Chapter 20

THERE WAS AN air of determined conspiracy abroad in the yard that day. Whispering groups of men in dripping greatcoats, their collars turned up to keep the rain from their necks, huddled together, their voices low and earnest. Albert seemed scarcely to notice me all day. He would neither talk to me nor even look at me but hurried through the daily routine of mucking out, haying up and grooming, in a deep and gloomy silence. I knew, as every horse in the yard knew, that we were threatened. I was torn with anxiety. An ominous shadow had fallen on the yard that morning and not one of us could settle in our stables. When we were led out for exercise, we were jumpy and skittish and Albert, like the other soldiers, responded with impatience, jerking sharply at my halter, something I had never known him do before. That evening the men were still talking but now Sergeant Thunder was with them and they all stood together in the darkening yard.

I could just see in the last of the evening light the glint of money in their hands. Sergeant Thunder carried a small tin box which was being passed around from one to the other and I heard the clink of coins as they were dropped in. The rain had stopped now and it was a still evening so that I could just make out Sergeant Thunder’s low, growling voice. ‘That’s the best we can do, lads,’ he was saying. ‘It’s not a lot, but then we ’aven’t got a lot, ’ave we? No one ever gets rich in this man’s army. I’ll do the bidding like I said – it’s against orders, but I’ll do it. Mind you, I’m not promising anything.’ He paused and looked over his shoulder before going on. ‘I’m not supposed to tell you this – the Major said not to – and make no mistake, I’m not in the ’abit of disobeying officers’ orders. But we aren’t at war any more, and anyway this order was more like advice, so to speak. So I’m telling you this ’cos I wouldn’t like you to think badly of the major. ’E knows what’s going on right enough. Matter of fact the ’ole thing was ’is own idea. It was ’im that told me to suggest it to you in the first place. What’s more, lads, ’e ’s given us every penny of ’is pay that ’e ’ad saved up – every penny. It’s not much but it’ll ’elp. ’Course I don’t ’ave to tell you that no one says a word about this, not a dicky bird. If this was to get about, then ’e goes for the ’igh jump, like all of us would. So mum’s the word, clear?’ ‘Have you got enough, Sarge?’ I could hear that it was Albert’s voice speaking. ‘I’m ’oping so, son,’ Sergeant Thunder said, shaking the tin. ‘I’m ’oping so. Now let’s all of us get some shut-eye. I want you layabouts up bright and early in the morning and them ’orses looking their thundering best. It’s the last thing we’ll be doing for ’em, least we can do for ’em seems to me.’ And so the group dispersed, the men walking away in twos and threes, shoulders hunched against the cold, their hands deep in their greatcoat pockets. One man only was left standing by himself in the yard. He stood for a moment looking up at the sky before walking over towards my stable.

I could tell it was Albert from the way he walked – it was that rolling farmer’s gait with the knees never quite straightening up after each stride. He pushed back his peaked cap as he leant over the stable door. ‘I’ve done all I can, Joey,’ he said. ‘We all have. I can’t tell you any more ’cos I know you’d understand every word I said, and then you’d only worry yourself sick with it. This time, Joey, I can’t even make you a promise like I did when Father sold you off to the army. I can’t make you a promise ’cos I don’t know whether I can keep it. I asked old Thunder to help and he helped. I asked the major to help and he helped. And now I’ve just asked God, ’cos when all’s said and done, it’s all up to Him. We’ve done all we can, that’s for certain sure. I remember old Miss Wirtle telling me in Sunday

School back home once: “God helps those that helps themselves”. Mean old divil she was, but she knew her scriptures right enough. God bless you, Joey. Sleep tight.’ And he put out his clenched fist and rubbed my muzzle, and then stroked each of my ears in turn before leaving me alone in the dark of the stables. It was the first time he had talked to me like that since the day David had been reported killed, and it warmed my heart just to listen to him. The day dawned bright over the clock tower, throwing the long, lean shadows of the poplars beyond across the cobbles that glistened with frost. Albert was up with the others before reveille was blown, so that by the time the first buyers arrived in the yard in their carts and cars, I was fed and watered and groomed so hard that my winter coat gleamed red as I was led out into the morning sun. The buyers were gathered in the middle of the yard, and we were led, all those that could walk, around the perimeter of the yard in a grand parade, before being brought out one by one to face the auctioneer and the buyers. I found myself waiting in my stable watching every horse in the yard being sold ahead of me.

I was, it seemed, to be the last to be brought out. Distant echoes of an earlier auction sent me suddenly into a feverish sweat, but I forced myself to remember Albert’s reassuring words of the night before, and in time my heart stopped racing. So when Albert led me out into the yard I was calm and easy in my stride. I had unswerving faith in him as he patted my neck gently and whispered secretly in my ear. There were audible and visible signs of approval from the buyers as he walked me round in a tight circle, bringing me at last to a standstill facing a line of red, craggy faces and grasping, greedy eyes.

Then I noticed in amongst the shabby coats and hats of the buyers, the still, tall figure of Sergeant Thunder towering above them, and to one side the entire veterinary unit lined up along the wall and watching the proceedings anxiously. The bidding began. I was clearly much in demand for the bidding was swift to start with, but as the price rose I could see more heads shaking and very soon there seemed to be only two bidders left. One was old Thunder himself, who would touch the corner of his cap with his stick, almost like a salute, to make his bid; and the other was a thin, wiry little man with weasel eyes who wore on his face a smile so full of consummate greed and evil that I could hardly bear to look at him. Still the price moved up. ‘At twenty-five, twenty-six. At twenty-seven. Twenty-seven I’m bid. On my right. Twenty-seven I’m bid. Any more please? It’s against the sergeant there, at twenty-seven. Any more please? He’s a fine young animal, as you see. Got to be worth a lot more than this. Any more please?’ But the sergeant was shaking his head now, his eyes looked down and acknowledged defeat. ‘Oh God, no,’ I heard Albert whisper beside me. ‘Dear God, not him. He’s one of them, Joey. He’s been buying all morning. Old Thunder says he’s the butcher from Cambrai. Please God, no.’ ‘Well then, if there are no more bids, I’m selling to Monsieur Cirac of Cambrai at twenty-seven English pounds. Is that all? Selling then for twenty-seven. Going, going . . .’ ‘Twenty-eight,’ came a voice from amongst the buyers, and I saw a white haired old man leaning heavily on his stick, shuffle slowly forward through the buyers until he stood in front of them. ‘I’m bidding you twenty-eight of your English pounds,’ said the old man, speaking in hesitant English. ‘And I’ll bid for so long and so high as I need to, I advise you, sir,’ he said, turning to the butcher from Cambrai. ‘I advise you not to try to bid me out. For this horse I will pay one hundred English pounds if I must do. No one will have this horse except me.

This is my Emilie’s horse. It is hers by right.’ Before he spoke her name I had not been quite sure that my eyes and ears were not deceiving me, for the old man had aged many years since I had last set eyes on him, and his voice was thinner and weaker than I remembered. But now I was sure. This was indeed Emilie’s grandfather standing before me, his mouth set with grim determination, his eyes glaring around him, challenging anyone to try to outbid him. No one said a word. The butcher from Cambrai shook his head and turned away.

Even the auctioneer had been stunned into silence, and there was some delay before he brought his hammer down on the table and I was sold.