

PETER GUTTRIDGE

"Brilliantly melding Brighton's murderous past with its
murderous present" *PETER JAMES*

THE THING ITSELF



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The Brighton Mystery Series

CITY OF DREADFUL NIGHT *
THE LAST KING OF BRIGHTON *
THE THING ITSELF *

The Nick Madrid Series

NO LAUGHING MATTER
A GHOST OF A CHANCE
TWO TO TANGO
THE ONCE AND FUTURE CON
FOILED AGAIN
CAST ADRIFT

* *available from Severn House*

THE THING ITSELF

The Third Brighton Mystery

Peter Guttridge



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all situations in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to living persons is purely
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‘If only he had been able to breathe in more air. If only the road were less steep. If only he were able to reach home.’

Ivo Andric, The Bridge Over The Drina

‘To Brighton, to Brighton,
Where they do such things,
And they say such things,
In Brighton, in Brighton,
I’ll never go there anymore.’
Music hall song, 1934

PROLOGUE

June, 1934

I was sitting in my suit in a corner of the room when she came home. *City of Dreadful Night* lay open in my lap. My father, a sunless man, had given me the bleak Victorian poem for my twelfth birthday. The gas jets were lit and the one behind my head cast my elongated shadow across the room.

‘You startled me,’ she said, her mouth somewhere between a smile and something more nervous. ‘I didn’t expect to see you today.’

I was sitting, left leg crossed over right, trousers on the left leg pulled up to avoid bagging at the knees, a narrow band of lardy, hairless leg between turn-up and sock.

‘Where have you been?’ I said.

‘To Hove – to that doctor we heard about. It’s all set for next week.’

I knew my temper scared her. I saw she was avoiding looking at my face, her eyes fixed instead on that narrow band of bare leg. Her eyes were still focused there when I stood. She looked up and saw my face. I moved towards her.

I felt I was in a cathedral or some vast building where the silence buzzed. That strange susurrus sound that pressed on my ears. Then I realized the dim roar was inside, not outside my ears. My blood pumping through me in sharp surges. I checked my pulse with a finger on my wrist. My heart was beating quickly but not as rapidly as I expected.

I looked around me. Everything neat and in its place. I glanced down at my suit. I saw a dark spot on my waistcoat. I took my handkerchief from my pocket and rubbed at the spot. It didn’t budge although there was a blossom of pink on the white cloth.

I needed to still my ears. I walked to the radiogram and turned it on. The bulb glowed red. I recognized the music that grew louder as the radio warmed up. Ketèlbey’s *In a Monastery Garden*.

I picked up the packet of Rothmans on the table beside the sofa. I smoked two cigarettes, listening to the music, looking everywhere but at her. She lay face down on the floor, blood in a spreading halo around her head.

I should have felt regret. I knew that. But long ago, in Flanders, my emotions had been cauterized and I had returned unable to feel. Besides, the carcass lying splayed on the carpet was not the woman I had desired and, in my way, loved.

I’d explained the rules right at the start of our relationship. It was just a bit of fun. I would never leave my wife. I said things, of course. The things women liked to hear. But she knew – she must have known – that was just pillow talk.

I had been intoxicated by her. In bed there was nothing she wouldn’t do. Things my wife would never contemplate. Soiling things. I was shocked by some of her suggestions – she could be coarse using phrases I’d never heard before – but I had enjoyed what she did with me, there was no doubt about that.

I tolerated her wish to be seen out in public. In the best places, places I had never taken my wife. Part of me liked being seen with her – she was as beautiful as a movie star – whilst another part worried about being seen. Especially as she laughed in a ribald way. She was loud and vulgar. In private, I accepted it. In public, I was faintly embarrassed.

For me, the life had gone out of her weeks before I'd killed her. It had drained away the day she said: ~~'There's something I have to tell you. It will come as a surprise to you – as it did to me.'~~

I knew she didn't know about me. How could she? And so when she told me she was pregnant, she saw the immediate change in me but misunderstood the cause.

She sensed my heart harden but thought I was worried about a scandal. She promised to get rid of it but I could see she hoped to keep it.

It wasn't the scandal. She didn't know the reason. How could she? An abortion would make no difference.

I went to the kitchen and took her apron from behind the door. I put it on. I bent and opened the cupboard beneath the sink. I took out the toolbox. Removed the short saw.

I crossed to the window. I had a coppery taste in my mouth.

All I'd asked of her in return for this flat, the money, the expensive meals was fidelity.

I knew the baby wasn't mine. It couldn't be. My inability to give my wife a child had been a heavy burden for many years. It wasn't that I couldn't do the deed. It was that nothing ever came of it.

The day outside went on, unconcerned. Nothing in the street had changed. *In a Monastery Garden* was drawing to a close. It reminded me of the beautiful ruined frescoes I'd visited some months earlier in the churches on the South Downs whilst we were staying in Brighton.

I moved from the window to stand over her, the saw in my hand. The music stopped and there was silence. For a moment.

And then a hammering on the door.

I tilted my head. Silence, then the hammering again. A voice, faint through the solid wood, strained my ears. I thought for a moment. I put the saw down. Though my hands were clean, I wiped them on the apron and walked to the door. I lifted the latch. I opened the door wide and half-turned.

'Excuse the mess.'

God's Lonely Man

Twenty years earlier

August 1914, and I was upstairs on the front seat of a London double-decker bus a few yards behind Waring and Gillow pantehnicon. We should have been on Oxford Street but we were jostling along a cobbled road in northern France, lined by cheering peasants throwing flowers.

In the narrow seats behind me in the scarlet bus, tired soldiers dozed on each other's shoulders. I didn't have a shoulder to sleep on but I couldn't sleep anyway, despite my exhaustion.

In the past week 80,000 of us – the British Expeditionary Force – had been mobilized and shipped over to fight the Bosch. A year earlier I'd lied about my age to enlist. In a couple of years other men would be lying about their ages to get out. But for the time being everyone was gung-ho and keen to get at the Hun, who was bayoneting Belgian babies and raping nuns and Red Cross nurses.

I'd been infected by Rudyard Kipling. Until 1910 I'd been at preparatory school in Rottingdean outside Brighton, with his son Jack. Jack got a good-natured ribbing every May when we had to memorize and recite his father's poem, *Children's Song*, about our duty to the Empire. Personally, I believed the sentiments.

I liked Jack. We'd started chatting first when he'd seen me reading *City of Dreadful Night* and thought it was his father's Indian story with the same title. We'd lost touch but I'd heard Jack had tried to get into the war in 1914 – his father had pushed him forward – but he was as blind as a bat and would be useless in battle.

Not that I'd had battle experience. I was wet behind the ears. Even so, I was a professional soldier, like Tommy Atkins. Kitchener's amateur army came the following year.

I was in the Royal Sussex. Good lads but not all from Sussex. I'd palled up a bit with three ex-weavers from somewhere up north. Cousins: Jim, Jack and Ted. A salty bunch. Ted and Jack were both married men with two young ones apiece but they'd been reservists. All three men reckoned the war would be over by Christmas and they'd be home war heroes with the chance of better jobs.

A whole panoply of boats, steam whistles screeching, left Southampton and took us to France overnight. We'd crossed the rough and tumbling channel on a civilian ferry like holidaymakers. The *Holidaymakers* who could fire fifteen rounds a minute in three clips of five.

There were six divisions in the BEF and we knew we were just a gesture of support for the French. Although we wanted to, we didn't expect to get stuck in.

There was a remote possibility. The French had a million men mobilized but they were in the wrong place. There was a danger of them being outflanked by the German army coming through Belgium. Our job was to plug the gap if need be.

At dawn we were steaming up the Seine to Rouen. People lined each bank, cheering and waving tricolore flags. Rowing boats tried to keep up, people standing unsteadily in them, throwing fruit and flowers, toffees and rosettes.

We were mobbed in the narrow streets of Rouen. People were hanging out of windows, children running alongside waving flags. Our buttons were ripped off our jackets as souvenirs by screaming women. Hardly anybody hung on to their cap badges. A lot of us lost our caps altogether.

For other regiments that was pretty straightforward, but we in the Royal Sussex had the Roussillon plume as part of our cap badge. The regiment had got it at the battle of Quebec decades earlier when

we had wiped the floor with the soldiers of the French Roussillon brigade and ripped the plumes off their helmets.

When asked about the plume by curious older men in Rouen, I simply said the French brigade had given it to us in recognition of our bravery in battle. Others, stupidly, told the truth in gory detail. The welcoming crush turned into a near-riot.

It was a hot afternoon and marching on cobbles, buffeted at every turn, was no picnic. By now our uniforms were hanging mostly buttonless. We stumbled finally into a large park where we were bivouacking for the night.

I wandered down to find my Lancashire mates at one of the beer tents. I'd managed to get some local currency early on. Just as well – there were long queues outside the Paymaster's as soldiers changed coppers and threepenny bits so they could get a tuppenny pint.

I found Jim, Jack and Ted and we sat together eating our iron rations – biscuits and bully beef – then Jim was lured away by the siren sounds of girls calling from outside the park railings. Some just wanted to flirt, others had a more professional purpose. The warm evening got hotter.

'Not interested?' I said to Jack and Ted.

'I love my wife,' Ted said.

'And you made her a promise.'

He shook his head.

'Didn't need to. It goes without saying.'

I sipped my beer.

'What about you, Jack?'

'Didn't you read that note from Kitchener?'

We all laughed. Kitchener had put a note in every kit bag: 'Do Your Duty Bravely, Fear God, Honour The King.' It also said: 'In this new experience you may find temptations both in wine and women. You must entirely resist both temptations, and, whilst treating all women with perfect courtesy, you should avoid any intimacy.'

'You?' he said.

'Nobody back home waiting for me or worried about me.' I gestured towards the railings. 'But I'm not interested in that.'

'You've got family at home, though, worrying over you,' Jack said. 'A mum and dad.'

'Neither.' I smiled. 'I'm God's lonely man.'

Ted clapped me on the back.

'Jesus, lad – that's a bit bleak for your age. Wait until you go home the conquering hero – the girls will be all over you.'

We marched fifteen miles north the next day. We were billeted in the evening in school rooms, village halls and, in my case, a big barn stinking of cow dung. We were supposed to stay there a few days, so the next day we helped with the harvest – the grain in the fields was ripe and high. Grateful women kept us supplied with buckets of home-brewed cider.

We cheered when on the lane beside our field we saw a line of bright red London double-decker buses led by a van with an advertisement for HP Sauce plastered on its side. Posters on the side of the buses advertised West End plays – Shaw's *Pygmalion* and a comedy with Sir Charles Hawtrey at the Coliseum. The sight of them tugged at my heart.

We didn't cheer quite so much when the next day we had to get in the buses for the journey up to the Mons–Condé canal. We bumped and shuddered and listed for mile after slow mile through the French countryside.

It was hard to think about fighting alongside the French, not against them. I had an ancestor who had fought and died at Malplaquet. The Roussillon plume in my cap was a constant reminder of our former enmity.

On Thursday, 20th August, the Belgian army was forced to abandon Brussels and withdraw to Antwerp after eighteen days resisting the Germans. The Belgians were poorly trained and ill-equipped but clearly brave – it was only later, when we came face-to-face with the mass of the German army that we realized they must have been outnumbered a hundred to one.

On the 22nd we had our first sight of the enemy. We were on the undulating Nimy Road and a German cavalry patrol trotted over the brow of the next hill, bold as brass on their big horses, sprung in their grey uniforms and polished helmets, long lances held upright. The commander was puffing on a cigar. They were a shock, I can tell you. A few of us opened fire.

We set up quite a racket but we were too far away to hit anything. The horsemen wheeled in an orderly manner and trotted back over the brow of the hill, leaving us pocking only the bright blue sky.

We'd heard that we weren't going to attack the Hun army until our commander, Sir John French, was sure of its size and disposition. But the sighting of the cavalry must have startled him because suddenly we were out of the buses and marching double-time to the Mons canal in torrential rain. When the rain stopped, the sun came out and hit like a hammer. The dust kicked up. Then more rain, more sunshine.

We started out, as Robert Service had it, battle-bound and heart-high, singing *It's A Long Way To Tipperary*. But by the time we'd covered forty kilometres my uniform was so soaked in sweat and rainwater I could have wrung it out. Some of my companions didn't make the forty kilometres. Those who had new boots they hadn't yet broken in. A lot of old stagers were sitting at the roadside nursing blistered feet.

The first night, we camped in a field with no fires or lights. We were not much more than a stone's throw away from Malplaquet. The field was open but we were in the Black Country. There were slag heaps and coal mines, chemical plants, glass works and factories, and sooty washing on the lines in the back gardens of grubby villages.

Ted closed his eyes and breathed in.

'Smell that slag heap. You could imagine you're in Accrington.' He laughed. 'I'm not saying that's a good thing, mind.'

Next day we hobbled into Mons during a big market. We sat on the cobblestones in the sunshine, bedraggled, steaming like horses. We got our rations: a big loaf of bread between us four and tins of food without labels, some rusted, probably dating back to the Boer War. It was pot luck what was in them. Mine had stewed apple, Jimmy had pilchards – we put them together. The locals gave us cheese and sausage, apples and pears. I stuffed my knapsack full for later.

We went for a walk. Got hauled into cafés for beer. Hauled into a hairdresser for a haircut. Given cigars and cigarettes. A photographer pulled us into his shop and out into his muddy back yard for a photograph against a bit of tarpaulin. Jack scribbled on a piece of card 'Somewhere in France' and propped it against a barrel next to us. We each got a print of the snap.

When we got back to the square, our regiment was lining up. We marched on to Nimy to take up position on the bank of the canal.

'Bloody hell, this is a bit bigger than the Leeds and Liverpool,' Jim said, looking across the wide expanse of water. 'I wonder if we can have a dip?'

'If you don't mind having your bare white arse shot off,' Ted said.

It was cold and wet on the canal bank, especially after a thunderstorm at ten. We couldn't use our bivvies so we'd done our best to make trenches in the scrubland behind the canal. It was misty. There was some heat gusting from the blazing barges on the canal – we'd set them alight so they couldn't be used for makeshift bridges across the canal.

We were told we were going to engage the enemy the next day. That night our morale was good. Nevertheless, everybody wrote their notes to their loved ones back home. Gave them to friends, stuck them on the end of their bayonets with their wedding rings.

Ted spent some time beside me writing a note in pencil. When he'd done, he folded it round a small photo. He held out the package to me.

'Just in case.'

‘What if I get a packet?’ I said.

‘I’ll carry yours for you.’

‘I didn’t mean that. I’ve no one to write to.’

Ted proffered the package again. I shook my head.

‘I mean who’ll deliver your message if I get a packet? Best you keep it with you. I promise that if it come through and you don’t I’ll get it from you.’

Ted tucked it into one of his breast pockets.

‘Fair enough. You sure there’s no one you want to write to?’

‘Nobody. I told you. I’ve been orphaned for five years and there’s no sweetheart with her nose pressed to the windowpane pining for my return.’

At six a.m. on Sunday, 22nd August, the bells of Nimy church rang for mass. Smoke was coming from the chimney of a cottage about a hundred yards away and it was so quiet I could hear someone riddling the fire and adding more coal.

At nine a.m. the Germans started shelling. It lasted an hour but they couldn’t get the range. All the shells fell short, into the canal. Made our ears ring, though. We were waiting for our guns to reply but they didn’t.

The German infantry started forward soon after, a solid mass of grey. It gave me a jolt to see them coming, roaring and bellowing. My arms were shaking as I raised my rifle but then I realized we couldn’t miss. They came over a bank directly in front of us and as soon as they topped it we let them have it. The range was seventy yards, so we were firing our fifteen rounds a minute at them pointing blank.

They outnumbered us three to one but it was exhilarating to see what kind of devastation concentrated firepower can wreak. Horrible too, by Jove. Legs, arms and heads were flying all over the place. One minute the Hun was there, the next they were all dead. We absolutely smashed them.

I glanced at Ted, Jim and Jack beside me. Their eyes were burning as bright as mine.

I heard later the Hun was convinced we’d mowed them down with machine-gun fire but it was only musketry training coming through.

Then they got their machine guns into action and at that distance we were now the sitting ducks. We had to get out of it pretty sharp. That’s when Jack and Ted copped it. I didn’t see Jack die but Ted was right next to me.

One minute we were clambering up the canal side together, the next he’d fallen across me, his brains blown out through the back of his helmet. I scabbled in his pocket, taking out the few things I thought he’d want his wife to have in addition to the package and his wedding ring. I found another piece of paper with his home address on it.

I looked at what was left of his face. From human being to lifeless thing in an instant.

Jim went ten minutes later. I dug in his pocket for Jack’s stuff and his own.

I had a warm time of it the rest of that day. There were exploding shells, shrapnel in the air and machine-gun bullets. Eventually, German buglers sounded the ceasefire. Then, drifting down the line we could hear German voices singing ‘*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles*’. Made my blood boil.

There was no respite that night. The guns pounded away. Villages and farms were on fire in front of us, and behind us factories and towns blazed with light.

The next five days seemed to last five years as we retreated under the unrelenting racket of big guns and machine-gun fire. It rained still more, and withdrawing through villages I slipped and slid as the coal dust on the cobbles turned to slime.

On the last day, 26th August, at a place called Le Cateau, I had my first taste of hand-to-hand

combat. Well, bayonet-to-bayonet, really. I was the lucky one in that encounter. Lucky in the battle altogether. ~~We suffered 8,000 casualties on that last day alone. Everyone I'd known in the Royal Sussex had died. I hadn't got a scratch.~~

THREE

In 1915 I got my first Blighty leave. I stepped off the train in Brighton, in a uniform still splattered with mud from the front, surrounded by Tommies just as muddy but all carrying rifles.

I'd heard stories of men returning home earlier than expected, finding their wives or girlfriends messing about with some man in essential work and putting one of the King's issue bullets into each of them. The whole affair hushed up and the soldier sent back to the Front.

I visited Jack and Ted's wives to deliver the final letters, wedding rings and other stuff, including the photographs taken in Rouen. I substituted my copy of the photograph for Ted's. Mine was crumpled and muddy but his was stained with blood.

Both wives were working to make ends meet. Jack's wife was a tram conductor, Ted's was working as a dance teacher three afternoons a week and as a hostess in a dance hall in Gloucester Place for two evenings. Men paid fourpence a dance and she got a ticket for every dance they had. At the end of the session she got twopence for each ticket. She was a pretty woman and I regretted I wasn't much of a dancer.

I stayed in Brighton for my leave. Every day on the seafront I could hear the sound of the big guns across the Channel; distant booming in the bright blue air.

Brighton was the recuperation centre for men who had lost limbs during the war. Hundreds of men thronging the promenade without legs or arms, in wheelchairs and on crutches. Those who had lost all their limbs were carted around in big baskets. Basket-cases they were called.

On my last day of leave I was walking down near the West Pier by the bathing machines when the guns started up again. There was a gang of limbless men huddled together near the gents' toilet. One with no legs perched in a wheelchair; several with one leg and crutches. They were watching the young women come out of the machines with their buckets and spades. The girls screeched and giggled as they paddled into the cold water.

I threaded between the sailboats drawn up on the shingle between the huts.

'Someone's copping it,' I said to a man with no arms. He ran his eyes over my stained uniform and gave me a nod. He saw me looking at his empty sleeves.

'I had to go into no-man's-land to cut a bit of wire,' he said. 'So that our major could show it to his old woman. I knew the idea was she would be so proud of his bravery she would let him have a bit of grummer.'

'"Grummer"?' I said.

'That's what some Irishmen call the "blow through".' I still looked puzzled. 'Sex, man, sex.'

'Of course,' I said. 'Sorry.'

'I hope he's like me, and when she's on her back waiting for him to up her, he won't be able to get hard-on.'

He spat next to his polished boot. I nodded to him and walked on, past barrows loaded with herrings for twenty-four for a shilling. They stank but it was a better stink than I was used to.

I was thinking I wouldn't mind a bit of grummer myself, but wondered if I'd be able to manage.

I stepped aside for big, lumbering horses pulling carts piled with tradesmen's wares and a coal cart pulled by the biggest horse I'd ever seen. I was surprised these animals weren't at the Front.

On the King's Road there was a hubbub. Khaki-clad troops marched by, their uniforms spick and span. I heard someone say that the fresh-faced youth at the head of the march was Prince Edward.

They were singing *Sussex by the Sea* and then *Tipperary*. I looked back at the group of limbless men and shrugged.

Someone screamed and I looked around, then up. There was a Zeppelin, cutting lazily across the sky. It was too high to see the crew leaning over to toss out the bombs, but I saw a dozen or so explosives drifting through the air before they plummeted sharply, growing larger as they fell to earth.

The explosions were loud. The sound bounced off the tall buildings. Ten minutes later I reviewed the damage. The Grand Hotel had taken a hit and a tram had come off its lines. A motor car swerved by it, throwing up dust on the dirt road.

The hit on the Grand would cause panic right enough. I'd been in there the day before for afternoon tea. It was stuffed with people who had left London for fear of air raids. Members of the royal family and the aristocracy of Britain and Europe rubbed shoulders with theatre and cinema stars, wives of bankers and industrialists, profiteers and more obvious London crooks like the Sabinis, who ran the rackets at the racecourse.

Most German Zeppelin attacks on the coast had been in the east, in Suffolk and Kent. German warships had shelled the east coast. In consequence, those people taking holidays flocked to Brighton rather than Broadstairs.

I thought about going out into the country, maybe down to Black Rock. But I also had the address of a brothel. It had been given me by a man who died beside me at Le Couteau. He joined up in 1912 at Preston barracks, just outside Brighton. His father had taken him there when he turned sixteen. His father had kept the shilling his son was paid as a new recruit.

He was with the Second Sussex. He told me he was a virgin but he'd been given this address and on his first Blighty leave he was going to see to that. He died an hour later without ever knowing a woman.

I looked across the road at the slums that came right down to the sea. I could find some girl in there who'd do it for a penny and a tot of gin but I was mindful of disease.

Ted's wife had asked me if I'd go to see a friend of the family, who was invalided up on the Ditchling Road in a school converted into a hospital. She said he was very low. A grenade blast had caught him, splintered his right arm, blinded him in his right eye; crippled him.

I went there now. It continued to be a hectic day. There were a lot of men in the hospital coughing up their lungs from the poisoned gas. More Zeppelins souged over, bombs falling out of the sky. They were trying to hit the munitions factory in Hove. I came away not knowing which of us had tried harder to be cheerful.

FOUR

I didn't get a scratch in the Great War. Not even a Blighty wound for me. I knew a lot of men who prayed for that wound serious enough to earn them a ticket home without being life-threatening. Some men tried to inflict it on themselves. One man shot off his toes and then had to hobble unaided to the post where a firing squad was waiting to shoot him for cowardice.

As the war ground us ever more finely, I knew many men become so desperate to get out they would happily sacrifice a limb. Two limbs. Maybe some of the men I saw in Brighton did the same.

Men put their hands up above the trench parapets to have them shot by the Germans. Soaking a gunshot wound in a filthy pond would ensure a worse injury. Some faked abscesses by injecting paraffin or turpentine under the skin. One man drank petrol to make himself ill but he drank too much of it and died.

The authorities came down hard on malingerers. They got field punishment number one, morning and night for up to twenty-one days. It didn't hurt but it humiliated them. They were tied to a wheel by their wrists and ankles. From a distance, they looked like they'd been crucified.

I don't know many survivors of the Great War willing to talk about the horror of those four years. I'm not the man to describe it. I will say that I never saw a bayoneted baby. I will say that I never would have imagined the many ways in which Humpty Dumpty can be taken apart, with no hope of him ever being put back together again. I will say that we played football with the Hun in no-man's-land on Christmas Day, but on Boxing Day we were sticking German heads on poles all along the top of our trench.

Sigmund Freud might fruitfully have explored the effect of that close confinement in the stench and ooze of the trenches on the libido. It destroyed the urge for many. But just as the devastation wrought by pipe grenade and machine gun and howitzer shell blurred what it meant to be human, so the edge of sexuality dissolved for others.

A batman I knew called himself his colonel's slut. Married men openly comforted each other in the most physical way imaginable. Men with sweethearts at home loved other men. Less welcome – but unsurprising, given the darkness at the centre of all our beings – men raped other men.

You won't read about that kind of behaviour in the poems of Mr Sassoon or the memoir of Mr Graves.

At Mons, where the battle was ghastly beyond description, I saw acts of tenderness amid the horrors. I saw Ted's brains blown out, but further down the line I also saw two men going over the top hand in hand. In the calm after that phase of the battle I saw a Royal Sussex man I vaguely knew cradling his dying mate in his arms.

'I'll give you your mother's kiss, Bob,' I heard him murmur. 'And one for me.'

He kissed him twice on the brow.

I saw men cry all the time. But then there were no words to describe what we were experiencing. Later I realized that the only true account was the thing itself.

I was raised in pessimism and sorrow. After Jim, Jack and Ted all copped it I steered clear of pals. I decided I could not get too close. I know comradeship is one of the great themes of the Great War. At the time, the authorities pushed the idea of the Pals battalions – friends from before the war fighting side by side. But it was a lie.

What was the point of making pals who would be dead within the week? Once, we were playing

marbles in our trench and someone straightened up and was shot through the head. At Mons, in those tremendous twenty-two hours, the deaths of my fellow men seemed a very small thing. Why, in the first thirty minutes I saw two thousand gallant men lay down their lives.

I learned not to stop to help wounded men and I was not alone in that.

The years passed. Every day I expected to be killed. Every winter I expected to freeze to death. I began the war in fear. Shuddering, corrosive fear. I was surprised at how long a man can live in fear. But then I decided I was going to die and I accepted it. Fear replaced neither by fatalism nor resignation but by certainty.

In that I was wrong. I lived. But at what price? I have not shed a tear for twenty years. I am unable to feel anything except self-loathing. My body is not my own. I came back from the Great War cut off from everything and everybody. I pretend, of course. I make a facsimile of living.

I survived the war: the Hun couldn't kill me. But the Spanish flu almost did. The pandemic. Millions died – more than in the Great War. I was laid low in a hospital in London for months. I recovered, although I didn't know until later that it had made me sterile.

I resumed a life. Of sorts.

After the war I had an appetite for the ladies and the money to feed it. Then, in 1925, up at the racecourse, I met a young woman and her swaggering brother. The young woman took a shine to me but her brother less so. They were both cockneys but were Italian by descent. The brother worked for the Sabini family, who controlled the rackets on many racecourses.

The young woman worked in Liberty in London. I was footloose. I moved up to London. She headed out for marriage. In a moment of foolishness – she was a beautiful woman and lust was about the only emotion I was capable of feeling – I married her.

We honeymooned in Siena, her family's city of origin. She hoped for children but it didn't happen. The Spanish flu. I joked it could be worse. I knew of people who had contracted sleeping sickness through the influenza and hadn't woken up yet. She didn't find me funny. She got depressed. Blamed me. Blamed herself. There were rows. She had a fiery temper.

Oswald Mosley founded his fascist party and I joined straight away. I wore the blackshirt uniform with pride. I was interested in a better Britain. My wife and I visited Italy when we could. Mussolini was doing great things. He was keeping the Socialists down. The trains ran on time.

Her brother was wary of my uniform but reluctantly accepted me when he discovered we had something in common. Hatred of kikes. The big Jew and the small Jew, as Sir Oswald described it. He hated them for bringing our country down. My brother-in-law hated them because the Italian gangsters were at war with Jewish ones for control of Soho and the racecourses.

Her brother warmed to me further when I saved him from a beating at Brighton racecourse. He was openly a gangster now. I happened to be around when a man came at him with an open razor. Man? He was little more than a teenager but with an evil face – a long razor slash down one side of it. I knocked him to the ground without really thinking twice, but he had two older men nearby who I could tell knew how to handle themselves.

We squared off but then it all drizzled away.

My wife put on weight as only Italian women can. Screamed at me. I took mistresses. One in particular. She knew the Chinese method. It was whispered Wallis Simpson knew it too. If it made the king abdicate, what chance did I stand?

My brother-in-law saw us together one day. I was expecting a beating – knuckledusters and coshes – ‘The racecourse thing?’ he said. ‘We’re even.’

I killed my mistress for her infidelity. There was a knock on the door. I let my wife in. I didn't ask what she was doing there. I'd long suspected she was having me followed.

She stood by the radiogram looking at the body on the rug, the blood thickening around it. She pointed at the saw on the table.

‘What were you intending to do with that?’

‘What do you suppose?’

She looked at me for a long moment. Looked at the apron covered in bright red flowers.

‘And then?’

I raised my shoulders slowly. Let them fall.

‘I hadn't thought that far.’

She nodded.

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