

PART I — A DIFFERENT MAN

Geoffrey Talbot was supposed to be a linguist, but spent most of his time at university playing games. He appeared twice for the First XI at cricket, but was not selected for the match at Lord's where his place was taken by 'Tiny' Trembath, a slab of a man already on Lancashire's books. At rugby, Geoffrey's headlong tackling in college games had earned him a game for the university itself against Rosslyn Park, but at Twickenham the man chosen at open-side wing forward was a graduate Rhodesian.

It was no surprise to Geoffrey that he fell twice at the last. His Hampshire day-school had told the pupils that their place in life would be the middle rank. Geoffrey's father worked as a jobber on the London Stock Exchange and hoped that Geoffrey, with his knowledge of languages, might one day go into the Diplomatic Service. Geoffrey's mother, who came from Limoges, had no ambition for Geoffrey; her main interest was in dog breeding, and the family house near Twyford Down was home to generations of yapping dachshunds.

After graduation, Geoffrey went to see the university appointments board, where a man with a pipe gave him some brochures from Shell and Imperial Tobacco. 'You're a personable fellow,' he said. 'I should think you'd do well in industry.'

'What about the Diplomatic Service?'

'They won't mind your sportsman's two-two — won't even ask — but their own exam can be tricky.'

In September 1938, after a series of rebuffs, Geoffrey found

himself at a boys' preparatory school in Nottinghamshire, where he was to teach French, Latin and elementary maths. He had been interviewed by the headmaster in London at the offices of an educational agency and hired on the spot.

The taxi from the station drove through the outskirts of a mining town before the road opened up on some hills of oak and beech as they neared the village of Crampton. The school was set on high ground that overlooked a fast-flowing tributary of the Trent; it was a building whose elevated position and solitary brick tower gave it a commanding aspect; the grey stones were covered in creepers and the stone-mullioned windows held leaded lights. The headmaster's wife, Mrs Little, showed him upstairs to his quarters. She was a woman in her sixties who smelled of lavender water and peppermints.

'It's not a large room,' Mrs Little said, 'but bachelors can't be choosers. The boys come back tomorrow, but there'll be tea in the dining hall today at six. You can meet your colleagues. After tea, you have to forage for yourself. We don't allow drink on the premises, though the Head won't mind if you occasionally go down to the Whitby Arms.'

The room had a small sash window, with a view towards a wooded park. There was a chest, a shallow built-in cupboard with a hanging rail, a standing bookcase of four shelves and a single bed. When the house had belonged to a wealthy family, Geoffrey thought, this would have been a maid's bedroom. The shape of it seemed somehow to dictate the sort of life he would lead. The bookcase would need filling and the evening sun would help him read in the armchair with its loose floral cover; he would send for his old books from university and might even get round to the plays of Schiller and Racine; presumably there would also be a lending library in the town. He had never imagined he would be a schoolmaster, but felt the role settle on to his shoulders as easily as the black gown he hung up on the door.

His interview with the headmaster of Crampton Abbey had been brief. Captain Little, a tall, grey-haired man whose horn-rimmed glasses had one blacked-out lens, had made it clear that Geoffrey's principal job was to improve the performance of the sports teams. 'The parents do expect us to win a few matches, you know,' he said. 'It's more than twenty years since we beat Bearwood Hall at anything.'

After Geoffrey had unpacked his single suit and spare tweed jacket, he decided to go for a walk in the grounds. Beneath an oak tree next to the cricket pitch, he came across a wooden bench with the inscription 'J. D. Farmington 1895–1915'. The Battle of Loos, he thought. He wondered if Captain Little's sad demeanour and sightless eye had had anything to do with the war. Geoffrey's father had been in the infantry in France, but never spoke about it except if he had a coughing fit, when he muttered about the gas and made disparaging remarks about his wife's German dogs.

Geoffrey looked to his right, where the ground rose to a wooden pavilion. He pictured the nervous opening batsmen making their way to the middle to be met by a barrage from the opening bowlers of Bearwood Hall. Only a few weeks earlier he had himself gone in on a damp morning at Guildford to face Alf Gover and his brother-in-law Eddie Watts of Surrey; he had made only twelve and had been hit painfully on the forearm. He had no idea whether his knowledge of rugby and cricket would make him a good coach, but it could scarcely be difficult to motivate a group of energetic small boys.

There were wood pigeons and some noisy blackbirds in the trees that fringed a small football pitch behind him. Generations came and went in places like this, Geoffrey thought; they flickered through the huge front door with its iron bolts and bars, each new boy gripped by the conviction that he was alone in such straits — deprived of mother and home, beset by rules he

didn't understand, hoping the next hour might bring relief from new sensations. It must be hard for a child to believe that his experience, far from being unique, would in time dwindle into something no longer even individual, as his tears were taken up into the clouds. Geoffrey liked poetry and had a secret ambition to write verses in the style of Rupert Brooke, but he had never shown his undergraduate efforts to anyone, not even the fellow members of the Marvell, a weekly reading society.

A light wind blew as he set off back to the school to have tea; walking along the crazy-paved path towards the terrace, he felt apprehensive at the thought of meeting experienced members of his new profession. He pushed open the tall double oak doors of the dining hall and saw one of the two long trestles partly laid up with a red gingham cloth. There was no one else there; Geoffrey went in and sat down on an inconspicuous chair. Through swing doors from a kitchen came a woman in blue overalls with wild hair. She carried a plate that she set down in front of him without speaking; it had two warm sardines on a half-slice of toast. She reached over and lifted the teapot to pour him a cupful of deep chestnut brown. Geoffrey, who was hungry after his journey up from Hampshire, disposed of the sardines quickly, wondering if he might need something else to eat later in the evening. As he was preparing to leave, the double doors swung open and a bald man in tweeds and brown brogues with thick rubber welts rolled into the room.

He held out his hand and introduced himself. 'Gerald Baxter. Classics and Under Eleven cricket.'

The maid brought his sardines. 'Thank you, Elsie,' Baxter said. When she had gone back into the kitchen, he lowered his voice. 'They get them from the bin. You probably saw it when you came from the station. The old county asylum. They're all quite harmless. Apart from one who fell in love with the maths

master and tried to stab him with the ceremonial sword above the fireplace. Before my time, though. Do you want to come to the pub?’

‘Is that allowed?’

Baxter smiled. He had yellowing teeth and one gruesome canine, coloured almost black. ‘Old Ma Little warn you off, did she? No, it’s perfectly all right. Just not meant to go to the Hare and Hounds in case we bump into Long John. Doesn’t booze with other ranks.’

‘Long John?’

‘The Head. After Long John Silver.’ Baxter covered one eye piratically.

The Whitby Arms was a fifteen-minute walk downhill. The saloon bar was a large featureless room with a few coloured photographs of vintage cars and a small coke fire; through the servery Geoffrey could glimpse a dim public bar where men in caps were drinking flat, dark beer. He could see why Mr Little might have preferred the Hare and Hounds with its bottle-bottom windows and coloured lights.

‘Done any teaching before?’

‘No, it’s my first job.’

‘It’s not a bad life. Especially if you have a private income.’

‘I’m afraid I haven’t.’

‘Nor have I,’ said Baxter. ‘A word of advice. Don’t try and become head of department or any of that nonsense. Then your life is all timetables and meetings. Stay a foot soldier. Teach the little buggers and knock off promptly when the bell goes. I’ll have the other half if you twist my arm.’

Although Baxter insisted on drinking only half-pints, he managed to dispose of a dozen in two hours, most of which Geoffrey bought for him. ‘Still your round, I think, Talbot. Just a freshener.’

Baxter puffed loudly as they made their way back up the

hill. 'I'd get a car if I could afford it. I don't mind coming down, it's the climb back I can't manage. I was wounded, you know.'

'Where?'

'I was with the Sandpipers.'

'The Sandpipers?'

'The 13th/25th. Won't be called on to fight again, that's for sure. Too bloody old.'

They were walking into the school grounds and the clock was striking nine. 'Are you up by the sick room?' said Baxter.

'Yes.'

'I thought so. My room's at the end, down the half-flight. Breakfast's at seven-thirty. Why not look in afterwards? I generally have a dry martini before Prayers.'

Geoffrey had been a schoolmaster for only a year when war broke out and he went to ask Long John Little's permission to volunteer.

'You could do well at this job, you know,' said Little. 'You're a natural. The boys listen to you.'

'I hope I'll be back soon,' said Geoffrey. He had really no idea how long the war would last. So long as the Russians and Americans were not involved, there would be, he imagined, an intense but brief struggle in Europe. The Scandinavians would offer little resistance, but the French could be relied on to hold out until British reinforcements came to help. Then he could return to coaching the First XI, who had scraped a draw against Bearwood Hall in his first summer in charge, and see if he could get some games for the Nottinghamshire Second XI himself.

'It's going to be a devil of a job getting any young staff at all,' said Little. 'During the last war my father had to dig a lot of old men out of retirement. They were making it up as they went

along, keeping one step ahead of the boys in Hillard and Botting. But I shall still have Baxter.’

‘Yes. He did his bit, I suppose.’

‘Oh God, he didn’t give you all the “Sandpipers” stuff, did he?’ said Mr Little. ‘I do wish he wouldn’t do that. He had a game leg and never got nearer to the fighting than Étapes. He was a quartermaster in charge of handing out kit. Not his fault.’

‘What about you, sir?’ If ever there was a time to ask, Geoffrey thought, this was it.

‘Messpot.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Mesopotamia. I was happy to miss the Western Front. This was a small price to pay.’ He pointed at his eye. ‘You’ll be all right, Talbot. No trenches this time. It’ll be all tanks and movement and high-level bombing. Write to us if you like. I know Mrs Little would like to hear. She’s got quite a soft spot for you.’

‘Thank you, sir. I will.’

As a graduate from an ancient university, Geoffrey was expected to become an officer. Out of loyalty to the county of his birth, he offered his services to the Duke of Hampshire’s Regiment, whose honours included the Battle of Dettingen in 1743 during the War of the Austrian Succession (what on earth had that to do with Micheldever, Geoffrey wondered) and the Siege of Havana in 1762, where it had suffered heavy losses owing to dysentery. Ejected and reabsorbed in countless infantry shake-ups since Waterloo, its members were by 1939 known simply as the Musketeers.

After four months at officer cadet school in Colchester, during which he learned the rudiments of leadership (‘Always let the men smoke during a briefing’; ‘The first thing that happens in action is that the radio breaks down’), Geoffrey was sent to join

the 1st Battalion in Norfolk. Looking through the window as the train left Swaffham, he noticed how the sandy pine forests started to give way to a different landscape, unchanged for centuries, dark, self-absorbed, as though its inhabitants had not often stirred themselves to make the journey to King's Lynn, still less the odyssey to London. He took a notebook from his case and began one of his secret verses – in pencil so an eraser would leave no trace of the clumsy first draft.

The hedgerow cannot hide where last the may
Like spring snow daubed it reckless white.
Now, flowers gone, the thorns assert their day
And this fair land is entering the night.

He wondered whether 'may' – by which he meant hawthorn – should have a capital 'M' or if that might make people think it referred to the month. 'Fair land' sounded archaic, but it echoed what he felt – such true affection for a part of England he had never seen before, heightened by the fact that it might soon be under attack from the skies. There was also an irksome echo in 'reckless white' – something second-hand, owing its existence perhaps to Shelley's 'hectic red'.

The 650 men of the battalion were assembled at a shabby Queen Anne house that had been offered to them by its impoverished owner. The bedrooms were designated 'officers for the use of'; the outhouses, barns and stables were filled with bunks and makeshift beds for other ranks, while the medical officer set up his surgery in the old butler's pantry. Geoffrey was instructed to present himself for dinner at the officers' mess in what had been the library, a pleasant room with a large fireplace and marble surround, above which hung the Musketeer colours in magenta and gold. There were oak-fronted cupboards and double doors leading into a comfortable sitting area – the last room, it

appeared, the owner had been able to afford to heat and keep habitable.

Geoffrey had just taken a cocktail from the mess servant and was trying to conceal his sense of being all at sea when he saw someone he recognised. Standing with his back to the fireplace, smoking a cigarette in a bluff, aggressive way, was the monumental figure of 'Tiny' Trembath.

'What on earth are you doing here, Talbot?' he said.

'The same as you, I presume.'

'It's all a mistake,' said Trembath. 'I meant to go into the navy. Too late. Then the Gunners, but I failed the trigonometry. Now I'm in the bloody infantry. They look an absolute shambles, don't you think?'

Geoffrey found himself bristling a little, as though he had already developed a loyalty to the Musketeers. 'I expect we'll be billeted together,' he said, in a neutral sort of way.

Trembath looked Geoffrey up and down, as though imagining the prospect without relish.

'I suppose so,' he said eventually. 'I can't wait to get the hell out of here.'

On the fifth day there was a 'night op', the first time the junior officers were allowed out to take charge of some men without an NCO to keep an eye on them. They were meant to find their way, using compasses and a map reference but no torches, to a secret enemy position at Location X, where they would take possession of a Nazi flag to an accompaniment of blank rifle fire. This first part of the exercise was supposed to take only four hours, and from Point X they would receive their orders for the rest of the night, culminating in the safe transfer of the Nazi flag to secret position Y. Trembath and Geoffrey were in charge of A Section, but there was a second group, B Section, who would of course try to get there before them.

At five o'clock, when it was already almost dark, they started

to black up their faces with burnt corks from wine bottles they had emptied the night before in the mess.

‘Rather a fitting end for such a disappointing hock,’ said Geoffrey, smearing his forehead.

‘Don’t be an arse, Talbot,’ said Trembath.

The section walked for three and a half hours through the Norfolk countryside towards the sea, the men toiling under the weight of their packs and complaining that they were not allowed to smoke.

‘You know damn well you can’t show a light after blackout,’ Trembath told them. ‘Get a bloody move on or the other chaps’ll beat us to it.’

Geoffrey had been put in charge of map-reading, not something that was easy to do by the light of a winter moon. Eventually they found themselves by a village green.

‘For God’s sake, Talbot,’ said Trembath as the men sat on the grass. ‘We’re supposed to be going across country not on the bloody trunk roads.’

‘It’s hardly a trunk road, it’s a village lane.’

‘Here. Give me the map.’

While Trembath was wrestling with the outsize piece of paper, Geoffrey looked about him. On the other side of the road he thought he could make out the shape of an inn sign swinging gently in the breeze; and while Trembath struggled to get the map laid out to his satisfaction on the grass, he walked quietly over to it. Through the blacked-out windows came the sound of glasses chinking and low, contented conversation. Geoffrey checked the luminous hands of his watch: 20.45 hours. He eased up the latch of the front door and went down a short flagged corridor into a room with wooden settles and a small serving hatch. Silence fell in the room as Geoffrey asked for a pint of best bitter and the barman bent over the tap on a wooden barrel.

As he put down the glass on the counter, he said, ‘Do you want a Lord Nelson with that?’

‘Yes, please,’ said Geoffrey. He hoped it might be a sandwich, or a pie, but it turned out to be a small tot of something that smelled of cloves. The beer, though still, was fresh; the Lord Nelson was sweetly aromatic. Two minutes later, Geoffrey was back with Trembath on the grass, ready for the battle ahead.

‘Sorry. Call of nature. What do you think?’

‘I think we should follow this path here.’ Trembath prodded his forefinger against the map. ‘Then we go across country.’

‘Jolly good,’ said Geoffrey. ‘You take over the map-reading, I’ll push along the stragglers from behind.’

‘I say, Talbot, I—’

‘No, I don’t mind. It’s your turn. Off we go. Fall in, please, men. Come along.’

Trebath’s route took them through a field behind the pub, then into a copse, where he consulted his compass by the light of a match.

He sucked in his breath. ‘I think the enemy will be well dug in. They’ll have a bunker in some deeply wooded area, a natural fortification. That’s my guess. I think if we follow this bearing, north by north-west, and just about here . . .’

There followed an hour of walking over fields, climbing fences, regrouping, head-counting and grumbling. The ground was becoming marshy and hard to walk through. Geoffrey, who was now beside Trembath at the head of the section, wondered what it must be like for the men who hadn’t had the chance to play as much sport as he had; some of them were clearly city types on whom a ten-mile hike must be starting to take its toll. By now they were all knee-deep in water. Geoffrey trailed his fingers through it for a moment and licked them: salt.

Then the going underfoot seemed suddenly to change again; it

was becoming drier, then sandy. Ahead of him Geoffrey could make out undulations – not hills exactly, but mounds or rises that stood out in the dark winter countryside.

And now there was something odd – yet familiar – about the soil beneath his boots, and in a moment, it came to him. He was walking on a seaside golf course. There were no flags to confirm his suspicion, the ground staff having doubtless taken them down for the night, but he could see where the cropped grass on which they were walking gave way to rough on either side of a fairway. Geoffrey had no doubt that 200 yards or so ahead, among the dunes, they would come to an even more close-cut area: the green.

‘Trembath?’

‘Yes?’

‘Do you know where we are?’

‘Yes, we’re heading north-north-west on a bearing of—’

‘No. More exactly. More colloquially.’

‘What the hell are you talking about, Talbot?’

‘We’re on the eighth hole at Burnham.’

‘The Royal North Norfolk?’

‘Yes.’

Trembath said nothing, though he grunted a good deal.

‘Can you make out that shape in the distance?’ said Geoffrey. ‘The one that looks as though it’s built up with railway sleepers and filled with sand?’

‘Just about,’ said Trembath, non-committally.

‘I was just wondering. Do you think that might be the enemy bunker?’ said Geoffrey. ‘A natural fortific—’

‘Pipe down, Talbot. If we don’t get a move on, B Section’s going to beat us to it.’

At that moment, there came the sound of rifle fire about half a mile east of where they were standing.

‘Too late, I think,’ said Geoffrey.

‘Quick,’ said Trembath, ‘let’s get our men over there and ambush them.’

‘We can’t go forward on to the beach,’ said Geoffrey. ‘They’ll have patrols there.’

‘You sure?’

‘Yes. Sergeant Turnbull said, “Stay off the beach, Mr Talbot.”’

‘Did he really call you “Mister”?’

‘Yes. Look, we’ll have to go back the way we came, then pick up the coast road towards Wells. The guns weren’t far away.’

‘Come on then,’ said Trembath. ‘Let’s get a bloody move on.’

‘We’re on the eighth fairway now, so if we cut back through—’

‘I don’t want a lesson in course management. I played here in the varsity match.’

‘Don’t tell me you got a golf blue as well,’ said Geoffrey.

‘Halved my match at the eighteenth. The race is to the swift, Talbot. Come on.’

The men fell in and began to walk back the way they had come, but before they reached the seventh tee, they came to a halt. Ground that had earlier been marshy, then knee-deep in water, was now submerged by the sea.

‘We’re cut off, sir,’ said Hill, one of the other ranks; known as ‘Puffer’, he was a tobacconist in civilian life. ‘Tide comes in here at a hell of a lick. It’ll be six feet deep in places.’

‘How do you know?’ said Trembath.

‘Used to come here on holidays, sir.’

‘Well, we’ll just have to wade through it.’

‘Can’t wade, sir. It’ll be too deep. And some of us can’t swim.’

‘Don’t be so bloody ridiculous, man. It’s only a few yards across. Come on. Get going. All of you.’

Reluctantly, holding their rifles above their heads, the Musketeers entered the icy tidal waters that cut off the eighth hole from the mainland.

Geoffrey felt his feet slip from beneath him. He was swimming – a clumsy breaststroke towards the higher ground he could make out just in front of them. He had never been much of a sea-bather and was finding the water almost unbearably cold. He was not alone in feeling the chill; a good deal of shouting and groaning came from the section as it half swam, half splashed its way towards the out-of-bounds beside the seventh.

To warm his drenched and freezing troops, Trembath told them to proceed at the double back to the coast road between Brancaster and Wells. As soon as they got there, they would be allowed to smoke; he had seen them stick their cigarette packets beneath their forage caps as they went into the water, like householders saving their most valued item from a natural disaster.

This order seemed to Geoffrey an idea of near-genius. He had thought the extent of Trembath's cunning might be to make sure his batting partner faced the fast bowler while he enjoyed the youthful leg-break lobber at the other end; he had never thought old 'Tiny' might be capable of such insight into the mind of the soldier. A few minutes later, smoking and steaming by the side of the road, the section caught its breath.

Geoffrey resumed map-reading duties, and shortly afterwards A Section, chilly but in good spirits, arrived at Location X – a telephone box set back between the road and the 'staithe', as the locals called the area of jetties and moorings by the sea. Here they were rewarded with hot chocolate, pork pies and more cigarettes before pressing on towards Location Y.

The bracing tidal water and the nicotine had left the men exhilarated, eager to outflank B Section, and attentive to all commands. They went at the double through the grounds of a stately house that looked, in the darkness, like a lunatic asylum, lacking only a water tower to set off its grim west facade. At one o'clock they found Location Y in a cherry orchard in the grounds of the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham and an

hour later they ambushed a complacent B Section on a country lane with thunder flashes and vigorous hand-to-hand fighting, resulting in the capture of the Nazi flag. It was not until they were back at battalion headquarters just after dawn that they saw that one of their number was missing at roll call. A. J. 'Puffer' Hill did not answer his name.

After breakfast, a search party was assembled to leave by lorry and retrace their steps, but was told to stand down when a telephone call reached battalion headquarters. An early-morning golfer, searching for his ball in the rough beside the par-five seventh, had come across the drowned body of a soldier, evidently beached some hours earlier by the retreating tide. Geoffrey was despatched with the medical officer to fetch him back as discreetly as possible; the course prided itself on rapid play (four-balls were banned) and the secretary was anxious not to disrupt the progress of the monthly medal.

'I suppose there'll be a dreadful stink about this,' said Geoffrey.

'I rather think there will,' said the MO, a man inured to disaster. 'You can say goodbye to any hopes of getting a company. You and Trembath will probably be put on a charge.'

'Oh God. Someone'll have to write to his wife.'

'They certainly will. He was probably the last Hill in Norfolk.'