

The Wages of War

By Hilda Weissfloch

On March 2nd, 1945, Dave Forrester arrived in the village of Coombe Dingle. He was twenty eight, clean-shaven but bedraggled in a war-worn uniform that draped his bony body. He carried a tattered kit bag and he bore unhappy news.

There had been a settlement on the edge of the Mendip Hills since Neolithic times when cave dwellers had lived there. Romans later occupied the area, mining for lead, giving the villagers an opportunity to eke out a living for generations.

Mining had wrought its toll on the men, leaving their families destitute and villagers often died from long term effects of eating fish from the toxic, lead-laden pond. Disasters were part of life, creating an enduring bond between families.

By the end of the 19th century, some thirty houses clung to the sides of the gorge. Mining had ceased and villagers turned to sheep farming, shepherding the animals on the heath above the gorge. Once WWII began, those with a few square feet of garden, grew vegetables where they had once grown flowers. The older people shook their heads and said they had never known such food shortages, even in the 'Great War' of 1914.

The Sorrow of untimely loss had not ended when the mines closed. Seven young men left to fight for their country in the early days of 1915; five of them died in the trenches. Two came home, handicapped both physically and psychologically.

Three men of Coombe Dingle had died in this current war and residents prayed it would end. Several village sons were still 'over there', fighting.

Dave Forrester had taken the bus to Compton Highfield, then walked the two miles of winding road to Coombe Dingle. Light was fading as he knocked on the door of the first house he saw. A rosy cheeked woman in her sixties answered.

"Hello. I'm, looking for the Tippet's house. Do you know them?"

"Oh my dear, of course we do. Up the hill on the other side of the brook, with a green door. We've known 'em all our lives. I do hope you've brought 'em some good news. They bain't heard nothing for weeks from their son. Tis terrible; just waiting. Per'aps you met him?"

"Yes, I knew him well. I'll be off now. Thank you." Dave hurried away.

He crossed the bridge and used the green door's brass knocker. The door was opened by a tall, broad-shouldered man with greying hair and a leathered face.

Dave knew it was Ben's father; there was a definite family resemblance. Strain showed on the older man's face brightening momentarily when he saw the uniform of the man on his doorstep.

"Hello. What can I do for you?" Frank Tippet said.

"Mr Tippet?"

"Aye, that be I. D'you bring news of our Ben?" he asked, unable to hide a sudden fear.

"Yes. May I come in?"

"Mable, we've a visitor," Frank called out, leading Dave into the living room where a meagre fire burned in the grate. A small woman entered, removing her apron. Dave recognised her from a photo Ben had shown him.

“The news is not good. I knew Ben well. We were good friends; we’d been in the same unit since the beginning.”

“No, no, please no,” Mabel sobbed. Her husband guided her to the sofa and pulled her close.

“We need to know. Please tell us,” Frank said.

“It was eleven days ago. We were sheltering inside a ruined farmhouse. Shells fell all around and two came through the caved-in roof. Five chaps were hit. They died instantly, poor devils..., including Ben. Somebody shouted ‘retreat’ and I ran for my life. I noticed Ben’s kit bag and an old tobacco tin in which he kept a few souvenirs. I grabbed the tin and kept running. Next thing, I was on a stretcher, being evacuated; my leg had been hit by shrapnel.” Dave pulled up his trouser leg to display a bandage on his left leg. “I felt it my duty to tell you personally.”

He opened his kit bag and pulled out the tin, handing it to Mabel.

She sat, still as stone, fondling it, with tears streaming down her cheeks. Mabel’s father had given it to Ben, years ago, for his collection of boyhood treasures.

Frank leaned over and gently took the tin from his wife. Inside were four photos, well-worn and dog-eared around the edges. One was of Frank and Mabel taken by Ben. Another was Ben, aged twelve, with his sister Ann, aged eight. Frank’s hand shook as he examined the images. The third was a group of nine young men in uniform including Ben, another boy from the village and the young chap now in their living room.

“This was to keep our Ben safe,” Frank said dejectedly, pulling a broken silver chain with a medallion from the box. It was an image of St Christopher, patron saint of travellers. Frank and Mabel had given it to Ben the day he left home.

Frank was disappointed the gold signet ring his father had left to Ben in his will, was not there. He drew a little comfort knowing Ben must have been wearing it when he died. Frank wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

“Well Mabel, I reckon as we owe our young friend a nice meal. That woodcock I brought home this morning will do well. There’s still a few potatoes left and I’ll get a cabbage from the cellar.”

The meal was paltry. It wasn’t easy feeding an extra mouth with wartime rationing. The cabbage had caught the frost giving it an odd taste but, for a wartime meal, Mabel had done her best. She had enough milk left to make three small portions of custard. Little was said during the meal; each within their own thoughts.

“Well, thou hast our thanks for a’comin. Where bist thee goin now?” Frank said, momentarily slipping into his thick Somerset brogue.

Dave hesitated, “Not sure.”

“Don’t you want to get home as soon as possible?”

“I have no family. My Dad died in an accident when I was six and my Mum died in ’42, during the bombing. Just my old Gran who lives up in Hull... I wonder if I could sleep on your floor for tonight?”

“You’ll stay in our Ben’s room. He’d have wanted that, wouldn’t he, Mabel?”

Mabel’s tear-stained face looked at Dave as she stoically nodded. She left the room, returning a few minutes later with an old blackened kettle, placing it on an iron trivet over the fire. They sat in silence watching the crackling flames and hearing the occasional splutter from the kettle. When the water boiled, Mabel made a pot of tea.

Later, Dave followed Frank up the steep narrow stairs. Ben's room was just large enough to hold a single bed and a small dresser. A shelf on the wall beside the bed held a lit candle. Frank had told him there was no electricity upstairs. Within minutes, Dave blew out the candle and pulled the bedding up to his chin.

Morning brought torrential rain. Dave stayed in bed as long as he dared, hoping the room downstairs would be warm once the fire was lit. However, on descending he found the temperature inside the house was barely warmer than outside and both Tippetts wearing old woollen coats with wool hats pulled down over their ears.

"We only light the fire in the late afternoon. It's the coal rationing. Things got worse this past year. Hard, very hard, for all of us. Everything's rationed. Two ounces of butter a week, same of cheese and tea. Not much more than a pound of meat. Even clothing's now rationed." Frank paused for a moment, "What are your plans, Dave?"

Dave looked out the window at the battering rain and shrugged.

"You don't seem to know what to do with yourself, laddie. Well you're welcome to bide here a bit. Course, you'll have to share what little we have unless you've got a ration book yourself."

"I don't. It'll take a while unless I get to our barracks in Yorkshire."

"Now you listen here. You took the trouble to come and give us the news, even though the worst news possible. Now, if you give those grubby clothes of yours to Mabel, she'll give them a bit of a scrub. You'll find something in one of the dresser drawers that belonged to Ben; he'll not be needing them anymore, poor soul."

By mid-day the whole village had heard the story of the death of Ben and the kind young soldier who had gone out of his way to deliver the news. One by one they came to see Frank and

Mabel, offering comfort and condolences. Many brought small gifts of food to help out with feeding their visitor. Some offered a few ration coupons from their own books.

And so the days turned into weeks. Dave made himself at home and the Tibbets didn't seem to mind him staying on. He filled a void. Sometimes he would go with Frank to look after their sheep up on the heath. Lambing season had begun and Frank was glad of the help. Occasionally, Dave helped Mabel peel the potatoes or turnips but mostly he read books upstairs, in what he now thought of as 'his' room. On sunny days he would wander the lanes or hike up to explore the caves in the gorge.

On Tuesday, May 8th the war came to an end. Churchill gave a Victory speech on the radio and people went wild all over the country. Church bells rang and parties were held in the streets of every town and village.

In Coombe Dingle the whole population gathered on the village green. It was a warm sunny day and no thoughts were given to working. Bunting was hung around the village, Union Jacks pulled out of cupboards and children made flags from scraps of paper and crayons.

Those who had the ingredients, made cakes to share during the evening's celebration. 'Sunday' clothes were worn and the Averys, who lived on the edge of the village green, turned up their gramophone providing music for dancing. Laughter echoed from the sides of the gorge all night.

It was a bittersweet celebration for Frank and Mabel. They still couldn't believe Ben would never come home. They left early, telling Dave to stay and enjoy himself. The revelry continued all night.

“It just seems so unfair for it to happen such a short time before the war ended,” Mabel said as she cried herself to sleep.

Next morning, Dave didn't turn up for breakfast, Frank went to check on him. He knocked on the bedroom door and then let himself in. The bed was still made and the dresser drawers stood open, emptied of all Ben's clothes and possessions. Dave's kit bag was gone.

Frank ran down the stairs. “He's gone! Cleared out without a word!” he called. Mabel was cleaning the fireplace and looked up in dismay. Frank noticed the silver mantel clock was missing. It had been a gift from Ben the Christmas before war began.

“He must have left a note somewhere or he'll write to us” Mabel said, finding it hard to believe the nice young Dave would do such a thing.

“No! He's taken the clock. We'll never hear from him again.” Frank left the room so Mabel would not see how angry he was.

No letter ever came but from then on, Frank locked the door every night.

Two weeks later Frank and Mabel were startled awake by a loud knocking on the front door.

“Now who would that be at this time of night?”

They climbed out of bed, wrapping themselves in their dressing-gowns. Frank opened the front door then clutched his chest. Mabel screamed.

There, silhouetted by the moonlight, stood Ben!