The Last Dance Before The Chimes Of Midnight

I was waiting patiently upon the stone terrace outside the ballroom in the freezing night air, for the day to end. I had my overcoat collar turned up above my ears and a long woollen scarf wrapped round and around inside it. Kid leather gloves were keeping my hands as warm as freshly toasted bread underneath the blanket spread over my legs.

Midnight was approaching and I was missing Tom. I bitterly regretted coming.

Heavily laden snow clouds of silver-blue and grey, concealing the jet black of heaven, were threatening to discharge another load upon the snowbound countryside. The white hills rose, then dipped and rose again – like a Scenic Railway – far beyond the point the eye could see.

I was gaily lit in blues and reds and greens by the paper Chinese lanterns, which were hung around the perimeter of the terrace. I felt rather like a lone actor onstage who has forgotten his lines and is anxiously waiting for his cue. I began to drum my fingers on the tops of my thighs, nervously, with an uneven rhythm.

Earlier on, as we were approaching the great house, I had remarked to my chauffeur, Digs – he and I prefer Digs to his full Christian name – how the house, from a long way off – all of the rooms aglow with golden electrical lighting; the terrace shimmering with sapphire, emerald, and ruby; the lime trees strewn with fairy-lights, like elegant bejewelled ladies standing in a semi-circle, with the lawn and the terrace before them, and the park behind – looked like a swirling galaxy, flung far out in space; or perhaps a Catherine wheel, fizzing and whizzing on a dark November evening.

Digs, who does not possess a creative imagination, had merely raised both eyebrows and proffered no opinion.

Now, sitting at the centre of that lone galaxy, I surveyed the distant park beyond the limes, where all was dark and nothing stirred. The sound of the four-piece band playing a foxtrot and the merry laughter of the guests floated lightly past me and was lost in the silent parkland.

Large snowflakes had begun to fall and I was at the point of giving up on the party completely, when, to my utter astonishment, there was Tom – like a newly introduced slide in a magic lantern show – standing on the path between the limes. He moved from the dark enclosure into the light.

When Tom saw my bemused expression he stopped and stood dead

still for a second or two, then he smiled; it was, I thought, the most beautiful smile Tom had ever imparted. Then he advanced with a formal parade march, both arms swinging at his sides.

Tom's boots made ridged imprints in the thick snow that lay upon the grass, yet there was not the familiar sound of crunching that accompanies the breaking of the icy crust nor the creak of compressing snow crystals, only silence.

Would that I could stand up, and greet Tom, eye-to-eye, and hold him tightly in a welcoming embrace. My *will* was strong, but my legs were not capable of supporting me, and even if they *were*, the shock of this spectral visitation at the eleventh hour would not have allowed me to.

All my voice could produce was a single inarticulate croak; it was unbelievable, Tom being here. It rendered me mute. I shut my eyelids hard for a moment, then I blinked, once, twice, thrice. This was not a figment of my imagination, nor a trick of the light. The thought occurred to me that perhaps, in my lonely state, I had willed Tom into being.

Very softly, Tom said:

"Believe it, Gerald."

Tom ascended the steps leading to the terrace and knelt down on one knee before me so that we were face-to-face.

"I'm terribly late," he stated, as if I had actually been waiting for him to arrive.

He gifted me another wide, charming smile. I had never been able to resist the allure of Tom's smile, nor his crimson lips; like a splash of blood on the landscape of his pale complexion. I had often been seduced by that smile, surrendered to Tom's lips when he had an urgent want of my own, or after a quarrel when we were forgiving of one another. Rarely a day had passed when I had not filled the challice of his mouth with my love.

One dreary year had passed since Tom and I were together.

I wasn't fearful of Tom's ghost, on the contrary, I was delighted at the sight of him. My only concern was the spirit might take flight too soon.

I returned Tom's smile with one equally lovely, and said:

"Yes, terribly!"

"Yet, I got here, and just in the nick of time."

"Yes," I said, "but you were cutting it a bit fine, weren't you, old chap?"

"Yes, terribly fine, old bean." Tom replied.

We dispensed with the fake, stiff lipped chatter and laughed loud and heartily.

“All’s forgiven,” I said. “You’re here now– you’ve come home, thank God. And that’s all that matters.”

Tom kissed me, hard upon the lips. I could feel that his own were warm and fleshy, as they would be were he alive, which confused me greatly. There was a tickling sensation followed by a snap of blue static when he gently pulled his lips away from mine. Then he softly brushed my cheeks, forehead, and eyelids with them.

When he’d finished, I studied Tom’s features closely.

He was still handsome. Most noticable was that his forehead was now permanently furrowed. It used to hurt one to look into Tom’s silver-grey eyes for too long, but not tonight. They’d lost their piercing intensity. His cheeks, once full and rosy, now grey sunken hollows.

The hopeful countenance of his youth was all spent. Two and a half years at the front line had seen to that.

I also had fought at the front with a company of men, all of whom endured long periods there, all of whom were kept active on little more than tea and biscuits and barely edible, watery slop which narrowly passed as stew. Most of them had looked the way Tom did now.

I cupped the back of Tom’s head in my hand and pulled his face towards mine. I kissed him tenderly, then I gently pushed him away from me, and said:

“That moustache will take some getting used to.”

Tom laughed, and said that most junior officers grew them.

“It lends one a look of authority, don’t you think, old chum?”

I wasn’t greatly impressed by it, and I said:

“Well– it lends one an air of pomposity, old fruit. And it makes you look remarkably like George– that’s for sure.”

“Good grief! I shall shave it off at once!”

We both laughed at that, then he gave me a hard look.

“I need a drink, badly,” Tom said.

I indicated the uncorked bottle of champagne standing proud of the ice in the silver ice bucket on the table next to me.

Tom poured out a glassful and proceeded to gulp it down in one quick draught. Then he filled both our glasses. We toasted each other’s good health.

“Here’s to us,” I said.

“The two of us, forever, my darling,” Tom replied.

When the rims of our glasses lightly touched, a single, high-pitched musical note chimed out.

The dance band intruded upon our intimacy with a lengthy drum-roll that ended in a crash of cymbals. They struck up with “I’m forever blowing bubbles.”

One– two– three– one– two– three– A slow waltz.

“I want you to dance with me,” Tom said. “Out here– in the snow.”

“But– ”

“But– what? Bugger but. What harm is there in a waltz between comrades, Gerald? We deserve it. I say we cock-a-snoot at what people will think– fuck convention, *and* the consequences.”

Tom was brave. We had witnessed men other than ourselves coupling openly and unnashamedly in dugouts. Tom disputed that if love between men was acceptable in the trenches then why not their clandestine meetings in public conveniences, or in the bed sitting rooms of civilian life, or any other private place for that matter? He believed that homosexual love should be lawful and openly celebrated, not restricted to secrecy.

Tom put down his empty glass, removed my cap and ruffled my neatly parted hair. It was an endearing yet somewhat annoying habit of his. When he’d replaced my cap he smiled lovingly at me, and said:

“You always were a sensitive and cautious soul, my own.”

Tom’s sweet sentiment was anachronistic; evoking memories of ice-blue winters, and the blazing hot summers of our bygone youth. A time when I relied on Tom’s physical strength and his strength of character, far more than I should have.

I immediately thought of George, and of how – when I was a boy – he’d taken me to one side and advised me, in a hushed voice and conspiratorial manner – which was most *un*common for George – about how hard life out in the wide world was, especially if one was overly sensitive, and that I’d do best to toughen up, otherwise I might not survive it.

Tom was outgoing, and had inherited George’s kindly and forthright characteristics. Tom, with his joy for life and his exuberance for every moment of it, imbued those same qualities in me. Little by little I had come out from my shell. And as Tom and I approached maturity we grew intimately close; much more so than mere best friends.

In wartime one rarely has time to think, let alone think of oneself. I shed the last remnant of my self-conscious youth there on the battlefield, and a man with a surprising sense of self-worth emerged. In assuming a higher

level of rank and responsibility for my fellow men, I attained a level of confidence which before had eluded me. By the grace of Providence, and the courage of one of my men, I survived the horrors of the devil's domain made manifest on earth. Those foul trenches. The nerve-racking wait before giving the order to go over the top. Then, up above, striving to negotiate chaos: that vast, practically impenetrable middle ground of mud, twisted metal, and water-filled bomb craters; stagnant reservoirs, where armies of rats banqueted on rotten human flesh, while magnesium rockets flared and shells exploded like supernovas, everywhere. And all the time, men prayed aloud– *"Please God! May I not take a bullet!*"

Tom's request that I dance with him had hurt, but he was not to know the reason why. I flashed him an icy-blue look of despair, then I lowered my eyes, and with what must have sounded like miserable self-pity, I said:

"I don't give a tinker's cuss what people think, Tom; that's not why I hesitated. I'm bound to this chair. I doubt I shall ever walk again… let alone dance."

I dared not look up, lest reservoirs of tears might overflow.

Tom earnestly ruled out what I'd said, with:

"You *shall* walk, Gerald. You must will it into being. Even though fate has dealt you a bad hand– you can do anything, if you have a mind to."

Tom, the eternal optimist.

Tom had never been one to give in to *any*thing, and I had no fight left in me so, without contradiction, I acquiesced. I gripped the arms of my chair and pushed down as hard and mightily as I could, but the effort was in vain.

All sensations in my legs and feet were lost a year ago, and no manner of treatment, or effort of will had enabled me this far. My brain and my body were still not in sympathy. I tried again. And again– and yet again! Through tears of frustration, I implored:

"You will have to carry me, my love– please!"

And so, Tom took control.

I felt the strong grip of Tom's hands about my waist, then he lifted me from the chair. He held me close; so close that my body was perfectly contoured with his, then we moved about as one. Tom led me effortlessly, to and fro, and around and back again, in perfect time to the music. We covered the whole of the terrace: our very own dance floor. It was a sensation akin to gliding on air, like the time we had skated together when

the river flowing through the Northamptonshire valley had frozen over. Tom had been an excellent skater and a very competent dancer as well. And it was Tom who'd taught me how to do both.

I remembered one mid-summer Saturday in 1909. We were practising a waltz on the damp, moss-invaded grass, amongst the lime trees, when a sudden down-pour of rain forced us to take shelter beneath them. The grass was painted a greenish-yellow with the pollen the cloudburst had stolen from clusters of lime flowers in the branches above us.

Tom pushed me, very lightly. I slipped and lost my balance, and I fell to the ground. Tom then launched himself in a dive and landed firmly on top of me, forcing all the air out of my lungs and leaving me breathless. He held me down and kissed my mouth– my throat– and the upper part of my chest, where my shirt was unbuttoned.

We rolled over and over, and when I managed to stay on top, I kissed Tom back with all the passion I could muster. Our white cotton summer clothing got soaked through whilst we wrestled and was printed all over with lime flower pollen in large, greenish-yellow blotches; like freshly laundered hospital linen absorbing the discharge of gangrenous wounds.

The dance-band concluded the tune. Tom carefully set me down in the chair and tucked the blanket around my blasted, useless legs. Then he proceeded to gently rub his diaphragm. He didn't look at all well. When I asked Tom what the matter was, he told me that he hurt quite sorely there. He massaged his temples as if relieving a headache. Tom's form seemed of a sudden, almost transparent. He rapidly touched his colourless lips to mine and he kissed me, but this time I could not feel it.

Then he put his mouth close to my ear, and whispered:

"Love– forever, Gerald."

In time to the dull beat of the waltz which lingered in my head, I replied:

"For ever– and ever– and ever– and– " Tom was gone. I was alone on the terrace with snowflakes falling silently all around me.
The bandleader announced:

"The new year– a better year for all, is almost upon us!"

That was immediately followed by whooping and shouting and whistling and the tooting of party horns. Then the crowd inside chanted along with him, the countdown to the midnight hour: the last thirty seconds of the death of 1918 before the birth of 1919.

“Gerald, lad!”

It was the familiar, friendly voice of George Thornton, Tom’s father.

“You shouldn’t be out here all by thyself with only thoughts for company. The wife’s fretting, so I’ve come looking after thee. Fairly concerned you might miss it, is our Dolly. Come on in, quickly now, lad. You’ll catch your– ”

“If only– ” I abruptly chimed in.

“There, there now, lad. Do try and buck-up. For all our sakes. We wouldn’t want Dolly to see you like this, now, would we?”

George grasped the handles of my chair and wheeled me about to face the ballroom, which was ablaze with light and bursting with the merriment of party guests in fancy dress, evening gowns, and black morning coats.

They were all shouting:

“Twenty-six– twenty-five– twenty-four– ”

I saw Dolly Thornton as though through a mist, urgently beckoning to us to join her. My eyes were again filled with tears and about to brim over; though whether they were tears of joy, or pain, or grief, or regret, I knew not. My cranium seemed about to explode with the rational and irrational thoughts at odds inside my brain. The conversation with Tom and our waltz had felt tangibly real, but there was no doubt in my mind that it had been an experience of the *super*natural kind. There was no use in pretending otherwise, but even so, I forced myself into believing that Tom had been here with me in actual human form because the horror of the truth was too great for me to bear.

I sensed that Tom had returned at this crucial point in time, not only to console my abject misery and aching loneliness for him, but also to forgive me, perhaps thank me; to ease the terrible guilt I had been burdened with since my period of convalescence began, a year before.

I lay face down in the freezing mud, stranded in no-man’s-land. The firing had stopped, the last of the flares had died, and a deathly silence had spread all around. I knew that I was badly wounded but I could not feel the pain; not until I tried to crawl on my belly back to the safety of the trench. I stifled screams that would have given me away by biting hard into my coarse, mud caked coatsleeve, then all went dark as my brain proffered me oblivion from agony.

Gradually I became concious again and awoke to a nightmare. Close to the horizon the full Cold Moon was rising, its brilliance illuminating the

shards of metal buried in my legs. It had snowed heavily, leaving the sky bereft of clouds. Across the white undulating landscape I could make out the shapes of snow covered human corpses; a remembrance of the Herculaneum dead, preserved in Vesuvian ash. Hell had frozen; so had my wounds; only a little of my lifesblood had been drunk by the the snow.

There was pathetic sobbing close by, then my name, softly spoken:

"Gerald."

Tom's voice was unmistakable.

I crawled with splayed limbs like a lizard, slithering in brown slime, then I floundered through a pool of sulphrous liquid to where Tom lay on the bank, bloodsoaked. His breathing was laboured; the rise and fall of his chest barely noticeable. It was clear to me that Tom's life was ending in an excrutiating and undignified manner.

A black rat the size of a cat emerged quite suddenly from beneath Tom's trenchcoat. Without even pausing for thought, I drew my knife and before it could scarper I sliced off its evil head. I undid the buttons on Tom's coat in order to help relieve his suffering. I watched, horrified, at the sight of Tom's burst belly oozing chewed entrails.

His eyes were pleading, begging me; I knew what I must do. Taking Tom's face in both my hands I kissed him, first on the forehead, then on his cold, dry lips.

He smiled for an instant and said:

"You can do anything, if you have a mind to, Gerald."

I drew my pistol from the holster. I placed the muzzle of the gun against Tom's left temple and whispered in his ear:

"Love– forever, Tom."

Then I shot him dead.

The telegram inside my trouser pocket had been delivered to the owners of the great house in January 1918. George and Dolly Thornton could not bear to look upon the awful words enclosed.

At the hospital, where I lay in a basket chair, George had handed the telegram to me and asked me to read the confirmation.

Deeply regret to inform you… missing in action…

I conveyed the message as delicately as I possibly could. It was like the receiving of a punishment.

"He's gone," Dolly had wailed. "My boy– "

Little did they know what had truly passed. They never would.

George had asked me to burn the telegram but I could not bring myself to destroy it.

"Eighteen– seventeen– sixteen– fifteen– " the multitude of voices cried out, shrill and terrifying. I soaked up the rivulets of my tears on the sleeve of my regimental great-coat and looked down at the thick blanket of snow warming the terrace stones.

I started at what I saw there; inadvertently drawing George's attention to it. I gazed up at his face, which had turned a ghastly grey, and he uttered:

"Dear Lord!"

In spite of snowflakes gently settling there, the deep impressions in the snow were quite discernible. It was a diagram made by a pair of large army boots. I'd recognised it at once, and so had George.

The firm imprints were the steps, and the delicate curves linking them were the moves of the leading dancer in a waltz. The design was identical to one printed in the book: *An Introduction to the Dance*. In the summer of 1908 I had borrowed a copy from George and Dolly to assist me in learning the steps of the follower.

"Eleven– ten– nine– " they chanted.

Dolly Thornton was on her feet and fighting her way through the crowd – like a soldier on the battlefield charging the enemy with fixed bayonet – in an effort to reach us before the last chime of midnight.

"Four– three– two– *one*. *Happy new year!*" the exuberant crowd cried in unity.

Dolly threw open the French doors. The din of frivolity and a voluminous cloud of cigarette smoke – like an explosion of mustard gas – escaped the ballroom with her. As she staggered over to us, the chill breeze caught her white fur cape and it billowed out like the wings of a gigantic ermine moth taking flight. It fell from her shoulders, and for an instant, we all saw it for the ugly thing it really was: the coat of an animal that had been shot to death. Dolly began to tremble violently. Pointing at the tartan blanket covering my legs, she cried out:

"Look!– Look!– "

Upon the blanket was a plain band of gold. A wedding ring, identical to the one that I wear on my left fore-finger.

In the winter of 1910, the Midlands ice-skating championship had been held in Leicestershire, and Tom was the competition favourite. On the last

morning of the games, we had each pledged to love the other only, and for always.

That same year, at the close of one scorching summer afternoon, I was lying on newly-mown grass in the cool shade of the lime trees engrossed in a thrilling novel, when Tom quietly appeared. He distracted me by planting a warm kiss onto my forehead. I reluctantly disengaged from H. G. Wells's futuristic fantasy of interplanetary warfare. Tom held out a hand to me. Resting in his palm was a small, black leather box. When I opened it I was wonderstruck. The inside was lined with blue velvet upon which lay two gold rings.

That morning, right after a hurried breakfast, Tom had mysteriously departed. He'd cycled into Northampton and pawned his bicycle, and ice-skating boots. The money he got in return for them, he added to the pocket money he had been saving and purchased two new identical gold wedding rings from one of the most reputable jewellers in the town. With a good helping of charm, Tom had put pressure on the proprietor to have them engraved before closing time. The proprietor had succumbed, and had his goldsmith engrave the inside of each of the circlets with the same inscription.

I picked up the ring and placed it in the palm of Dolly's outstretched hand. I knew, even before Dolly spoke, the endearment the fine, calligraphic inscription conveyed. Mine and Tom's declaration:

"Love– forever."

Tom and I had deliberately not given up our gold bands for collection as the other soldiers had before our final venture into no-man's land, and I had had no chance to take Tom's ring from his left forefinger. After the ordeal of ending Tom's life, I blacked out. When I came to, I was being dragged back to safety by a comrade.

Fantastic as it was, Tom had returned last night and proved that there is no boundary between life and death, nor between love and death.

Tom the athlete; Tom the comedian; Tom the brave; Tom the dancer; who had miraculously carried me throughout the last waltz, before the old year died.

I removed my kid gloves. Dolly gave me back Tom's gold ring and I carefully slid it onto my left fore-finger, next my own; then I clasped my hands together in my lap, knowing I would wear it always.

I shivered, and for the first time since the shards of metal from the exploded shell had been removed, I sensed a pricking in the muscles of my

thighs, through my calves, down to my feet. I remembered Tom's fervent optimism, and his words:

"You can do anything, if you have a mind to, Gerald."

I *could* do anything, and I had a mind to. I would walk again. Make a new life for myself, far from the drabness of Northampton and its streets lined with leather dust; the depressing shoe factories and the narrow-minded people who worked in them; the greasy fish and chips cafes, oozing steam, and commonplace natterings. But I would never forget the happiness of my youth spent in the company of Tom, Dolly, and George. Nor would I cease to visit them from time to time at the great house. More importantly, I would forgive myself and try to forget the awful deed of ending Tom's life.

Tom Thornton was close by. I could feel his presence.

Then I saw his apparition, lingering; shrouded in the dark shadows of the lime trees. He was smiling gaily at me.

Tom outstretched his arms and made wide, semi-circular arcs above his head. In life, it had been Tom's unique way of waving goodbye, and instinctively I knew this was his final goodbye. Tom saluted me, then he turned and strode away down the path between the lime trees without disturbing the surface of the thick blanket of intricately woven snow that lay there.

The snowflakes – large and delicate as bone china saucers swirling about us – quite suddenly stopped falling. The silver-blue and grey clouds were depleted and had nothing more to bestow upon us. As the last flakes silently settled I watched Tom disappear for ever into the deepest indigo of early morning.

George retrieved Dolly's fur and placed it about her shoulders. There we stayed, upon the terrace, and waited for the dawn. At first light, Dolly and George Thornton transported me to the white marble monument which they had had erected to the memory of their son.

The dark rolling hills on the distant horizon were outlined with a crimson glow.

Red sky in the morning–

And the day broke, bloody, on the bereft, and those who had survived.

END