, wouldn’t you!”

“Come on, Solomon.” Sam looked at Joseph, his mouth pulled into an ironic twist.

“Right,” Joseph said decisively. “Left boot, Nunn. Right boot, Arnold.”

There was considerable grumbling, but Tucky took off the right boot and passed it over, reaching for one of the worn boots where Plugger had been sitting.

“Shouldn’t have had them off now anyway,” Sam said disapprovingly. “You know better than that. What if Fritz’d made a sudden attack?”

Plugger’s eyebrows shot up, his blue eyes wide open. “At half past three in the afternoon? It’s teatoime in a minute. They may be soddin’ Germans, but they’re not uncivilized. They still got to eat an’ sleep, same as us.”

“You stick your head up above the parapet, and you’ll find he’s nowhere near asleep, I promise you,” Sam warned.

Tucky was about to reply when there was a shouting about twenty yards along the line, and a moment later a young soldier lurched around the corner, his face white. He stared at Sam.

“One of your sappers has taken half his hand off!” he said, his voice high-pitched and jerky.

“Where is he, Charlie?” Joseph said quickly. “We’ll get him to the first-aid post.”

Sam was rigid. “Who is it?” He started forward, pushing ahead of both of them, ignoring the rats scattering in both directions.

Charlie Gee swiveled and went on his heels. Joseph stopped to duck into the connecting trench leading back to the second line, and pick out a first-aid pack in case they needed more than the field dressing the wounded man should be carrying himself.

When he caught up with them Sam was bent over, one arm around a man sitting on the duckboards. The sapper was rocking back and forth, clutching the stump of his hand to his chest, scarlet blood streaming from it.

Joseph had lost count of how many wounded and dead he had seen, but each man’s horror was new, and real, and it looked as if in this case the man might have lost a good deal of his right hand.

Sam was ashen, his jaw clenched so tight the muscles stood out like cords. “We have to see it, Corliss!” His voice shook in spite of everything he could do to steady it. “We have to stop the bleeding!” He looked at Joseph, his eyes desperate.

Joseph tore open the dressing and, speaking gently to the injured man, took his hand and without examining it, pressed the bandage and the lint over the streaming wound, then bound it as well as he could. He had very little idea how many fingers were left.

“Come on, ol’ feller,” Charlie said, trying to help Corliss to his feet. “Oi’ll get you back to the doc’s and they’ll do it for you proper.”

Sam climbed to his feet and pulled Joseph aside as Charlie and Corliss stumbled past.

“Joe, can you go with them?” Sam said urgently. He swallowed, gulping. “Corliss is in a hell of a state. He’s been on the edge of funkering it for days. I’ve got to find out what happened, put in a report, but the medics’ll ask him what caused it. . . . Answer for him, will you?” He stopped, but it was painfully apparent he wanted to say more.

Suddenly Joseph understood. Sam was terrified the man had injured himself deliberately. Some men panicked, worn down by fear, cold, and horror, and put their hands up above the parapet precisely so a sniper would get them. A hand maimed was “a Blighty one,” and they got sent home. But if it was self-inflicted, it was considered cowardice in the face of the enemy. It warranted a court-martial, and possibly even the death sentence. Corliss’s nerves may have snapped. It happened to men sometimes. Anything could trigger a reaction: the incessant noise of bombardment, the dirt, body lice. For some it was waking in the night with rats crawling over your body—or worse, your face. The horror of talking one moment to a man you had grown up with, the next seeing him blown to bits, perhaps armless and legless but still alive, taking minutes of screaming in agony to die. It was more than some could take. For others it was the guilt of knowing that your bullet, or your bayonet, was doing the same to a German you had never met, but who was your own age, and essentially just like you. Sometimes they crept over no-man’s-land at night and swapped food. Occasionally you could even hear them singing. Different things broke different men. Corliss was a sapper. It could have been the claustrophobia of crawling inside the tunnels under the earth, the terror of being buried alive.

“Help him,” Sam begged. “I can’t go . . . and they won’t believe me anyway.”

“Of course.” Joseph did not hesitate. He grasped Sam’s arm for an instant, then turned and made his way back over the duckboards to the opening of the communication trench. Charlie Gee and Corliss were far enough ahead of him to be out of sight around one of the numerous dogleg bends. He hurried, his feet slithering on the wet boards. In some places chicken wire had been tacked over them to give a grip, but no one had bothered here. He must catch up with them before they reached the supply trench and someone else started asking questions.

From the Hardcover edition. Revue de presse

'The plot of this book is riveting throughout; the elegance of the prose and depth of characterisation combine to create a powerful and poignant journey into the past that long stays with you after the final page' *The Lady*, 28/9/04 (*The Lady*)

'The writer weaves her compelling fiction around a graphic account of the horror of First World War trench warfare that has not been bettered since Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong*' (*Nottingham Evening Post*)

'Perry cleverly resolves some plot lines while reserving the solution of others for future mysteries...she does a superb job of bringing the grimness and waste to life, in a nice shift of gears from her two 19th-century historical series' *Publishers Weekly*, 26/7/04 (*Publishers Weekly*)

'An absorbing tale' *Kirkus Reviews*, 15/7/04 (*Kirkus Reviews*) Présentation de l'éditeur

En 1915, la guerre s’embourbe dans les tranchées, plongeant des millions d’hommes dans un cauchemar

quotidien. Depuis que leurs parents ont été assassinés, victimes d'un odieux complot politique, les membres de la famille Reavley ont chacun un rôle à jouer au cœur du conflit. Tandis qu'en Angleterre, Matthew, espion des services secrets, suit la piste semée de secrets d'État du commanditaire de la mort de ses parents, surnommé le Pacificateur, Joseph, son frère, aumônier dans les tranchées des Flandres et sa sœur, la rebelle Judith, volontaire sur le front, enquêtent sur l'assassinat d'un correspondant de guerre qui semblait lui aussi avoir beaucoup de choses à cacher... Après *Avant la tourmente*, la reine du polar livre le second volet des aventures de la famille Reavley pendant la Grande Guerre. De la tranquillité bucolique des campagnes anglaises à l'horreur des tranchées, Anne Perry compose avec brio une grande épopée historique et humaine.

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