

Prologue

1 May 1929

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THERE WAS A time before the Great War claimed the lives of millions when Frenchie wanted to be a carpenter like Jesus. There was a time when he was proud to serve his country. Then its politicians broke their pledge to create a land fit for heroes, and Frenchie began to believe those who had done most to rouse the people to service and sacrifice had only been serving themselves. So now Frenchie was simply happy to have a job when so many were without one. Sometimes it was work for Special Branch, sometimes for Mr Maxwell Knight, and tonight it was a shitty little outing to Brecon for both. Mr Knight tried to characterise it as work of ‘national importance’. He must have thought those fine words would appeal to an old soldier and spy who had been decorated in the trenches for his ‘devotion to duty’. Not Frenchie; he kept his Military Medal in a kitchen drawer with the spoons, a scratched and tarnished reminder of wasted years, before the slaughter at the Front gave way to the scrape-a-living peace. Frenchie was a bread-and-butter spy now, no more honourable than the crooks, pimps and hucksters Mr Knight and his fascist pals paid for half-baked gossip and rumour. Principles were for the well-to-do, and duty for those foolish enough to believe they owed their country some – not for old soldiers, not for Frenchie.

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But when spies bugger about in bars too long or loiter for hours on the shadow side of the street, they brood, they scratch, and food for the family table can seem like a poor code to live a life by. That was Frenchie as the sun dipped below the hills to the west of Brecon. He was standing on the last corner in a week of corners in dirty little Welsh towns he was unable to pronounce, his chase near its end, and on May Day, Labour Day, when working men and women were expected to demonstrate class solidarity. That was bloody fate for you, and as a working man he felt quite bad about it. During the war they said, 'if the bullet has your number you're done for': May Day in Brecon the number was up for a couple of ordinary blokes called Owen and Eyre; and it was Agent Frenchie's job to make it so.

Owen and Eyre were across the street in a little boozer called the Dragon. Frenchie had ghosted in and out of the pub and seen Owen at the bar buying beer for Tommies; Eyre at a table persuading them to mutiny. How many pints would it take to convince them? And when their glasses were empty, Owen and Eyre were to walk to Brecon barracks to hand out flyers urging the rest of the garrison to do the same.

Frenchie reached behind his right ear for the dog-end he had left there. Desperate times. He would buy some more fags at the station kiosk. He knew it sold cigarettes because he had telephoned Mr Knight from the call box opposite.

'It's tonight, M.'

'I'll make the arrangements,' had come the reply. 'Ring me when the deed is done. Dudley 4832.'

Knight would be at a political meeting. The country was four weeks from a general election that the workers' party – the Labour Party – was expecting to win. Owen and Eyre were workers – or they would like to be. Owen was an ex-miner, a father of four, Eyre an unemployed furnace man, and the talk at their pints and politics meeting in the Dragon would be of

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jobs and of workers uniting everywhere. Wrong shade of Red, lads! Poor sods. They were labouring under the misapprehension they lived in a free country: not for communists, boys, not for commies. They wanted to sweep away the old order in a Russian-style revolution – well, the old order was not going to stand for it. Those that *had* were terrified of those that *hadn't*, terrified they would rise up and turn the pyramid upside down, that their grand houses would become hospitals, their estates collective farms, that aristos would be forced to pick up a shovel, and the colonies would revolt. That was why hounding unemployed butties like Owen and Eyre was work of 'national importance'. Frenchie gave a wry smile. Think! The spark of revolution, lit on a chilly May Day in Brecon. Only, if the country was run well and fairly, how could it happen?

The fag-end burned his fingers and he flicked it into the gutter. 'Here they come.' On the pavement in front of the pub: Owen, 43, sturdy as a pit pony, his arm about a Tommy's shoulders; Eyre, from Essex, 32, tall, sinewy, six feet of colliery winding cable, blathering to two more soldiers, a hessian sack of flyers over his shoulder. *Unite to free the heroic workers and peasants of India, Soldier! If you are sent to serve in India, you must refuse to shoot down workers fighting for their freedom. Our guns must be turned on our real enemy – the thieving, robbing, British ruling class.*

Their appeal to the soldier-workers of Brecon was printed on thin grey paper. Frenchie had followed the Communist Party's courier from London to iron and steel Merthyr, and to a meeting of local comrades in a temperance hall. Then to a crowded pub called the Patriot, where he had watched the courier pass the flyers under a table to Eyre.

'Who are you, butty?' the barman had enquired.

Union rep and a stevedore from London was Frenchie's story, and he had shown anyone who asked him a transport workers'

union card. A comradely visit – ‘let me buy you another’ – and he’d talked about the general election and a Labour government, and it was time for the people to seize control of the means of production. Yes, Frenchie had been a bloody bore, but his new Welsh comrades seemed ready to forgive him for being a Londoner and a little la-di-da because he was an old soldier and a worker too, with scars and calluses and money for beer. He had bought Owen a pint and listened to the story of how he was blacklisted for leading a strike. At closing time his new comrades had found him a bed for the night with an old grey woman who lived in a terrace beneath a slag mountain she called her old grey man. That was how the paperchase had begun. Dowlais to Aberdare, Pontypool to Mardy, he had followed the distribution of the flyers up and down the smokestack valleys of Wales, until the train pulled into Brecon, a different sort of town, a town with cow shit in the high street – and a barracks.

The comrades were walking towards the lights at its main gate now, Owen and Eyre on one side, Frenchie covering them on the other. They were taking their time about it too. Sober enough perhaps to recognise it was reckless, even suicidal, like storming a machine gun post without covering smoke, like Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. Brecon was home to regiments that were famous for fighting natives with spears. Stitched into their colours were battle honours awarded for actions in hot places. An appeal by the comrades for solidarity with the peasants of India was bound to end badly. With luck the police would break up the ensuing melee before too much blood was spilled.

They crossed to Frenchie’s side of the street, the tall one, Owen, shortening his stride to keep in step with his companion. An old Vulcan lorry grumbled towards them, *MR ANTHONY LEWIS, GROCER* painted on a board above the cab. The whine

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and percussion of its engine filled the street with memories: a road through no-man's-land, a procession of ambulances carrying wounded from a shell-shattered city, the crump of high explosives, and the stop-start roar of a lorry that would carry Frenchie in and out of the line for the rest of his life. A few seconds later, *MR ANTHONY LEWIS, GROCER* and his Vulcan turned left and the war retreated along the side street with him.

Soldiers were drifting back from the pubs and a score or more were chatting and smoking beneath the tower to the right of the barracks' gate, enjoying their last minutes of freedom from barked orders and the clatter of the dormitory. Frenchie's own Tommy years had begun in a grey stone mental hospital very like Brecon barracks. The army had commandeered the place for use as a training camp and its new inmates had charged across its grounds to stick a bag with a bayonet. The recollection of it made him wince. Eyre had missed the war somehow; Owen had done his bit. 'Made me see the truth,' he had confided to Frenchie at the Patriot. 'Workers on both sides was doin' the dying, see, and for what?'

Eyre handed Owen some flyers and one of them must have shouted a greeting because the soldiers turned towards them. Frenchie staggered like a local with a skinful of beer and came to rest against the rough stone wall of the barracks. Chin on his chest, he gazed beyond his peaked cap at the terrace of shops and houses on the opposite side of the street. Someone was twitching a curtain at an upstairs window, a member of the local constabulary, no doubt.

There was trouble at the gate already. A burly-looking Tommy was trying to wrestle the bag of flyers from Eyre. One of his companions waded in with his fists. Owen tried to haul him away. The soldiers would be under orders to kick up the dust. A tussle in front of the barracks was all the excuse the police

needed to scoop up Owen and Eyre and charge them with affray. A crowd was pressing round them and more punches were thrown.

‘Christ!’ Frenchie murmured. ‘Arrest them, why don’t you?’

Perhaps the officer commanding the barracks had decided to teach them a lesson: the shit. His ‘chaps’ were sticking in the boot, in and out like a village hall dance.

‘Bugger it.’ Frenchie looked away.

Owen was a decent bloke, and Eyre didn’t deserve a beating. Flyers were spilling from his bag and scuttering along the street like the leaves of a fabulous tree.

‘Come on now, come on.’ Frenchie was willing it to stop, because the circle was tightening, the soldiers’ dance at fever pitch. One of Owen or Eyre was going to die while he stood there watching. Then with a surge of relief he heard a blast on a whistle and policemen poured from the house opposite and shouldered their way into the ring. Comrade Owen was hauled to his feet; Eyre was lying motionless. A plainclothes copper knelt beside him. They were going to have to carry the poor sod into custody. To add insult to his injury, they would charge him with ‘resisting arrest’.

Frenchie turned away. He felt empty, he felt numb, he felt as he used to feel at times in the big bombardments when he had ceased to care where the next shell would fall.