

# 1

19<sup>th</sup> August 1899

**M**orning Father, morning Mother, morning brats, Jack chanted as he strode through the breakfast room to the kitchen.

Marion Whitelaw was beaming proudly at her younger son. 'Hello Jack, sleep well?'

His baby sister, Jo, pulled a face while the older one, Kate, grinned and waved her serviette at him dismissively, muttering, 'Brat yourself!'

His father, George, hidden behind *The Telegraph*, scowled at something in it and responded absent-mindedly with, 'Morning, Son.'

Stepping into the kitchen, Jack felt the customary warmth of both the Aga stove and the family cook and ex-nanny, Rose, a rotund, ruddy-faced product of Bristol. She responded to his cheery greeting by enveloping him in a motherly hug, saying, 'My, up so soon! I thought you'd spend your first morning home in bed. Fancy the usual?'

Jack smiled. 'Thanks, Rosie. And don't forget I like my bacon crispy!'

She swatted him with her kitchen towel. 'You're even cheekier than your brother, Master Jack!' she said, referring to Jack's brother, Arthur, two years his senior and now a curate at St James's Church in Piccadilly. 'Here's some oats to keep you quiet while I do the rest.'

Jack grinned, took the plate of porridge and patted her shoulder. 'Thanks Rosie, You're a gem,' then joined his family at the table. It felt wonderful to be back on the farm; so peaceful.

As he sat down, his father rapped his newspaper sharply and lowered it to peer over his spectacles at no one in particular. 'Bloody cheek!' he growled. 'Who does this bloke Kruger think he is anyway? He's now blaming us for the actions of that oaf, Jameson! Everyone knows it was Rhodes who was behind it all, not our government.'

Jack reached for the sugar bowl. 'That may be, Father, but our prime minister's recent statements about the way the Transvaal government has been treating its foreigners were less than diplomatic.'

George Whitelaw folded his paper and stretched for a slice of toast. 'Well he's bloody right! Those foreigners pay most of the taxes and have virtually no rights. They can't even vote! No, we'll give those Boers a damn good hiding if they continue to challenge us.'

Jack poured milk over his oats. 'Anyway, I may be heading out there myself, soon.'

Four pairs of eyes turned on him.

'To South Africa?' his father asked, his knife poised over his toast.

'Yes. On Tuesday I heard that I've been transferred to our 1st Battalion. They've been warned to be on shortest notice for service in South Africa.'

'But the battalion's still in India, isn't it?'

'They are, but they're short of junior officers. I've been told to stay put at our base in Exeter for a while. If they are ordered out, I'll be shipped off on a transport vessel to join them.'

Marion Whitelaw looked anxious. 'When you say short notice, does that mean we may not see you before you go?'

Jack was touched by his mother's concern. 'No, if there isn't an urgent message in the next few days, I'll be reporting back to barracks on Monday to await further orders. But either way, I'm sure they'd grant me a couple of days embarkation leave.' He paused to attend to his porridge. 'It's all very exciting, and, to cap it all, Mark has also been transferred. We'll be travelling there together!'

His mother looked more relaxed. 'D'you mean Mark Lytton-Smyth?'

'Yes.'

'That's good. *Such* a nice lad. He'll be able to get away from his dreadful father.'

'Oh it's not that bad, Mum. Mark and his dad get on quite well most of the time.'

George cleared his throat. 'Well, anyway, that's good news, Son. If the balloon goes up soon and we send out all the reinforcements that we understand are on standby, you could be home for Christmas.'

Jack managed to temper his response. 'With respect, Father, don't you think that's being a touch too optimistic?'

His father glared at him. 'Too optimistic? Why? For how long do you think that untrained, ill-equipped bunch of rebels could survive against our well-trained, well-equipped and highly experienced army? I mean, we're talking about the might of the British Empire here, aren't we?'

'Well that bunch of rebels you talk about didn't do too badly the last time out, did they? Have you forgotten about Majuba?'

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‘Majuba! Majuba! Everyone’s making such a bloody fuss about Majuba. In retrospect, it’s not at all surprising we took such a pasting back then. Only the other day I read that the regiments we had in the field hadn’t seen action since Crimea. In any case, they stood no chance with the ridiculous tactics used by that damn fool, Colley! And remember, that was a good eight years ago. Nowadays our troops are kitted out in khaki in the field; and our present crop of generals are a damn sight more competent than Colley.’

Although Jack recognised there was a good deal of truth in his father’s observations, he couldn’t share his level of confidence. His superior officer, Harry Winchester, had pointed out that on several occasions the 1st Battalion had experienced tough resistance in the hills of India during the recent Tirah Campaign, despite the fact that the rebels there were not nearly as well-equipped and organised as the Boers. But he kept his counsel and was relieved when his mother changed the subject.

‘What does Jessie think about it?’ she asked, referring to Jack’s Dorchester girlfriend, Jessica Westropp.

‘I’m not really sure. She left on Sunday for a week’s holiday with an aunt and uncle in Llandudno. I’ve written to tell her, and will be spending a few hours with her at her home before catching the train back to base. But we’ve often discussed the probability of my being posted to some foreign place for a few years, so it won’t come as a great surprise to her. She understands there’s little chance of significant promotion for anyone who’s had no combat experience.’ He paused while he polished off his porridge. ‘But it will be quite a wrench for us both.’

Jack spent much of the morning with his bay gelding, Gladstone, grooming him lovingly before giving him a good run to a small grove of trees in Top Field. Unlike Jo, who had once fallen off and been dragged by a horse, Kate was horse mad and joined him on her small grey mare.

Cantering over the brow of a hill, they came across the head shepherd, ‘Uncle’ Bert Shanks, trudging back to the homestead; a sick ewe draped over his shoulders. Jack’s grandfather had taken Bert on as a young lad over thirty years back and Jack had spent much of his time during school holidays helping ‘Uncle Bert’ with the sheep and listening to his yarns.

Bert looked impressed when Jack told him his news. ‘Eh, lad,’ he growled, ‘I hope you’ll sort out those bloody Boers. And don’t you worry about Gladstone, now, I’ll see to it that young James grooms and exercises him regularly. E’ll cop a thick ear if e don’t!’

George Whitelaw had business to attend to in Dorchester that Monday and drove Jack to the Westropp’s home in the trap. Jessica came skipping

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down the front steps with a huge grin on her face and folded Jack in a warm embrace. He was hesitant to display too much emotion in front of his father, but revelled in her warmth as he murmured in her ear, 'You're looking lovely as usual.'

They spent a few happy hours together before she walked with him to the station. Her mother was hovering about, but there was no sign of Mr Westropp. Knowing about his strong partiality for whisky, Jack didn't ask.

As the train pulled out, he reflected that, while he and Jessica had enjoyed each other's company as usual, there'd seemed to be something missing. He couldn't quite put his finger on it but wondered if she was somewhat less concerned about the prospect of a long separation than she'd admitted to. He quickly dismissed the idea that she may have met someone else on holiday, but the thought crossed his mind that there couldn't be anything much worse than being ditched while thousands of miles away on active service.

## 2

4<sup>th</sup> September

Jack! You here?' Mark shouted, as he stumbled into the officers' bathroom after lunch while Jack was brushing his teeth. 'Oh, here you are.'

Jack finished rinsing his mouth. 'Why the excitement?'

'It's happened!'

'What's happened?'

'We've been ordered out to South Africa!'

'Who told you?'

'Harry. He'll be coming with us! Major Humphreys called him in and told him that the 1st Battalion is due to sail from Bombay on the twenty-first of next month.'

'Did he say who else?'

'Well, the three of us and four others are due to sail from Southampton on the fourteenth!'

'Of this month you say? September?'

'That's right, in ten days' time.'

'That's fantastic! Did he say who the other chaps are?'

'He did, but the only one you and I really know is Phillips.'

'Not the Captain Phillips with the big nose and offhand manner?'

'That's him, I'm afraid. But be careful what you say, Harry told me all this in confidence. Humphreys said he would be briefing each of us separately this afternoon, so remember to look surprised when he does.'

Jack grinned. 'Don't worry, I'll look the epitome of ignorance. But I'm so pleased Harry'll be with us.'

'Yes, he never takes advantage of his rank or brags about his time in India, the way Phillips does.'

Jack reported to Major Humphreys' office at 16h00 sharp. The major bade him sit, offering him a Player's cigarette, which he declined, to avoid any distraction.

Humphreys' whisky tan seemed to be glowing more brightly than ever and Jack noticed that his girth was generous for a relatively young military man. However, the man had been mentioned in despatches for his role in a skirmish in the Tirah, resulting in him being badly wounded and seconded to the 2nd Battalion back in Exeter.

Humphreys lit his cigarette and inhaled deeply. 'First, I want to congratulate you on being selected to join our colleagues in Africa. They've had a rather tough time of it during the past few years, with men lost in battle and through disease. As a result, they're now short of junior officers. When their commanding officer first contacted me, he said he expected much tougher resistance out there than some of the politicians and most of the media appear to be anticipating, and asked me to choose only men who are physically tough and have guts.'

Humphreys proceeded to give Jack the information that he'd already learned from Mark, but added, 'Captain Phillips and Captain Winchester are booked to sail with you to Durban on the Union Line's *SS Gaul*. You'll all be issued with tropical kit in the morning, so make sure to be at the stores at nine o'clock sharp. And you've been granted a week's embarkation leave, starting in three days' time. You can collect your train voucher from the admin office any time before that. You'll see from my written order that you must report at Quay 17 of the Southampton Docks at twelve hundred hours on Wednesday the fourteenth of September, and be prepared to sail later that afternoon.'

Jack was delighted Harry Winchester would be going to South Africa, knowing he was not alone in liking and respecting the man, but had strong reservations about Phillips. He suspected Phillips didn't like something about him, but couldn't quite put his finger on it.

Humphreys paused as he took another draw. 'I've been keeping an eye on you, Whitelaw, and mostly like what I've seen. Your country upbringing has done you no harm and I like the way you relate to both your senior officers and the lower ranks.'

Jack shifted uneasily. 'Thank you, Major.'

The major's face took on a sterner look. 'Yes, but I used the term "mostly" advisedly. Looking through your file, you appear to have sailed through life quite effortlessly up until now, with colours for cricket, a cap for your first fifteen, squash champion, history and English prizes, etcetera. But, although you've acquitted yourself equally well during your two years with the regiment, you've yet to earn your spurs in the field.' He tapped the ash off his cigarette. 'I want you to remember that you're once more a junior; not quite a new boy, but in a position similar to when

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you were in Form Three. Captain Winchester tells me you're an excellent bridge player. That should prove useful when you get out there. You may well be roped into a few games with your superiors. But if you are, be careful to maintain respect for their rank at all times, even, and perhaps especially, when the whisky begins to flow!

Jack hoped the lecture would soon end, but made a point of maintaining eye contact with his superior officer as he continued with his theme.

'Having said that, I have no doubt you'll do your best to serve and bring honour to both your new battalion and to this one. I'm sure you are aware of the regiment's proud record.' With that, he stood, and Jack followed suit. 'Is there anything you'd like to ask me before you go?'

'Only that I be granted permission to send telegrams from the office to my girlfriend.'

'What about your family?'

'No, I'd probably be home by the time one was delivered to the farm. But thank you very much for your advice, Major - and for your guidance and support since the day I arrived.'

Humphreys chuckled. 'You were very green back then!' He extended his arm and, as they shook hands, said, 'But yes, tell Lieutenant Shaw I say he should send the telegrams for you.' He began to move around his desk, indicating the end of the interview. 'I'm pleased to have been of help, Whitelaw. I'll be following your progress with interest and know you'll make us proud.'

Back in their bungalow, Jack compared notes with Mark. Their briefings had been similar, except that Humphreys appeared not to have made any mention of Mark's somewhat limited sporting achievements.

As if confirming that, Mark frowned as he said, 'Humphreys went on a bit about the need for me to improve my levels of fitness.'

Having undressed in preparation for a shower, Jack wrapped a towel around his waist. 'Was he specific about it?'

'Not really, but he emphasised the tough conditions we'll be experiencing in the South African veld, including the scorching sun and rugged terrain.'

'Well, he should know, having been out there for two years during the first encounter. I believe he was mentioned in despatches after a skirmish with the Boers at Laing's Nek in 1883.'

'That's right. I suppose I'd better take his advice seriously.'

Jack chuckled. 'You'd better. Why don't we do twenty laps around the deck before breakfast every morning?'

His friend grinned. 'Maybe. But you know I hate jogging, in fact anything more violent than a round of golf. I don't suppose there'll be much of that where we're headed!'

There was a buoyant air of confidence in the officers' mess during dinner as the four men selected were congratulated and wished well by those staying behind. Several expressed envy. As one pumped Jack's hand, he urged him in a loud voice to 'Avenge Majuba'. His words were echoed by a few others.

Harry Winchester greeted Jack warmly, saying, 'I'm so pleased you're coming with us, Jack. You'll be an asset out there, especially when it comes to bridge! I intend to arrange a good many rubbers on the voyage.'

Jack made a point of congratulating Laurence Phillips, but his response fell a long way short of Harry's, especially when he said with a smirk, 'I suppose you and Lytton-Smyth realise you have a lot to learn when it comes to leadership in the field. I hope you pick it up quickly. Many lives will depend on it.' Jack realised he would have to tread carefully whenever Phillips was around.

After dinner, he and Mark could barely contain their excitement as they packed their things and prepared for bed. They continued to chat quietly for a while after lights out, and were soon asleep.

It only took them half an hour to draw their additional kit the next morning and they were at the station by 11h00, with Mark set to continue alone on to Weymouth.

Jessica was standing on the platform as the train steamed into the Dorchester station. Her pale-blue dress hugged her hourglass figure and toned in beautifully with her clear eyes and fair hair. Jack felt very fortunate as he leapt onto the platform before the train had clattered to a complete stop, took her in his arms and kissed her on both cheeks, Continental style. Mark jumped down after him to greet Jessica, but insisted they not wait to see him off.

Jack looked around him. 'My folks aren't expecting us, but it's only five miles to the farm. I'll walk.'

However, knowing his baggage was heavy, he was grateful when Jessica came to his rescue, saying, 'No, don't be silly, borrow Father's horse. You can keep him for the whole week if you like. He needs the exercise.'

Jack smiled adoringly at her. 'Thanks, sweetheart, you're a gem.'

With that, he hefted his kitbag and haversack, and followed her to the Westropp's pony trap in the street. He thought she seemed slightly uneasy when she said, 'Shall we have something to eat in town before going home? That way, we'll have more time to ourselves,' and guessed it might have something to do with her father's drinking problem.

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As always, he was impressed with Jessica's horse-handling skills as they trundled down High West Street and tethered their horses close to Judge Jeffrey's 'restaurant and coffee house'.

A spotty youth with a mop of red hair seemed equally impressed with her physical attributes, as he showed them to a table. They both ordered steak and kidney and the house coffee, which was said to be specially imported from Java.

Jack thoroughly enjoyed their short time there, hardly taking his eyes off her as they chatted. But he had to feign interest when she went on, for what he thought was too long - and perhaps a touch too enthusiastically - about her holiday in Torquay, especially the new friends she'd made, including a medical student called Walter.

Eventually he changed the topic by saying, 'You've said nothing about your music. Have you applied to that college in London?'

'The London School of Music? Yes, I have, but still waiting for an answer. Oh, I *do* hope they accept me!'

From Judge Jeffrey's they drove to the Westropp home in West Walks Road. It was within easy walking distance but, as before, Jack was relieved he didn't have to lug his baggage along.

Jessica's mother greeted him warmly, saying he must be very excited about his new posting. There was no sign of Henry Westropp. It took some time to unharness the horses and saddle up her father's horse, Wellington, especially as the privacy of the stables and comfort of the fresh bales of hay enabled Jack and Jessica to enjoy each other somewhat more intimately.

But eventually Jessica leant backwards, and murmured breathlessly, 'Steady on, Lieutenant Whitelaw, I think it's time you mounted your trusty steed and made your departure!'

Jack laughed and pulled her back close to him. 'You can't call me "lieutenant" yet, I'm only a lowly second lieutenant - a lowly subaltern.'

They lingered longingly over their exchange of farewell hugs and kisses, and a last extra passionate hug for good measure, before Jack said, 'Until next week, my darling,' leapt onto Wellington and set off for home.

It was an emotional week for Jack. He made a point of keeping busy, riding Gladstone at least once a day, often accompanied by Kate, helping Bert Shanks to de-burr and dose the sheep, and playing table tennis and card games with his sisters. As he did so, he kept thinking about the thrill and dangers of the challenges that lay ahead.

Perhaps the highlight of the week was when, one afternoon, his father suggested they ride over to The Three Horseshoes at Askerswell for a pint before dinner. George Whitelaw was a private sort of man; Jack had even heard one or two people call him taciturn, or something similar. Once

Jack's older brother, Arthur, had left home for the ministry, Jack had been able to get closer to him and this was the third time he'd suggested they have a couple of drinks together.

It was only a fifteen-minute ride and they were soon tethering Gladstone and Wellington to the hitching post in the yard.

Sandy Williams, a boy who had been in Jack's class at the local prep school, was helping his father behind their bar and gave a welcoming shout as the two walked in, saying, 'Look who's here! You've been a bit scarce since you joined the army Master Whitelaw - or should I say, Lieutenant Whitelaw?'

Jack was pleased to see him and their easy relationship loosened things up considerably, to the extent that dinner had been waiting in the oven for a while by the time they got home. Marion Whitelaw was clearly far from pleased. Although saying nothing, she was unusually quiet, busying herself elsewhere while Jack and his father ate.

Jack felt a warm glow as he recalled his father saying, as they unsaddled their mounts, 'You know, Jack, although I was disappointed when neither of my sons decided to join me on the farm, I believe you'll make a great success of your military career. Perhaps you'll join me when you retire from the army. I'm proud of you, my son.'

On his last evening at home, with the family gathered in the lounge after dinner, he wondered how long he would be away and how much in his life would have changed by the time he returned. Assuming he did, that is.