

Morning: Jameson

Colonel Richard Edward Jameson stood silently upon the harbour wall; his demeanour martially courteous but socially awkward, one hand in his jacket pocket, the other swaying lightly by his side unsure of where it should be.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

The past was being torn up in front of him.

He observed with cool grey eyes men clambering and struggling over the old seven hundred foot pier that was swiftly being denuded of its wood and steel frames, ants dismembering a giant. Several dark green Bedford trucks waited to take the timber decking up to the military camp for various purposes; boats bobbed up and down in the low water as steel girders and posts were lowered gently down.

It was as if he were watching the disembodiment of a memory within. Maybe it would be the necessary catharsis his soul had needed all these years, but he gravely doubted it; nothing could erase the pains of life and the violence he had seen. It was the way of the world and that was that. He could either wallow in misery or work efficiently within the system; only the latter seemed the obvious choice. Three men trundled past carrying the last commercial sign that used to belong to the Campbell Steam Company advertising sea excursions to the small islands of Steep Holme and Flat Holme, to Ilfracombe for a day trip or to Cardiff on the other side of the bay. The noise of the clattering metal and the thuds of heavy wooden beams being dropped into the awaiting trucks jarred his nerves but his nerves were used to being jarred and they would just have to accommodate along with other sufferings.

The local War Department, on whose committee he had sat, had ordered the pier to be demolished after positioning two four inch guns on the harbour wall; but upon lining the guns up for a practice round the artillery corps had pointed out that the pier blocked a good thirty degrees, poignantly commenting that that would be the direction that Jerry would be coming. France had fallen, now Britain looked vulnerable. The Germans seemed unstoppable and he had felt their might and persistence to impose themselves on the rest of European civilization in northern France.

Not that there seemed to be much civilization left. Grey's lamps had gone out all across Europe. It was a dim place indeed.

The invasion could be this month, before the deep autumn set in and the sea crossings become harder; swift destruction of the RAF's southern bases, U-boat attacks on shipping in the Bristol Channel and the Irish Sea, harrying of London and then a full blown invasion. The other

officers thought that was inevitable; London thought it inevitable. France had fallen. Anything and everything was inevitable.

Down went more timber, down went the past in thuds, crashes and clanks. The past, so fragile, so pressing. It could be ignored, it could be marched away from. But the demolition held him, there were memories locked in that pier.

A requisition order was swiftly passed and within a week the demolition had begun and an era was wrenched from its stilts. By now it was all part of the course for the locals – indeed, it reminded the older generations of the army's games on the Hill in the Great War, but there was an added fear that perhaps the Germans may actually use the north coast of Devon and Somerset for their invasion, after all, the Bristol Channel gave wonderful access to the heart of England through Bristol and the Welsh ports. Accordingly, the entire north coast had been swiftly militarised over the past eight months by orders from London in preparation for the feared invasion of Hitler's armada, even though most of the brass believed it would take place where invasions had always taken place – in the southeast corner of the country with swift access to London.

Despite the professional glances he gave the work and orderliness of his troops, all around him the memories of carefree summers he had enjoyed here a lifetime ago were fomenting and being cast up on the retreating tide to be hauled up the beach again and again threatening to assail his hardened core. The source of the memories was a mere mile up the road, inconveniently thrown upon him by the military fates that decree postings and responsibilities. He had never wanted to return but here he stood, like a bronze martial casting, keeping the inner turmoil safely canned up behind steely eyes and a hardened mouth and permanently clenched jaw, soldier to the core.

It was still early morning. The sun had risen three hours before and the soldiers and engineers were by now hot from their labours, sleeves rolled up, shirts removed, brawn revealed. A third of the pier, he estimated, had now gone: an edifice that had strutted out for forty years or so, slowly disappearing under the scavengers' hands. No replacement, only the darkly silent pair of gun barrels on the harbour wall awaiting action. The past was surely the past and held nothing on him now, he hoped, but knew it would only nag. But when considered with all that had happened more recently, of the experiences and horrors of war and of the feared invasion and fall of Britain, the faint memories of those innocuous summers could only but take a diminutive role in his mind's chorus. Yet so much of his past was tied up locally and each turn of his eye towards that verdant shady tunnel, the path to the old Farm, brought back the old memories as if they were yesterday's and all the recent events receded

like the sea. There up the gentle incline into the heavily foliated mouth of the forest that spilled down onto the sea like a moving shifting shimmering green liquid alive and powerful, spilled down from the heights of the Hill with its great bucolic and nautical vistas and ancient valleys and settlements as if the land and the sea needed a green cloak to hide secrets and happenings away from prying eyes. There, the fissure beckoned with gaping natural structures that birthed memories of yesteryear in continuous pulses. He knew he would have to rise to the challenge, confront the past, put it to rest. Put the old dog to rest; but that would mean more than just staring at the past and its geography.

Besides, it was only polite and an officer had to be polite.

Jameson's jaw clenched against his memories, brow furrowed against the future and its uncertainties; he listened as a few of his men prattled about the range of the guns and joking about firing at the pier to quicken the job. One wag began telling of the stag that had been hunted off the moors and which had escaped by running down the pier and onto an excursion boat. Jameson smiled laconically at the other's gullibility – it was an old legend in the area cast about amidst the visitors along with beasts on the moors and ghosts on the Church Steps or up amongst the old Bronze Age fort on the Hill. Nearby Sergeant Davies and Captain McCurrough were discussing potential landing sites for the German invasion force. Oh we have been here before, thought Jameson; so many threats from the Spanish or the French, but only the Normans had pulled it off. The sea was our defence ... except Hitler had his U-boats and Luftwaffe and they could cripple the island quickly if they wanted to. He enjoyed listening to Davies although he found that his independence of mind grated on his martial sentiments at times, while McCurrough was a thoughtful, creative man bordering on morose at times, but ambitious no doubt, always looking to further his career; his insights were curiosities that appealed to the artist while Davies offered the gut instinct of the peasant. Straight as it was and no ornamentation.

He turned sharply on his well-polished shoes to walk in crisply starched trousers to the demolition group. The Sergeant, a wiry, dark haired man with sharp brown eyes, was a local and he was claiming that Minehead to Dunster would see a lot more of the action than his superiors reckoned; Jameson was glad he wasn't part of Hitler's entourage. If Hitler chose the Channel, the Captain retorted before turning to Jameson to discuss camp logistics and exercises for the weekend and the fact that several soldiers had been caught drunk by the local constabulary and two complaints from farmers concerning the coincidence of shooting exercises and lost sheep.

A few minutes' peace with his memories would, it suddenly occurred to him be a useful distraction. It might help put things in order

once more for without order the world would fall apart, the Empire would collapse, England would be run over by Germans, and he himself would be lying dead in a pool of blood defending some trench in the Quantocks to the last man, for that is how he saw the tragically heroic version of his future.

After dealing with their problems, he nodded curtly to the two men.

“I’m off for a walk. Wait here. If I’m not back in an hour, return to camp without me. I know my way around. You’re in charge John. We’ll take a pint later in Porlock.”

McCurrough raised an eyebrow and nodded. Unusual of the Colonel to want a social bevv. Davies returned to explaining the problems of landing far to the west of Minehead. “Too many cliffs. Rocks are close to the surface as well.”

“Mind you, perhaps we could set up decoys to attract Jerry into them,” McCurrough said ironically. The Sergeant thought it a good idea though, and could he take the Captain on a reccy to show him useful locations?

They were a good bunch and although Jameson maintained the bearing of rank, he did not mind the witty prattle and banter. It was part of the great circle that the army created, a filial circle in which each played a role in his, or even her these days, layer, but all were interconnected and made strong through the martial circle.

Their voices dimmed as he strolled on past the colourful fishermen’s houses with their nets hanging up for repair and lobster pots awaiting the next high tide, past the chugging trucks and their fumes on to the Harnford Track and the incongruous serenity of the woods. He had known all along, ever since his promotion and first detail, that he would head that way, into the jaws of the past to confront awkward memories head on as he had confronted death in France in the guise of the confidently swift moving German divisions that had penetrated the northern defences in the Ardennes region or later from the Stuka attacks from the air as the retreating troops were harried all the way to Dunkirk.

The rhythm of his walk allowed the images and concerns of his work to float freely, giving him the quietude to arrange his priorities. The dismantling of the pier, supervision of the regiment’s complex defences around the Somerset coastline, consideration of local MP activity – thefts from farms, smuggling rationed goods, subordination charges, a few cases of overzealous masculinity and bothering local women and repressed women in uniform complaining bitterly of advances, attendance at several key meetings with the Brigadier, local landowners, and now this, an involuntary move back to the past; everything else seemed a piece of cake. But not this.

He paused for a moment and stopped to look back at the work. The pier turnstile and gates had now gone and another truck was carting off more metal for smelting. The dismantling of infrastructure seemed such a normal pastime these days, and for a moment, as the emotional image emerged, as he knew it would, he tried to deflect it by focusing on the efficiency by which his men had gone about their job and what else he had to accomplish over the following days and the urgency by which all had to be done. But there she was, still painfully etched on his mind as if she still stood there next to the pier entrance walking up to him.

A horse was heard beyond the shallow slope of the path leading into the woods. Sarah? A young girl. For a moment memory clashed with vision and he saw Sarah as she was during the Great War, in trousers, a bareback rider, no riding hat, hair flowing in the wind like a Celtic queen who could stir deep desire and yet hold her men at bay with a look. No, it was not Sarah approaching on horse trotting at a steady pace veering slightly at an angle on the slope; no, not Sarah, not that vision of dreams and conscious recollection, no, not she. But she was coming from the farm, could it be her daughter? She looked the right age. He must speak to her.

“Good morning,” said the Colonel tipping his hat as if it were a morning meet.

“Morning,” replied the girl pleasantly. She was about fifteen, not seventeen yet, he thought. Short brown hair fell to her shoulders in a pleasing manner to Richard, for she seemed so content and inwardly confident, so different from the broken women he had seen so many of in France and the outwardly confident but inwardly fearful faces of London suffering the Blitz as they called it. Her brown eyes, femininely large, almost Indian in appearance, presented a gentility about them that stirred some deep fatherly spirit.

“Are you from the Farm?”

“Harnford? Yes. Are you heading that way?”

A daughter surely indeed, his heart sank. Sarah had indeed moved on. Of course she would have done by now, eighteen years. Enough time to find a man, marry him, probably that Irish runt she was seeing, have a brood of children. “Yes, I am,” he replied neutrally.

“Army business?” she inquired.

He deflected the personal explanation he was going to offer. She did not need to know. “Yes, I’m in charge of the Hill and the surroundings. Need to prepare the defences in case of an invasion.”

She was not perturbed by the possibility it seemed, for she immediately inquired, “Are you going to stop me from riding up there?”

“Where? On the Hill itself? Well, you know there’s an army encampment and we have training exercises, we use live ammunition ...”

The Turning Away © Alexander Moseley, 2010

“Yes, but where I ride is a good quarter of a mile from your camp. Can I still ride there?”

“Well, I don’t see why not. Unless the situation changes and the Germans invade, of course.”

“They won’t invade here,” she said confidently as if she had the news from the highest authorities.

Jameson inadvertently smiled for she repeated a deeply held belief of his own. “Well, my job is to make sure that if they do, then we’ll make it hard for them.”

“So I can ride where I like, as long as I stay away from your camp?”

“Yes.” The girl turned her horse’s head to go. “But not if the flags are flying. Red flags. It means we’re shooting. The horse might not like it.”

“I understand,” said the girl as if the entire war were ruining her riding, “but Hera’s used to shooting. She has hunted stags, you know.” She said goodbye and trotted off towards the town.

Daughter? Pretty enough to be, young enough to be. Fatherly looks? Could be that bastard Irishman. Could be. Conjecture, he reminded himself, all conjecture. He walked on and picked up his pace.