

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER



JOHN CLARK

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Houston, TX 77065

www.sbpra.com

ISBN: 978-1-63135-026-9

*Dedicated to the memory of Archibald Marsden
who was killed in action near Rheims, France,
on 20 July 1918, aged 19.*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Geoff Molyneux for his assistance with the German translation and Barrie Rhodes and John Smith for guidance with the Yorkshire and Devonshire dialects respectively. Thanks also to Helen Jones and Martin Fox from the Keep Military Museum, Dorchester, for information on the 1/5th Devons' involvement in the Battle of Tardenois, July 1918. I am grateful to Geoff Marsden for allowing me to mention his uncle, Archibald Marsden, in a work of fiction.

I have used many secondary sources in my research of the period. The following have been particularly helpful. *For King's and Country* (2003) by David Hill is an exhaustive analysis of the fate of the seventy former pupils of the King's School, Macclesfield, who lost their lives in the Great War. *Tommy* (2004) by Richard Holmes gives an excellent portrayal of life for the ordinary soldier on the Western Front. *Somme* (1983) by Lyn Macdonald is a scholarly and readable account of the 1916 battle of that name. *The Somme Battlefields* (1991) by Martin and Mary Middlebrook is an

indispensable guide to the former battlefields and their cemeteries. At this point, mention should be made of the Commonwealth (formerly Imperial) War Graves Commission which does so much to perpetuate the memory of those who died — I am forever amazed by the work of the Commission's gardeners and stonemasons who keep the cemeteries in immaculate condition. *The Road Back* (1931) by Erich Remarque provides a moving insight into the problems faced by returning soldiers after the war. Literature provided by the Salt Museum in Northwich was immensely helpful in my research into the salt industry of Mid Cheshire.

For the Nazi period, two books were particularly useful. *Strength Through Joy* (1972) by Hans Peter Bleuel provides fascinating information on sex and society in Nazi Germany and *The Third Reich* (2000) by Michael Burleigh gives a masterful and terrifying insight into life under a totalitarian regime. *Leni Riefenstahl* (1996) by Audrey Salkeld is a fascinating biography of the enigmatic film director. *The Rough Guide to Berlin* provided me with a host of snippets on Berlin's history, geography, architecture and culture.

I should also mention a group of friends (the Sutton Pals) with whom I make regular pilgrimages to the former battlefields of the First World War. These poignant visits provided me with a germ of an idea which eventually found shape in this novel.

Finally, many thanks to my publisher — Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Agency — for their help and support. They believed in me when others didn't.

PART ONE

COMRADES IN ARMS

WAFFENBRÜDER

CHAPTER 1

JULY 18, 1918

“One mile to go. Pass it on back down the line.”

Roland turned and relayed the message to the man behind.

“Thank Christ for that!” muttered Jim Duggan, who was marching beside him. “My feet are killing me.”

Both men scanned the distant horizon and made out the church spire marking the site of the village which was to be their billet for the night. The late afternoon sun cast oblique, gun barrel-straight shadows of the evenly spaced poplar trees across the road which led to their destination.

Roland empathised with his pal. Their company had been on the march since breakfast, covering nearly twenty miles in the process. Under normal circumstances, Roland would have thought nothing of walking this distance but burdened with a fifty-pound pack and rifle, kitted out in a coarse, bulky uniform, and subjected to an unrelenting midsummer sun, the march had become an interminable trial of endurance.

To compound the men's misery, the constant passage of military vehicles heading west towards Épernay threw up clouds of dust from the unsurfaced road which irritated their eyes and throats, and coated their hair in a veneer of grey, making them look prematurely aged. The vehicles themselves became a focus for resentment. How come, they complained, that some soldiers were allowed the luxury of transport by lorry or even, incongruously, by omnibus while other, less privileged members of the rank and file had to footslog it? The mocking cries of encouragement from motor-borne troops were met with jeers and two fingered gestures from the marching columns left coughing in the dust cloud that followed each passing motor vehicle.

There had been stops along the way: welcome breaks for a smoke and a swig from the water bottle, for a joke, or a grumble. Roland's company was by now on nodding terms with other soldiers on the road as units passed and re-passed each other in an endless game of leapfrog. Troops of several nations were on the march that hot July day; English, Scots, French, Italians, Americans, and New Zealanders were all heading towards the rumbling drumfire of distant guns somewhere to the northwest. Among the international miscellany were *Tirailleurs* from French Senegal, who were the first black men Roland had ever seen. With their yellow braided uniforms and distinctive red fezzes, they added an exotic splash of colour to the all pervasive blue and khaki.

At times, the men were required to move to one side to allow lorries and ambulances conveying wounded soldiers to pass by as they headed in the opposite direction, away from the battle zone. The occupants were mostly *poilus*, *blessé pour la patrie*, the French

having been the first to face the shock of the sudden German onslaught three days previously. Their ragged appearance and lethargic body language offered a chilling glimpse of what lay ahead for those heading west. Red-rimmed eyes stared vacantly from ashen grey, unshaven faces which told of a hard fought, desperate struggle. Their blue greatcoats were torn and spattered with mud and most of the occupants sported at least one hastily applied, blood-stained bandage. Their bodies no longer had the strength to counteract the jolting of the lorries, so the human cargo lurched indifferently this way and that like a ragtag collection of loosely strung marionettes.

Above all, it was the silence of the wounded men which struck Roland as they passed by. There was none of the usual banter or cheery cries of "*Bonne chance!*" How could there be when the wounded and battle weary knew what the men they were passing were about to endure? They also had to face up to the grim certainty that, once patched up, they were sure to be sent back to resume the unfinished business of finishing off the Boche.

A complex military juggernaut was on the move. Men, horses, mules, buses, ambulances, wagons, mobile field-kitchens, limbers, bicycles, motorcycles, and field artillery pieces were heading slowly towards the distant front line which, following the recent German offensive, now bowed out north and west of the allied armies south of Rheims. The miracle was that the roads coped at all. Built for local farm traffic and the occasional horse-drawn carriage travelling between Épernay and Châlons-sur-Marne, these rural byways were now subjected to the pounding of thousands of boots and hooves and the unforgiving wheels of vehicles laden with the equipment,

munitions, medical supplies, provisions, and animal fodder which were needed to supply and sustain several armies.

On either side of this teeming, jostling military corridor, life carried on as normal. For many soldiers, this was their first glimpse of rural France. The River Marne meandered to their left, occasionally disappearing from view only to loop back to follow the course of the road. On either side of the road, the ground rose gradually to wooded crests. The gentle slopes of the valley were a wash of rich green now that the grapes of the vineyards were ripening on the vine. Dotted intermittently across the hillsides were whitewashed buildings with their attractive red pantiled roofs. Labourers moved among the rows of vines, tending the crop, hoping, no doubt, for a bumper autumnal harvest. This was champagne country, and champagne was always in demand, war or no war.

As Roland's company approached each village on their route, women could often be seen washing their laundry at the water's edge and hanging sheets out to dry in the summer sun. Young boys with homemade fishing rods tried their luck from the riverbank while others dashed to the roadside to march beside the men, a stick angled over one shoulder, free arm swinging vigorously in cheeky imitation. Some had even picked up a little English, which they used to ask for sweets and souvenirs. Meanwhile, demented dogs would yap incessantly at the intruders who dared to encroach on their patch, until a well aimed boot sent them packing.

To Roland, each village they passed through seemed very much like the one before. He found the houses, with their shuttered windows and distinctive patterns in the brickwork, attractive in comparison with the uniformly drab terraced rows of his hometown. As

they passed by shops, he would impress Jim with his knowledge of the French language when he was able to convey to him what he could purchase in the *Boulangerie*, *Boucherie*, *Épicerie*, *Pharmacie*, and, in the bigger villages, in the shop selling *Meubles*.

Some enterprising shopkeepers put signs saying “English Spoken” in their windows and hovered expectantly outside their doorways, hoping that a passing column would be allowed to take a break nearby. Many houses and shops had put out flags of the allied nations which fluttered gaily from first floor windows. In one village, the owner of one *estaminet* had taken the trouble to fasten a banner across the frontage which wished “*BONNE CHANCE TOMMYS!*” in red, white, and blue letters. Once the locals had established the nationality of each passing body of men, they would cry out appropriate encouragement: “*Vive l’Italie!*”; “*Vive King George!*”; “*Vive la France!*”

Trays of savouries, baguettes, fruit, cheeses, biscuits, gingerbread, and pastries were proffered by cheering women, many of whom winked and smiled at those who took their fancy. Jim would give his own inimitable assessment of each welcoming committee—“She’s got a nice pair...” or “I bet she’s up for it...” or “I wouldn’t mind having a bit of *entente cordiale* with her.” Some of the girls had picked up a little English and giggled at the crudities they overheard and recognised. The more forward ones, with hands on hips and pouting lips, would brazenly flirt with the impressionable young men who could only look and dream.

Unfortunately for Jim, he had not picked up any French. On the first day of their march, the company had taken a half hour break in a small village not far from the railhead where they had recently

detrained. As the men shared out their cigarettes, Jim spotted a comely dark haired girl who had taken a break from cleaning the windows of her house to run her eye over the Tommies across the road. Jim was convinced that he was the object of her attention and announced that he was going over for a chat. He turned to Paul Evans, who he knew could speak French.

“Hey, Paul, what’s the French for ‘Would you like to talk with me?’”

Paul saw an opportunity to make mischief. “Well, the French for *to converse* is *converser* and their word for *mouth* is *la bouche*. Now, *converser* is rather formal so they kind of stick the two words together to make *coucher*, which you would use in informal conversations. So, if you want to say *would you like to talk with me* to, for sake of argument, a pretty girl like the lass over there, you would say *voulez-vous coucher avec moi?*”

“*Voulez-vous coucher avec moi?*”

“Correct.”

Jim duly wandered over to the girl who smiled as he approached. Winking at his mates, Jim popped the question. The outraged girl promptly smacked him hard across his left cheek. Astonished, Jim repeated the question, this time putting emphasis on the word *coucher*, hoping that this would defuse the situation. After administering an even more vicious blow to his right cheek, the girl stomped into her house, slamming the door on the bewildered lothario.

Whilst the young were drawn instinctively towards the passing columns, the elderly would watch from a discreet distance. Men in faded berets and women in black dresses edged with lace sat on the

threshold of their houses or stood around in gossiping groups to watch as the soldiers marched by. Roland wondered what these wise old owls were discussing. *Les vieux* had seen it all before fifty long years ago when Prussian soldiers had passed this way in strutting triumph. Roland found their furtive whispering rather unnerving; it was as if they knew something the soldiers didn't.

Before departure for France, Roland's father had given him a pocket-size edition of the best-selling *Marching Songs for Soldiers Set to Well Known Tunes* by Arthur Ainger. Roland had learnt the words of many of the songs with their martial overtones and patriotic sentiments by heart, hoping thereby to ingratiate himself with the veterans.

In reality, the marching songs of his regiment contained less wholesome lyrics. Once through a village and out again into the countryside, beyond the earshot of children and womenfolk, the men would go through their bawdy repertoire.

In Roland's company, the singing was led by Bill Price, a burly, bull-necked man from solid farming stock. He possessed a fine bass voice and needed little encouragement to start off the soldiers' favourites. The most frequently requested was the stirringly ribald "Do Your Balls Hang Low?" with its anatomically improbable verses. Almost as popular was his smutty version of "Mademoiselle from Armentières," with its eagerly anticipated and raucously bel-lowed query, "*Parlez-vous?*" Roland learned more about the female anatomy from one song than he would have done from a dozen biology books. The banter, the crudity, the bravado, the expletives, and the humour achieved their purpose; minds were kept from dwelling for too long on the uncertainties that lay ahead.

And so this multinational military machine rumbled its way slowly and inexorably onwards through the tranquil countryside and sleepy villages of Champagne, two alien worlds thrown together by the emergency of war.

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