

Extract 3

Chapter 16

FROM BOTH SIDE OF ME I HEARD A GRADUAL crescendo of excitement and laughter rippling along the trenches, interspersed with barked orders that everyone was to keep their heads down and no one was to shoot. From my vantage point on the mound I could see only an occasional glimpse of a steel helmet, my only evidence that the voices I was hearing did indeed belong to real people. There was the sweet smell of cooking food wafting towards me and I lifted my nose to savour it. It was sweeter than the sweetest bran-mash I had ever tasted and it had a tinge of salt about it. I was drawn first one way and then the other by this promise of warm food, but each time I neared the trenches on either side I met an impenetrable barrier of loosely coiled barbed wire. The soldiers cheered me on as I came closer, showing their heads fully now over the trenches and beckoning me towards them; and when I had to turn back at the wire and crossed no man's land to the other side, I was welcomed again there by a chorus of whistling and clapping, but again I could find no way through the wire. I must have criss-crossed no man's land for much of that morning, and found at long last in the middle of this blasted wilderness a small patch of coarse, dank grass growing on the lip of an old crater.

I was busying myself at tearing the last of this away when I saw, out of the corner of my eye, a man in a grey uniform clamber up out of the trenches, waving a white flag above his head. I looked up as he began to clip his way methodically through the wire and then pull it aside. All this time there was much argument and noisy consternation from the other side; and soon a small, helmeted figure in a flapping khaki greatcoat climbed up into no man's land. He too held up a white handkerchief in one hand and began also to work his way through the wire towards me.