Growing Dumb

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Chapter Two. The Farm

Tom was the bailiff Dad had put in to manage a farm south of Birmingham, some time after the First World War, they might have gone shares, but I don't think it was a Partnership in any formal legal sense, I don't know that Tom put up any money and I've no idea how they met. Our Kid knows a lot more about that than I do, I haven't asked him, but there must have been some sort of written agreement. Dad really wanted to be a farmer, Mum more than once said, but it was pretty obvious his heart was set on it anyway, he looked so different on the farm, relaxed, his face a bit fuller, he smiled more, he talked more, and he listened. He loved the countryside and the fresh air, the animals, the feel of crops growing round you that you'd planted and could harvest, loved the work and the steady pace of it and of country life. He was a dead keen gardener no matter the weather, I can still see him at the end of the day when we lived in Lichfield, after he'd parked the car out the back it'd take him more than an hour to get across the sixty feet or so to the house, he'd get waylaid by the plants, he'd really get caught up by the weeds, he'd disappear into the shed and come out with a spade or the secateurs,

or a bit of green twine, even in the snow he'd stop and carefully disentangle a struggling coreopsis or pentstemon, he even knew their Latin names, and when at last he got to the back door *Oh Leo look at your suit!* Mum'd cry, *and your shoes!* and he'd look a bit crestfallen and smile, "I was a bit worried that geum wasn't going to make it" or "I must do something about the greenhouse, get some heat in there," pleased and relaxed, hands all covered in rust and spider-webbed muck from the old stove that hadn't been lit for years, and the two of them would set to cleaning his clothes up for the next day, he wouldn't let anybody else press his trousers, he did it himself the damp tea-towel laid carefully over the legs, the iron firmly running down the crease, that was *his* job, like cleaning shoes, he'd learned that in the Army, "You'll have to learn that too," he told us, "so you don't get tram-lines running down your leg," and every night he'd put his suit-trousers in the trouser press, laying the press on the bed and tenderly pulling and tucking and adjusting, a big sheet of brown cardboard under the trousers, another sheet laid gently over the legs before he closed the press down like a door closing and tightened up the screws, I think it was the cardboard that'd come with the press when he first got it, a bit scruffy round the edges, a bit brittle, but perfectly usable, he liked things to last, took care of his tools, wiped them with a rag after he'd used them, loved reading seed catalogues.

But it didn't matter how often Mum'd ask him to change into his gardening clothes as soon as he got home, he still took ages to get through the garden though sometimes he'd remember, I suppose it got to be a bit of a ritual for them, a shared domestic task. I don't know what Mum thought about it though what with clothes rationed even after the war, it always meant extra work for her after she'd been at it all day, she never said anything that I heard, not even a sigh, and I was really surprised soon after Dad died when she told me, I'd said something about Uncle Tom, that she was never really very happy about the farm, yes of course she'd enjoyed the summers there, especially in the War, but she didn't trust Tom much, thought he always managed things to his own advantage. Nowadays we'd probably call him good at manipulating. Of course by the time Dad died we didn't have anything to do with the farm any more. Dad'd been so ill for such a long time, "I'm glad we stopped going there," she said with a slight grimace, "when I think about it." It wasn't long after that, it can't've been more than two or three days, she asked me if I'd

go up to the bedroom and sort through Dad's clothes, both of us in that sort of shock you get with someone dying, Phil away at his job in Birmingham, "I couldn't bear to do that," she said, and sniffed, her eyes all wet, "Just the wardrobe," her bleak face. "Do you think his sports jacket would fit you?" I shrugged, didn't think any of us'd be able to stand me wandering round, the slightest glimpse of me out of the corner of your eye, me in that beautiful green lamb's wool jacket, grim punctuation. She looked relieved when I said I don't want it. "Somebody's coming tomorrow to pick them up, you'd better go through the pockets" she said; "I expect they'll end up at the Salvation Army, somewhere like that, unless he's a jobber," and I realised I'd never thought about it at all, all the things to be looked after after somebody died.

Faint trace of mothballs as I opened the wardrobe door, the camphor overlaying the *Muguet des Bois* from Mum's clothes on the right, Dad's clothes tucked away in the dimness on the left. Laying them on the bed one by one I went through his suits, the scent of stale cigarette smoke getting more and more noticeable as I reached further into the wardrobe, at the very back a baggy double-breasted suit, old stains here and there. As I reached it out a faint puff of dust from the shoulders and lapels, my finger-marks as I took it, he must've worn it for gardening but goodness only knows when, and there in the inside jacket pocket, it was the only thing I found in all those clothes except for a clean hankie, a cheque. The best part of thirteen years old, fountain-pen in slightly fading washable-blue ink, Barclay's Bank in Alcester, made out in December 1941 by Uncle Tom, paying Dad four hundred pounds. He'd never cashed it. A huge sum of money, more than enough in 1954 to live on for a year, and live on quite comfortably, almost exactly twice as much as I had to live on that year at University, and my two-hundred-and-fifteen quid had to pay for everything, food, clothing, lodging, bus fares, all those books, the lot. In 1941 it must've been worth the devil of a lot more, and I just looked at that cheque for a moment or two, and I wondered what Uncle Tom had thought about that, whether he'd said anything to Dad. I tore it up and stuffed it into my pocket. I didn't tell Mum, I didn't dare, she'd've been so upset, I never told her, there was no point, and I never told anyone till now, not even Our Kid, yet there's a small corner in me somewhere that wishes I'd hung onto it, a memento of difficulties. But I didn't want Mum to *know* what she'd suspected, how

much Dad must've put into the farm and into Uncle Tom's pocket over the years. If that cheque is anything to go by he must have spent quite a bit on the farm every year. I'm pretty sure it never actually brought any money in, precious little anyway at the best of times, I suppose it was a more-or-less unacknowledged bone of contention between them, though of course they never breathed a word of their disagreements to us. Dad's near-obsession with the farm and farming was, they must have agreed without ever much discussing it, a necessary vice, needed because the farm kept him sane.

Not that Phil and I thought *that,* we never really gave any thought to Dad's job, managing a Woolworth's store was simply what he did, leaving the house at half-past seven six days a week, during the War going off on his bike, coming home for dinner at twelve-thirty on the dot except at Rugby when the store was too far away, getting back to the store within the hour, coming home again at night after dark, nearly always too late for the six-o'clock news. *Mustn't set a bad example for the girls!* meaning the girls behind the counters, about twenty-five of them altogether, *if I'm not punctual I can hardly expect them to be on time.* It wouldn't be fair to dock their pay or even sack them for doing what he did. On Mondays especially what with it being wash-day Mum really had to scamper to make sure that dinner was on the table when he came through the door, the potatoes and greens nice and hot to go with the cold meat leftover from yesterday, the custard keeping warm on the cooker along with the pudding for afters, dinner invariably a proper sit-down meal, a brief domestic break in the middle of the working day, sacrosanct. "Martha Spriggs," he'd tell Mum, "the girl at the confectionery counter," and Mum would say "Oh yes, the pretty one with curls, she looks so very young." "She told me she's getting married," he said, "when I was doing my rounds. Sweet young thing, shy and proud all at the same time when she told me. Excited. He wants to be a baker when he gets out of the Forces," and they'd quietly worry together about people not getting back from the War, how young they were, "They'd better get married while they can," Mum said, and Dad "They're going to live with her parents." They'd think about the difficult times young people had nowadays what with the housing shortage and Air Raids, impermanence and change. Nothing said about what Dad would have to do to make sure Martha got a bit of time off for her honeymoon. Mum would retail her news and gossip to accompany his, how sudden rain ruined copies

of *Picture Post* at the newsagent's when the wind tore the old canvas awning or how Mr Jones's bike has been stolen, how terrible that is when he needs it to get to work. Difficult times we live in, how people need to help each other. The only time he ever talked shop in front of us at the dinner table was the day he said to Mum as soon as he got through the door "I had to give Gladys Potter a week's notice this morning," really down in the mouth, Mum saying "Oh Leo, what will she do, her mother sick the way she is and the other children still at school?" Dad saying how he'd had to talk to her over and over about not doing her job properly and how much theft there'd been from her counter, her giggling away and gossiping instead of looking after her till. "She's just not responsible," he said, worrying about his job as much as about Gladys; "I can't carry that dead weight, we can't afford it."

That deep-seated midday routine would be severely disrupted by Mr Porteus on his annual Inspection of the store. It was a big event not only because he was Dad's Superintendent but because he always expected to be brought to the house for dinner and given a good home-cooked meal, even in the War, and Mum'd spend the weekend cleaning all the windows and vacuuming, Dad'd polish the cutlery and dining-room furniture, the whole house spick-and-span for the Visit, no difficulty getting Phil and me to be on our best behaviour as we sat at dinner in awe of this important and powerful man, immaculate in his scrubbed face and fine suit, everyone ill at ease. Mr Porteus's Inspection would last two or even three days, thank goodness he only came for dinner just the once, and with Mr Porteus ensconced in the small office at the back of the store going over every scrap of paper in the accounts, examining all the stock records and movement, checking the payroll and quizzing the staff, Dad always got home late having to catch up on all the ordinary business of managing the store after Mr Porteus'd gone back to his hotel. Mum'd always ask how it'd gone and Dad'd always say "I think it was alright" but he really couldn't tell, Mr Porteus never opening his mouth except to ask a question, never even hinting how satisfactory or how disappointing anything was. When he'd finished Porteus might say he'd be sending his report to Head Office at the end of the week, and he might say there's nothing to worry about, but that didn't mean much, Mum and Dad worried anyway. Phil and me had no idea at all, except once, on the run-up to Christmas at Lichfield, Dad came home all grumpy, he'd been rebuked

because he'd put together a paper cut-out toy fort, he'd taken it out of stock, spent a whole Sunday afternoon enjoying himself carefully trimming and pasting, and put it on display in the window. He'd been pleased with himself, and he sold all one hundred of them in no time. "I wasn't supposed to do that," he told Mum, "It wasn't what they wanted, I was supposed just to display some boxes in the window. Too many people would be disappointed." Long after Dad was dead Mum told me that he would talk at such times about the rumours circulating among store managers, how some Superintendents lied, telling managers one thing and Head Office something else, that the manager of such-and-such store didn't discover he'd got a bad report until he got moved at the end of the year or even lost his job.

The hardest time of the year, Mr Porteus or not, was right after the Christmas holidays, four hard days of stock-taking, going to work early and coming home after midnight, finding out how much the total shrinkage for the year was on projected sales and profits, and getting from that a pretty good idea of how much he'd actually earned that year. Once we reached our early teens they'd talk a bit about it in front of us, perhaps over dinner before Dad went back to work, him relieved that it looks as though the shrinkage might be within the permitted range, and sales for the year probably enough to cover what he'd been drawing every month against his salary. If there was anything left over, and there always was, he'd get it in January, which was when he'd give Mum her allowance for the year. I don't know how much that was, but she had to carry all the household expenses out of that, pay for her clothes and stuff as well as ours, and every now and again when we were home for the holidays we'd hear Dad ask her how she was doing, did she need more. Not that she could necessarily have any more, since Dad didn't know what his salary would be until next January. Naturally, he had a pretty good idea, he was so careful, and it's not as though there wasn't enough to live on, we were actually quite comfortably off. But they both watched their pennies. If sales were low and shrinkage was too high then he'd be posted to another store, the dread of that wasn't just the expense of the move, sell the house, have to buy another, in a strange town, settle in, but that he might get moved to one of the notorious stores like the one in the Bull Ring in Birmingham, Dad said no manager lasted more than two years there, there was so much theft, if you got moved there it was because they wanted to get rid of you, he'd heard that in some stores the manager

had ended up owing the company money because they'd drawn more than sales justified. So Mum and Dad both had to be careful, and I know she sometimes had a bit of a hard time making ends meet. I don't know that Dad ever told her how much he'd actually earned, he looked after the money, that's what the head of the household was supposed to do, Mum carefully totting up the bill every week in the grocery book, Dad writing the cheques for coal and electricity and gas, things like that, and of course the car, and the mortgage, and Phil's and my school fees. Certainly he wouldn't have told Mum about that cheque I found. I'm a bit surprised he hid it instead of destroying it, but he'd think all that was none of her business, it was an aide-memoire I suppose, and it's not surprising that she was uneasy about the farm, money that went into the farm didn't go into the household, but she understood Dad's psychic need for it.

She didn't like Uncle Tom very much, found him too much of a know-it-all I suspect, nor Aunt Dot and Brenda. They weren't really relatives, we just called them that. They looked down their noses a bit at us, we weren't really farmers, Mum certainly wasn't. She told me that Dad bought the big old black-oak bureau because of Uncle Tom, it's a drop-leaf desk with three big drawers, it's sitting across the room from me here in Vancouver, lots of pigeon-holes, a couple of draw-supports for the drop-leaf so you don't break the hinges when you open it, bits of plank really with a knob on the end, set in slots each side of the top drawer, you just slide them out. She didn't know how much he paid for it, she said it was quite a lot, Tom found it in an antique shop in Redditch or somewhere round there and took Mum and Dad to see it all excited in his quiet way, a quiet sort of gleeful look of someone who's got a secret, and he pulled out the one on the right and said *Look at this!*, some child it looks like had written on it with a broad steel nib a long time ago practicing his copperplate, careful lettering, the nib scratching a bit into the wood the black ink soaking in. "William Wesla . . ll" it says, bits so faded you can't read them, and a couple of dozen goes at a script letter a in the same ink, on the other side of this bit of plank some pale faded illegible scratches made with a pen, and a few pencil marks. And then he walked round and pulled the left-hand support out, "Look at this! Who'd have thought it?" he'd said, a bit like the way Dad showed us Lichfield cathedral when we moved there in 1949 by leading us round the worst end first, saving the best till last, all that statuary covering

the west front such an extravagant shock, to please us with the town where we were going to live and make us proud. *Isn't that something!* Tom said, and pointed, and there, burned with a poker on the left plank as you pulled it out, etched in the wood, PQUARTERMAN all in capitals the lettering cramped and awkward pale browny grey. But it wasn't long after Dad bought it, four or five years, that the letters began to fade completely, you can hardly read them at all now just faint unevenness in the wood , ash-grey. Mum was convinced Tom had burned them there himself. "He was in league with that shop-keeper" she said, and I think she was probably right. That black-oak looks a lot like pine or fir to me, softwood anyhow. But Dad when he came back from the War in 1919 grew to love antiques and bought what he could, a painting or two and some etchings, that bureau, a pair of solid silver carving-rests one a bull the other a monkey. He had a couple of books on old furniture and one on old porcelain, a lovely black-oak grandfather clock which Our Kid's got, it really is oak, "vse time well" it says on a frieze, palm-tree pattern carved on each side of the motto, and "1716" arranged in a diamond the "17" vertical the "16" horizontal. A friend of Our Kid's who knows quite a bit about antiques says the clock's a fake made some time in the 1870s, the palm-tree pattern's a dead giveaway, "an antique fake-antique" Our Kid said on the phone, the carved relief on the case door actually mouldings. He found that out when some of them fell off, he glued them back on. "It looks alright," he said, "still keeps time," and we both love that clock with its slightly tinny westminster chimes. It's not anything Dad's parents would have cared about at all so far as I can see, any more than they cared for a collection of assegais and moth-eaten buffalo-hide shields from the Boer War that Dad picked up, "in some junk-shop" Mum said, "Rubbish," but I think he wanted things that had lasted or had a bit of history, there was some sort of stability about them perhaps, a continuity. I wasn't half pleased when I read *King Solomon's Mines* to know that I knew what an assegai looked like, I'd even held one in my hand, its beaten iron tip a bit stained and battered.

I think all that stuff, along with the clock and the bureau, are all of a piece with Dad's utter determination to keep the farm, they're a part of what the War gave him after it took so much away, retrieval of a kind of lost civility. Part of growing up too, I suppose, of becoming more than a simple extension of your parents, moving into a sense of

your own self. When I was staying with Our Kid a couple of years back he said he still had Dad's walking stick, and he pulled it out of Dad's umbrella stand, a heavy oval barrel varnished in dark-oak stain, hardwood, six iron hoops clasping the staves, ornamental studs spaced all round, three hefty dividers splitting the open top into six compartments, pretty useless nowadays. Solid as a rock. I looked for an ebony stick with a scarlet knob above a silver band for the hand and a steel or hard black-iron ferrule for the tip, its hexagonal knob mildly domed, possibly stone but if so I don't know what, its original gloss dimmed a bit with use. But it wasn't there, and we both wished it was. Phil didn't really remember it till I asked, hadn't thought about it, and we both decided as we talked that Dad must've been a bit of a dandy when he struck out on his own after the War, I remembered reading somewhere that the London Rifle Brigade, that's where Dad was, used to be called The Dandies. Phil dug out a snapshot taken in the 1920s

of Dad in his motorbike gear, taken one holiday by his younger brother Gilbert, Mum remembered that bike well with its up-to-date belt-drive – Dad said the belt kept slipping – but she never got a ride on it, and I thought of his hats, his gaiters and spats, his suspenders to keep his socks up and his armbands, his neat moustache and meticulous haircut, he got it trimmed once a week, manliness and gentility drawn mainly, as I look back on it, from books by Rider Haggard, or *Sherlock Holmes* or *Raffles* and stories in *Strand* and *Argosy* or, when he was a child, the *Boy's Own Annual*. And, of course, from his mother and father and from life generally in middle-class Edwardian London, the King a notable dandy himself. I think, too, of the rarely-if-ever-used pipes and pipe-rack hanging on the wall above the bureau, the heavily carved wooden dining chairs with their worn leather seats, a set of eight with an armchair for the head-of-the-table. And of the red velvet chair Our Kid still has. We weren't allowed to sit in that when we were kids, but it was uncomfortable anyway, the velvet much too prickly for anyone wearing shorts or even a frock, this was a man's chair, the seat too

deep for anyone undersized. Phil's son Matthew, showing the chair to his new wife Sue when I was there said he wasn't supposed to sit in it when he was a kid either, nor his sister Liz, and I don't recall anyone actually sitting in it. So I sat in it, and oh my, it's really quite comfortable, though a bit saggy and rickety after all these years. And I wondered just how much of all this stuff Dad had brought to the marriage, much of it rarely if ever used, but iconic, perhaps, affording identity. The pipe rack carved the way the chair was, the Bavarian tankard with a lid that Mum used to keep rose petals in, the fake Swiss cow-bells hanging from a bracket in the hall.

Dad'd been wounded in the War, a chunk of shrapnel had ploughed into the back of his neck, it must have been terribly painful even after they cut it out, a big Y-shaped scar you could have sunk a ha'penny in, soft flesh all folded in, the scar all dark where it folded in on itself, a bit blurry from the short hair where the barber trimmed growing round it. I was fascinated by it. Once, when we were walking along the towpath at Brewood or more likely Wheaton Aston, Our Kid was going to Brewood but I hadn't gone yet so it must've been around 1940, Mum and Dad in front, and Phil and me tagging along side-by-side, I was marching along I was holding a stick out in front of me a bit like a flag like on a parade almost strutting, marching between crowds, it was a bit droopy and had a few leaves on the end I kept looking at Dad's scar I couldn't keep my eyes off it I was feeling all cocky and full of myself, humming away, I wanted to see how close I could get it to Dad without touching him I must have been really daft to think he didn't sense this thing hovering round the back of his neck, Mum and Dad enjoying each other's company talking quietly together but I still remember how chirpy I felt marching along, Our Kid by my side behaving himself just walking along the canal, me being all clever, smiling away to myself, eying distances and angles, the droopy stick all wibbly-wobbly as we walked over the uneven stony towpath. And it suddenly dipped forward just a little bit I flailed it back, a leaf just brushed Dad's neck at the edge of the scar it must've tickled, and Dad wheeled round on me really annoyed, really cross at me, and told me to get rid of that stick and leave him alone, "And don't throw it in the canal!" he really scowled at me, I was shocked, I hadn't done anything really, all I'd done was just touch him a little bit with a little bit of stick with a leaf on it. But he was right, it was that scar I was after. It was a mysterious object, we knew it was in the

War but we didn't dare ask how he'd got it, he never talked about it or even mentioned it, I think now that he was a bit self-conscious about it, a disfigurement, though to me it was just a fascination. Every now and again he'd lift his hand, usually his left, and stroke it a little, gently, cupping the back of his neck in a little brushing motion, a comforting little gesture. It must have bothered him sometimes, ached, it was so deep, but that sort of thing never occurred to me then, that scar was just part of Dad, like his nose or his moustache, it was him really, and its enigmatic quality made him different from other dads, special.

We knew he'd got it somewhere in Flanders, but we never knew where or when, except it was in 1917. Mum told us that, Dad wouldn't say anything or just changed the subject if we asked him when were you wounded. Mum said, but Dad wasn't in the room, it was a chunk of British shrapnel. I had a hard time with that, *how could you shell your own troops?* but we didn't talk about it at all, Phil and I never talked it over even lying in bed when we shared the same room, goodness knows we talked about everything else *Time you boys were asleep!* A book of war memoirs I read long after the second War was over described a creeping shrapnel barrage bursting on top of the mist, the flash going in front of you as you advanced, it had to be really accurate, you could advance nice and quick, the flash telling you where you were, and it was easy to go too fast, right into the barrage and through it. I can imagine that, clammy and hasty in your fear wanting to get it over with, getting wounded and even killed by your own side, and perhaps something like that had happened to Dad, everybody in a panicky hurry-up urging each other on to get the enemy, things looming through the mist at you as you stumbled over broken ground, or slogging through the mud, treading on god knows what as things loom through the mist. But I couldn't imagine Dad himself doing that, still can't, it's just a generalised sort of picture a bit like what you'd see in a film, distanced, something you know you've dreamed up.

Our Kid and I didn't have the remotest idea at all of what it was like, we couldn't possibly conceive the terrible thick mud, the rats and flies, the stink, the endless noise. I don't think we even tried. A grainy photo or two of shell craters and leafless fractured trees was all we'd

seen, and if I thought about that scar on Dad's neck at all it called forth a vague picture of him all bandaged up in a nice clean hospital bed somewhere, being looked after. Certainly Phil and I hadn't the least glimmering of what he'd been through in a landscape so ruinous that one night in October 1917 it took four strong men working hard for six hours in the dark to move a wounded Rifleman only to find, when day broke and enemy sniping forced them to take cover, that in all that time they'd only moved him fifty yards. That'd happened in Dad's regiment, but nobody ever talked about that sort of thing happening, that'd be boasting or making a fuss, drawing attention to yourself. Other people had done much more difficult things, had much more terrible wounds.

So Dad's life in the Army was a closed subject, like everybody else who was there he kept it to himself, never said a word even to Mum so far as we could tell, women had to be protected from that side of life, though of course he must have told her something, it was nothing to be ashamed of. I think he felt the way Clifford Halliday did, an Old Soldier from the First World War, 104 years old, interviewed in the Toronto *Globe and Mail* a while ago, he wouldn't talk about the War at all. "When I came back," he said, "I just blanked it out of my mind. I didn't want to relive it." The world of the trenches must have been so remote from the world we lived in now, Dad managing a store, us away at School, that even in the Blitz it didn't bear thinking of. In any case you wouldn't intrude your private thoughts and feelings on others. "The personal is *personal*," he'd say, " *private*. Nobody else's business." Talking in bed at night in the dormitory nobody ever talked about his mum and dad, if somebody lay awake worrying about his dad getting wounded or taken prisoner or something he wouldn't say anything, whatever happened you mustn't feel sorry for yourself, everybody had a relative somewhere in the War even if it was only somebody like Uncle Edward, off in a safe place like South Africa in the Air Force, and if a kid suddenly disappeared from School for a day or two or even a week or more nobody ever said anything more than "He had to go home," and you didn't dare ask. You might find out later from one of his friends that his house had been destroyed, with his Mum in it, in an Air Raid or that his brother in the Navy had been killed, or his dad, but you couldn't go up to him and talk about that after he came back, what on earth could you say? You couldn't talk about things like that, and nobody ever talked about what it

had really been like in the trenches in the First world War or even anywhere else, somehow it didn't have anything to do with where you were now or what you were doing, and it wasn't the sort of thing you could ask. If you did people just said something vague and changed the subject, personal things that happened in the War weren't the sort of thing you told the children, especially not just out of the blue. How could anything anyone actually said tell you what anything was really like anyway, even nowadays in North Africa or at Dunkirk? There weren't any details about that sort of thing in the *Picture Post* or the newsreels so you didn't really think about what it felt like, those maps in the paper with black and white arrows and lots of dotted lines showing where the Army advanced or retreated were as close as we got to any real battle, names of places you'd never heard of till now. And if it wasn't your business why would you want to know anyway?

Dad was quietly proud of having been in the London Rifle Brigade, he didn't boast about it, but every November he'd carefully press his green-and-black LRB tie, dig out his medals and clean them up to wear in the Armistice Day Parade, big expensive poppy on his lapel, he insisted that Phil and me get one, *lest we forget*, he said. Not like his of course, we had to pay for it ourselves, but we didn't need to be told. You couldn't not buy a poppy for Poppy Day any more than you couldn't not buy a lifeboat flag on Lifeboat Day, for a while Mum got to run the Lifeboat Day collections when we lived in Lichfield, scrambling to find people to put in an hour or two in the market place or near the bus station, she'd stand outside Boots the chemists on High Street smiling away at people she didn't know, tray round her neck and rattling her money tin, the girls at Boots or even the manager now and again coming out to chat a bit. Every Armistice Day Dad'd go down to the Legion for a drink or two after, talk to other Old Soldiers, spend the afternoon in his armchair by the fire if he didn't have to go back to work, he wouldn't do any gardening Armistice Day and he didn't read anything he just sat there after he'd put his medals away till next year, *We will remember them*. Sometimes he'd fall asleep.

After he died I never saw those medals again nor did Our Kid, I think when Mum moved to Worthing at the end of the fifties they went to some jobber along with a lot of the stuff in that big Lichfield house, simplifying her life, but she still kept his big elaborate discharge certificate, Phil's got it now, a drawing in the bottom right-hand

corner of a stone tablet like the ones you see on the wall in Church, a mix of careful handwriting and calligraphic type, saying "No: 302308 Rfn Clifford Philip Quartermain of the 5th London Regiment" – Mum called him *Leo* he hated the name Clifford which is what Grandmother and Grandfather always called him – "served with honour and was disabled in the Great War. Honourably discharged on 22.5.18." The first time I ever laid eyes on that piece of paper was when I went through Mum's papers after she died in 1994, I didn't even know it existed. She had it carefully tucked away in an old chest that used to belong to her great grandmother, she once told me it dated from the seventeenth century but it doesn't. It's where she kept all her private stuff, spiritualist bits and pieces from White Eagle Lodge, bits of writing she did for a course she took in her eighties, things to do with Dad. Our Kid and I had always thought he'd at least been a Lance-Corporal or a Corporal because that's what he was when he joined the Home Guard in 1940, but the London Rifle Brigade was different from everyone else in the Army, they didn't have Lance-Corporals they called them Acting Corporals, just as they didn't call the men Privates but Riflemen. With their special vocabulary and their great reputation as sharp-shooters and skill at rapid rifle fire the LRB distinguished itself from other regiments, gave Dad a special knowledge which let him hold his head up among other men without ever saying anything, secret except to the initiate.

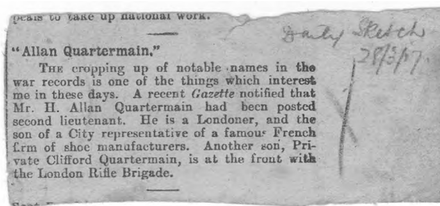
Even so we got the odd clues to his Army life if we stopped to think about it. Like the way he hated flies, especially bluebottles, he'd get really disturbed, genuinely cross if one was in the room, chase it down, try to kill it, it was years before I read about the bloated and torpid flies in the dugouts, sometimes asleep on beams or in bits of sacking, flopping down your neck as you brushed by or banged your head, that world of glutted rats. No wonder he was so fastidious. Even on the farm he couldn't stand to see dirt tracked into the house, *Clean yourself up before you come in!* he'd rebuke, if you didn't you'd better watch out. And he always followed Bisley in the news, he always commented on who'd won what, expected us to pay attention, follow the details. The Rifle Brigade walked off year after year with trophy after trophy as best shots in the Army, and when we lived in Rugby he bought an air rifle so Our Kid and me could learn to shoot. Knowing how to handle guns was an essential part of growing up, just like the art of self-defence, he'd given the two of us boxing gloves that

Christmas but we neither of us used them, we didn't want to learn how to box properly. No matter how often he told us *Keep your guard up!* or *Use your left!* and that if you knew even the least little bit how to box you'd easily beat someone just flailing away no matter how big they were, *All you need is a good right hook*. It made no odds to us. Why would you want to get hurt, why would you fight somebody just for something to do? We didn't understand that, we didn't have Boxing at School the way the stories said in the *Boys' Own Paper*, not many schools did, it just wasn't part of a gentleman's education any more. He must've thought we were a bit sissy, but he never said he was disappointed, didn't tell us how to run our lives so long as we were truthful, just quietly let it drop.

When I was getting ready to leave School around 1951 or 52 and began worrying a bit about doing my two years' conscription, I wanted to do it in the Navy but knew I'd probably have to settle for the Army, he really surprised me when he said if I ever thought I was going to get into a serious fight *And you will get into one, you know,* I should put a roll of coins in my fist, "Get them from the bank," he said, "ahead of time; keep them in your pocket. Ha'pennies 're best, they're good and heavy, fit nicely in your fist, get a bob's worth." When I asked he said "Of course they hurt your hand, but it's better than getting beaten up." He learned that in the Army, he said, just as he learned that if you get drunk on brandy "Don't drink any water as soon as you wake up or you'll feel drunk all over again, terrible." Those two bits of advice were the only things he ever deliberately let slip about his Army life, all Phil and I really knew was that he'd been wounded and that he'd been in hospital, but we didn't know where or when, he never even mentioned his wound, never referred to it, but the scar looked so terrible that we knew he must've been in hospital for a very long time, he had a War Disability Pension that kicked in, 23 May 1920, two years almost to the day after he was discharged, he had to wait longer than that, nearly three years, for it to be officially confirmed on May Day, 1923. So we both had the idea he'd been in hospital for ages, why else would he've had to wait so long for his pension? For a while I wondered if he'd been wounded at Vimy in 1917. People still talked about what a great victory that was, but when they said how terrific the Canadians had been, it was them that won that battle, I knew Dad couldn't've been there. I wanted him to have been wounded somewhere heroic, and once, when he was sorting

through some old envelopes and stuff for our stamp collections, he gave me a picture postcard of the Avenue de la Victoire, the Verdun War Memorial, Marlow Grandfather had sent him in 1937 from France, he was there on business, he'd been to see it, and I wondered *Was he wounded at Verdun?* I've still got that card, I came across it again when I started writing this, I remembered *ils ne passeront pas* that great French victory holding the line in 1916, Dad could've been there I suppose, he was old enough, but the Memorial at Verdun is a French National Shrine, nothing to do with the English, so it's very unlikely. Grandfather's card doesn't really tell me anything at all, and when I wrote to the Public Record Office at Kew I found out that most of the war records for non-commissioned officers and other ranks, including Dad's, had been destroyed in a German Air Raid in 1940.

The gap in Dad's life, his silence, remained a mystery. What did the war do to him? Where was he wounded? How much was he in the trenches? What did he do? Masses of grunt work, that's obvious, and a lot of hurry up and wait, half freezing in half-filled icy trenches. Phil said Dad once told him, almost the only time he ever said anything to him about the War, that he'd lied about his age so he could get in. "So he must have been in the army pretty well from the very beginning. He must have joined up in 1914," and that seemed quite possible, he'd've been almost 17 that October. I've got a studio portrait photograph of Uncle Allan, Dad's older brother, it was in the bottom of a battered old portable desk along with a scrap of newspaper, once-lovely Victorian walnut veneer bound in brass, it used to be Dad's, one of his antiques, Uncle Allan in his brand new uniform, officer's peaked cap but no insignia, with a note on the back in Grandmother's handwriting, "H. Allan Quartermain (19 yrs 4 mths) joined 2nd City of London Royal Fusiliers, August 1914." It struck Our Kid and me that with his elder brother's example before him Dad simply joined up as soon as he could, but he never overcame his reticence. If he'd lived until I was a grown man I suppose I might have been able to ask him straight out, man to man, over a drink perhaps, what he did in the War and where and when he got wounded, ask if his old wound bothered him, things like that.



peals to take up national work.

"Allan Quartermain."

THE cropping up of notable names in the war records is one of the things which interest me in these days. A recent *Gazette* notified that Mr. H. Allan Quartermain had been posted second lieutenant. He is a Londoner, and the son of a City representative of a famous French firm of shoe manufacturers. Another son, Private Clifford Quartermain, is at the front with the London Rifle Brigade.

Daily Sketch 28/5/17

Then Our Kid found a bit of paper in Mum's old bureau, *Army Form B. 2067*, "Character Certification," dated 22nd May 1918, on the back it says he joined up on 13 December 1915 so he was 18 after all when he joined up, and he didn't get to the Ypres salient on the Western Front till 24 January 1917 in the build-up to Passchendaele, and he spent over a year in England, probably training new recruits, and got sent home on the 28th of September. With a lot of help from retired Colonel J. H. McCausland at the Royal Green Jackets Museum in Winchester I realised Dad was most likely wounded about 1500 yards from St. Julien in an attack on a farm the British called Von Tirpitz, zero hour was twenty-to-six in the morning on the 20th of September, heavy mud, and three or four hours later when the battle was to all intents and purposes over, fifty percent casualties, all officers killed, it turned out that Von Tirpitz Farm was not only a German stronghold but a medical post. It's funny that Dad never even hinted he'd been treated by captured German doctors before being carried through the mud to a casualty clearing station, he must've known it was Germans who'd saved his life, and he had to wait eight days before he got back to England. You didn't get discharged from the Army till you got out of hospital, so it turns out he was in hospital for only about eight months instead of the years we thought, though goodness knows that's long enough. Phil and I both knew, it was a sort of family legend, that the week before he got out of hospital, the Doctor asked Dad what he was going to do now he was getting back into the world outside, and he said "I'm going to buy a farm." He'd saved all his pay through the War or at least – and that's more likely – since he'd been wounded. "I'm going to be a farmer," and the Doctor said "No you're not. It'll be the death of you within a month. You probably shouldn't have a job at all, but you certainly can't do anything as strenuous as that. You'll probably be alright in an office or somewhere quiet, but you've got to be very careful for the rest of your life." The mind boggles that nobody said anything until he was almost out of hospital, but Mum or whoever it was told me this said Yes, that's what they did in those days, but he went back to live with his mother and father at 52 Lowlands Road, Harrow, a nice suburban house named "Rycot."

And what sort of life was it for him, coming home at last, living with his mum and dad and his two younger brothers Geoffrey and Gilbert, how could he settle down, that painful aftermath of war

on the back of his neck, what was it like, walking down the road in Harrow the War still going on, him invalided out, no other young men anywhere that he might see. Did he feel lucky, I wonder, or did he, like Siegfried Sassoon after the War, see corpses wherever he went in London, lying about on the pavement, dimming the sunlight and muffling the traffic. *What shall we be*, the soldiers sang, *when we aren't what we are?* How could he tell Grandfather and Grandmother that, or anything like it. Dad was 21 in October 1918, five months out of hospital the war not yet over, and he'd probably never been alone, all by himself, never had any privacy at all from when he'd joined up three years ago, and after convalescence he wouldn't've had much choice but to take up his old life where it left off, a clerk, Our Kid says, in the Admiralty earning five bob a week, in the Army he'd got a shilling a day. Did he just accept it all as something you can't help, or did he think it was all wrong, the waste, the blood, the quiet surface of the London streets. How could he take up his French lessons again, or music or drawing, the polite accomplishments of conventional middle-class suburban life, posh Harrow School just down the road, his mind trying to get over all that death and loss, split masonry and flame-lap, ruined walls, broken bodies, friends and comrades he could never see again? What did he dream, no doubt fighting terrible headaches? What could he talk about at home?

"Steady the Buffs!" Grandfather used to say to settle things down whenever anything ruffled the smoothness of the day, like somebody nearly dropping something as they picked it up or stumbling on the edge of the carpet, anything like that. Our Kid and I'd pay no attention or maybe grin a bit to each other, the old man's empty reflex, but without fail Dad's face would instantly freeze for a moment, expressionless, his whole body immobile, his breath suddenly quiet, his gestures stalled. Phil and I simply didn't know what to make of that catchphrase until I came across it in a story by Rudyard Kipling, but even then I didn't understand that The Buffs was the Royal East Kent Regiment, Dad would've known soldiers there, The Buffs had been alongside the LRB in all sorts of battles in the run-up to Passchendaele, Grandfather unconsciously stirring up the grim realities of Flanders every time he said it. After the war one soldier from the Rifle Brigade said that in a way he'd lived his whole life between the ages of 19 and 23, "everything that happened after that was almost anti-climax."

In September 1919, sixteen months after he got out of hospital, Dad bought a Stanley Gibbons Simplex Blank Album for his stamp collection, taking up a constant from his life before the war, that album quite expensive with its little metal clasp inside the back cover to support the heavy pages. He'd already got one, he'd got it in January 1913 when he was fifteen, perhaps when he'd started work if it wasn't a Christmas present, it would've cost twelve-and-sixpence in 1914, more than a fortnight's wages, and it strikes me now, writing this, that his stamp collection must have afforded an island of cohesion and coherence, him poring over his Stanley Gibbons catalogue identifying and sorting the stamps, getting them into some sort of order, a page of Australian stamps, light notes done with a hard pencil, "Wmk Type 2" in the left margin. If you gently lift the bottom of the stamp a little you can see where he's written the perforation ("11½ - 12"), and the date of issue ("1914-15") on the flap of the hinge holding it to the page, and below that the catalogue value, anything from ha'penny to a shilling; he worked it so that all you saw, if you looked at the main body of the page, was just the stamps themselves, the important information tucked away out of sight. Sometimes he'd write down the catalogue number as well, mostly when it's hard to figure out, *how shiny is that shiny paper? how slaty is that grey?* I see him sitting at a table reaching for the black watermark-tray and benzene-dropper, tweezers and perforation gauge and magnifying glass close by, picking up his pencil, leafing slowly through the long illustrated lists of the stamp catalogue, looking at other stamps from the same issue, rubbing his face, perhaps sitting a long time without moving, or asking his father or his younger brothers Geoffrey and Gilbert what they thought, quiet moments of intense concentration affording some relief from that Other you have in the last three years and more become, a stranger to your family and to yourself, working away at the uncertain provenance of that small scrap of paper until its unstable identity settles, the decision no doubt a small step back towards who you are or think you used to be. But what would he have thought as he neatly pencilled "Pf 14 wmk lozenge" at the edge of the page, alongside that 1905 re-issue of a German stamp, 2-marks, blue, with its mythological tableau? Did he know it was a much-reprinted propaganda stamp celebrating Bismarck's unification of North and South Germany in 1871, its caption *Be One, One, One!* a rallying cry for unity, an allegorical call to arms? Neatly arranging row after row of carefully

identified German stamps, picture after picture of Germania, symbol of Imperial Germany. Dulling the memory perhaps, removing its bite, restoring an older perspective to his view of his ex-enemy as well as of himself.

Some time in the 1920s Dad put up what money he'd saved plus what must've been nigh on £125, almost three years' back-pay at sixteen bob a week, the pension he'd at last been awarded on Mayday 1923, to put Uncle Tom in a farm, Mum called him a Bailiff and talked about him as a Manager rather than a Partner, somewhere in Worcestershire, not far from Redditch, south of Birmingham, and when I was about three moved to a farm a bit further off from Birmingham, just outside Alcester, eight miles from Stratford-on-Avon, a lovely big square Georgian farmhouse you could see from the Stratford Road at the top of a rise, a hundred acres, arable mainly but good land, enough pasture for a couple of dozen cows, a few pigs, poultry, and an orchard, a river along the bottom edge that you could swim in. Great big housing estate now, the farmhouse turned into flats. Some time in the 1940s, after the War, Uncle Tom began to specialise in poultry, incubators everywhere, tiny little yellow chicks running about and cheeping underfoot, but not in the War, not any incubators anyway, and sometimes we'd get to the farm and be told a lot of chicks had died it'd been so cold. We spent a lot of wartime summers bringing in the cows or bringing in the harvest, wheat, oats, and barley, what we all thought of as corn, always some beans stuck in there with the barley, black and brittle when we brought it in. We wouldn't be there for haymaking, but now and again in the spring we'd spend the weekend hoeing beets or turnips or tending some sort of fodder.

Dad couldn't wait to get to the farm, with its ducks in the duck pond, and geese. Great big cart-horses to do the ploughing and harvesting in the War; farm cats to keep down the rats and mice in the barns where the feed was. *Leave 'em alone! They're not pets!* they didn't even have names, most of them. Disaster when an epidemic of cat 'flu killed most of them off, later on you'd occasionally come across a raggedy scrappy mess of fur and bones in some corner where it'd crawled off to die, then you'd have to take it away and bury it

somewhere. Hayricks and cornstacks dotted about the farmyard, thatched, wheat and oats waiting for the threshing machine to come round and the big traction engine to run it. Paraffin lamps and candles flickering your way to bed up the stairs, open the door to another flight of stairs, perishing cold once you left the kitchen area, blow the candle out when you got there. You didn't have any matches so if it went out on the way you'd have to grope and grope in the dark, easy to lose your way with the blackout over all the windows, quiet voices in conversation perhaps a muffled laugh or two drifting up behind you fainter and fainter as you got higher, or a door closing. Pour cold water into the basin on the wash stand but leave half of it in the china jug so big I could hardly lift it, in the winter have a shivery wash, clean your teeth, empty the lot into the slop bucket. Some mornings that would have a thin crust of ice, you'd have to empty it downstairs along with the chamber pot if you'd used it, taking it outside. Me and Our Kid huddled under the blankets till Aunt Dot or sometimes cousin Brenda clattered in, seven-thirty in the morning, and pulled the covers off. "Come on, look alive! You'll warm up once you get moving! and don't forget to empty everything now you're up. Breakfast's getting cold!" Everybody else would've been up for hours, the cows milked, the horses fed, and it was still dark, but no Woolworth's to get to, no shop-girls or shrinkage to worry about, no Superintendent Porteus. And no school.

If you opened the gate to the farmyard at the right time of day the cows would walk in without being told, but there was a dog to remind them, and now and again I'd be sent out to fetch them in, Our Kid busy with something else, not that the cows noticed and as it got towards milking time they were coming in on their own anyway. If it was raining I'd put my mac and wellygogs on, stick an old sou'-wester that was kept in the mud porch on my head, and the dog'd find me, it knew what to do and it didn't need me at all except to open the gate for it and for the cows when we were coming back, now and again I'd have to chase down a cow that'd strayed off from the rest, but most times they all just mooched along, I'd tell myself they'd be glad to get to the nice and dry cowsheds but it was obvious really that they didn't look ahead like that at all, they were just doing what cows do, which was nothing much. Marching off through the fields by myself was fun, just the dog for company, sometimes I'd have a stick to behead a thistle or swish at the grass or the cows, but I soon learned

that when you hit a thistle or anything else tall with a stick in the rain the water'd shoot up and scatter all over the place, hit you in the face and make you jump. The shock of cold made me turn it into a game, pirates or prisoners fighting back *Don't let him land a blow!* But what I liked about it was that it was always so quiet, nobody else there, just your boots swishing in the grass, and your mac rubbing on your legs, the scrape of the brim of the sou'-wester catching on the back of your collar when you turned your head, but you were in charge of those sounds even if a trickle of cold water did now and again somehow get down the back of your neck when you shrugged or moved your arm too fast, your hands cold and wet, it was all what *you* did made it happen, you could hear yourself think, the cows jostling and mumbling perhaps a bit of cud in the background the soft brushing clap of an udder against a leg as you all walked along. When you got back with the cows scrambling round the open gate as you let them in the barnyard you felt you'd done something, they were so much bigger than you were and they did what you told them to. Well, of course, they didn't really, they just went there because that was what they did that time of day, if you started out late they'd all be clustered round the gate anyway except for the odd stray, but it was you that helped it happen, the deep familiarity of routine, lovely smell of field and grass flavoured with mild acridity from cowpats, sweet and sharp pungency and fresh breeze.