

ONE

Fit For Heroes

Jack got back in '47 and moved into the front bedroom where his mother had died three years before. He took down the curtains and kept the light off so that he could watch from the window at night, unnoticed. Mostly, he stood there until two or three o'clock; if he slept, he slouched in an old easy chair that he had brought from the box room. Always, he stayed in his khaki trousers with their braces down and his sleeveless white vest.

Neighbours got used to seeing his lanky figure, in these last weeks of his life, dawdling along Goodladies Road and wasting time at street corners. Although he spent some of his mornings in Mrs Shipley's tearoom, he tried to avoid other shops; he said they felt strange. His old local had been boarded up in 1941 when a shell shifted the pub's foundations and destroyed the Christian Reading Rooms. Now, the Hoboken Arms was flaking and crumbling and coming adrift. Moss and tufts of grass grew in the window ledges, and three great timber buttresses shored up the walls. These were so heavy that they straddled the pavement and encroached onto the road. Lovers called them the Hoboken Arches. Someone had daubed 'This Place Is Out of Order' on the wooden shutters and everyone knew that the scallywag wasn't talking only about the pub.

The street corner, where Jack and the other young men used to gather and tell lies about the girls, was unrecognisable. The green bottle shop was burnt out and the pull-up for buses and lorries had been fenced off. Weeds grew on the hardcore. One of his school friends was trying to make a go of a motorcycle business in the wreck of a workshop on the site. An iron sign above the double doors said 'Springsmith and Car Painter' in elaborate letters. That wasn't his

trade but he had stolen the sign and had to make do. Jack spent hours in there, drinking tea and watching the mechanic work.

Once, Martha Shipley caught him muttering to himself as he kicked a knob of old flint along the cinder towpath of the town's canal. "He looked proper white," she reported.

"The lad's all right," insisted Mr Tupner, the Dirty Verger.

But everyone else thought that Jack had a queer look about him.

He wasn't the only out-of-place man from the army. There were other demobs who spent their days on the streets and tried not to sleep at night. They stood with their hands in their pockets and their shoulders sloping. Some told jokes. Others moaned or answered 'don't know' to anything that was said. They bet paltry amounts with bookies runners – tuppences and tanners – and listened to the laughter that went on behind pub windows and doors, knowing they would never be part of it. Every so often, one of the idlers would capture their sense of the world in a phrase, no more than four or five words, and the others would take comfort from the shared understanding. Just for a moment, they had something worth keeping. No-one asked the men to move on. Policemen, traders, shoppers and families accepted that these clumps on the corners were part of 'the boys coming home'. It had been worse after the first war, the older ones said. Some of the women, in their aprons and pinnies, brought pots of tea out to the pavements. Other people dropped generous cigarette ends. But Jack didn't see any begging. Oh, he heard talk of work. 'I'll go back on the lorries,' a chap might say. 'The life on the road suited me before I joined up and it'll do me again.' Or, 'Old Hank says he can get me into the dockyard. Set for life, you are, once you're in there.' But it was only talk. Occasionally, one went missing and the others got worried. 'Do you think he's done himself in? More and more people are doing it.' But that had never happened in Jack's circle, nor was it likely to. And even when the others learned that the lucky one had found a job and a proper place to rent, there was no celebration. These things always end in tears, they said. The war had demanded so much from some people. For men like Jack, peace was the last straw.

Twelve doors up from the pub, the terrace of houses was broken by a red brick archway at the entrance to a side alley. The bricks at

the top of the archway were black because, before the war, a hot chestnut man used to stand here and the smoke from his brazier had scorched the roof. Now, the alley was less scrumptious; it was on the way home from the Flying Horse and many men and one or two women used it as a toilet. Jack could smell the old urine as he walked down the slabs, his hands in his pockets, his lean shoulders hunched so that his narrow head sat low in the middle of them.

Half way down, a back door gave way as soon as Jack touched its Bakelite handle. He stepped into a little room, hardly more than twelve feet by twelve, which was set out like a café. Three tables with two chairs and a plastic cloth to each. Two more tables were pushed together to make a corner counter.

“I’ll pay for a cup of tea,” he said, although no-one was in the room, and he pulled a chair from the back table so that he could sit with his legs stretched forward. “Shippe!” he called, then got out a Park Drive and relished the naughty calendar on the wall. It showed an American woman from Esquire Magazine with her dress screwed up to her waist and her bottom very full in white pants. He didn’t take his eyes off the picture for all the time that he was alone. It made him hear voices of the Americans in London in ’43 and ’44. The longer he looked at the pin-up, the louder the voices grew.

When Mrs Shipley (she wasn’t yet fifty) came into the room, Jack knocked off the end of his cigarette and put the remnant in his pocket for later.

“What are you wanting, Jack?” Years of pipe smoking had cracked her voice. Her black hair was curly and tussled; it woke up like that. It never looked brushed. She wore a huge housecoat with faded yellow and green runner beans in the pattern and two great pockets for carrying polish and dusters in. Jack knew that she kept change in one and her notepad (and sometimes loose biscuits) in the other.

“The Dirty Verger says it, too.”

“Says what, Jack?” she asked wearily.

“He says that the murderer was asking after a young girl – skinny with hair down to her bottom. He means to kill her, that’s what our Verger says. If he can see it, why can’t you?”

She had listened to his warnings before and, each time, found

them more difficult to deal with. Without taking his order, she went behind the makeshift counter to put the kettle on.

“I’ll take no charity,” he called after her.

“And you’ll get none, Jack Rochester.”

Martha Shipley wasn’t fat, not even plump, but she hadn’t lost the saddlebags that came with her last child. And whenever she looked at herself in the long mirror at the top of the stairs, she saw how years of too much sitting had caused things to slip. Her bust was big – bigger now than it had ever been, thanks to the pregnancy – but even that wouldn’t sit right. Her breasts flopped to each side, so that they got in the way of her arms when she worked. Her sulky, wet brown eyes and dropped cheeks gave her face a dog’s look and her neck was stretched and fleshly like a plucked chicken. People teased her with Winston’s catchphrase. ‘Some chicken,’ someone would shout and another would answer. ‘Some neck!’ The CID Inspector said that it was a neck fit for a hanging.

“I can get Frankie to come down,” she said. “She’s only upstairs, fiddling with herself.”

“No!”

Crike, had he said that too loud? He repeated it in his head – No! No? No – trying to work out if he had made her jump. He hadn’t wanted to.

“I’m seeing her tonight,” he explained moderately. “Upstairs in the Artillery Man. I’ve nothing to say to her before then.”

‘Shippe’ came back with a cup of tea and two free biscuits in the saucer. “I thought it would be easier to talk with her here, that’s all.” Then she returned to the counter for a teaspoon of sugar. He knew that she mixed sand with the sugar to make it go further; sugar wasn’t short but Shippe wanted everyone to remember that these were difficult times. All her customers knew that little was as it was described on the menu. While Jack sorted out his money, Mrs Shipley produced a fag from her housecoat and lit it in her mouth.

“I’ve seen the murderer too,” he said. “I recognised him on our streets, five days ago. He was just a shadow at first and I wasn’t sure. I thought, it could be your jitters, Jack. But then I saw him close up. His name is Harry Kepple. They call him ‘Killer Kepple’ because he

murdered two French girls in the war. Executed them with his own bare hands, he did.”

”Jack, we all have suspicions and fears these days,” she said kindly. “And our Dirty Verger will say anything you put in his head.”

“It’s – from the way – I can tell from the way Sergeant Kepple was trained. Like me, you see, he was trained to seek people out. I know that he’s tracking someone down. I don’t know who and I don’t know why, but when he finds her, he’ll kill her.” Just saying it seemed to tire him. His face was drawn, his eyes fidgety and his lips pale and dry. “We need to call Ned,” he said.

“Forget Ned. Ned’s not here.” She said, “I believe what you say, but it was all in the war, Jack, when this man was a soldier. What’s to say he’ll do it again? Just because you’ve seen him on the streets? You see, we don’t know for sure, do we?”

“I know for sure,” he insisted. “There’s going to be a killing, Shippe.”

Carefully, wanting to do it without a sound, Jack laid the spoon on the tablecloth. (When Jack’s head was full of too much, he concentrated on a small task. That’s what the priest had told him to do.) He said deliberately, “I mean what I say, Shippe.”

As he went on staring at the little object, Shippe placed a twisted hand on the table top. Her yellow fingernails were thick and ridged, as if they had grown in layers, and they were crumbly at the edges.

“I know you do, dear. But things haven’t been right with you, have they?” Pipe smoking had tarnished her mouth and pulled it out of shape. The same habit had given a pad of tough skin to the outer edge of her forefinger, where the hot bowl often rested. “All this walking about, not wanting to go into shops and other people’s houses. And keeping yourself awake, Jack. It’s not right. It’s like,” she needed to clear her throat, but kept talking, “it’s like you’re afraid of leaving things unguarded in your head.”

Jack nodded. Yes, sometimes it felt like that. “When I look through my window at night I see a world that I can’t step into,” he admitted. “I can’t touch it or make any difference to it. Sometimes it seems like a painted board game with wooden, make believe, figures carrying on a life that’s no more than a fairy tale to me. Drinking on

Saturday nights, going to the dogs on a Friday, some might go to the pictures on Tuesdays and Thursdays. These are things that I would have done before the war and I say, you should be there, Jack Rochester. I say, you're the same as them. You all started in Pop Fletcher's class, didn't you? But I know I can never be part of their world again."

"So, perhaps a little time, eh? A little time to think about things."

"I have been careful, Shippe. Haven't I been coming in here for five days, wondering what to do about it? Doctor Hicks said if I was worried I should take my time, decide the best thing to do and get someone else to act for me. Now, I know we have to call Ned."

"I can't."

"Get Ned, Shippe. Call him; tell him that Jack Rochester's seen Killer Kepple in Goodladies Road. He'll know what to do."

"He can't come here, you know that. The Chief won't let him, not round here."

Mrs Shipley pinched the end of her cigarette so that it would last longer, then passed it to him. "Do I need to keep the girls in?" she asked. "My Daphne and Francine?"

Jack shook his head. "No. He's looking for a woman that he already knows. That's what gives him the pleasure." He corrected himself, "Gave him the pleasure, I mean. Last time. Doing it to someone he knew. He wanted to enjoy the look on her face, everything that was behind her eyes when she stared at death."

She coughed. "Long fair hair, you said, and thin? Jack, a skinny girl was in here two minutes before you. She needed somewhere to stay and she'd heard that I took in girls. She would be here for a couple of days, she said, then her mother would come looking for her. She said that's all she wanted, her mother to find her and take her home. I had to say no, didn't I Jack? I mean there's trouble in that, isn't there?"

Jack nodded. "We need to find her."

"Yes, go and find her, Jack. You'll spot her. Yellow hair down to her backside and a good figure, but thin boned. She'll be scrawny in five years; you know the look of girls like that. Take her in and talk to her. You think she's in danger. And I – well, I need to know what

she's about. You're good at finding out those things. Look, I want to help her, don't I? You know I do. Especially if there's mischief about. But a girl like that, she needs to be clean. You know what I'm on about, 'clean'? Nothing coming from her past. No family bother, that's what I mean."

Jack brought in his legs and leaned forward to the table. "If he's after her, we won't be able to save her unless we get Ned back here."

"We can't do that!"

"Ned will be able to get him taken care of."

"What are you talking about, Jack? 'Taken care of'? You're getting carried away."

"Shippe, this man kills women."

She sucked through her teeth and stuck her fists in the great pockets of her housecoat. She went back to the counter and, knowing that Jack was watching, shook her head. "Jack, if you're going to mess like this, you've got to show the Chief that you're on his side. You know what he thinks, Jack. He thinks you're a troublemaker, a whisperer. He thinks you're against him."

"All right. Tell him I'll fight for him. He's tried to persuade me, again and again. Ever since I've got back, he's wanted me to box for him."

"Hey, slow down. Things aren't like before. The Navy's a lot stricter about those goings-on. And the police, you wouldn't believe it, they've got people watching them."

"But you could fix it," Jack persisted. "You've got the police in your pocket. And the magistrates, round here."

She stopped him smartly. "Well, let's not be saying what I've got and what I haven't. That sort of thing's nothing to do with you, Jack Rochester, and you'll do well to keep quiet about what you've heard."

"All right. I'll leave all that to you. I just want to speak with Ned."

She took her time. She made herself busy, sorting through some change in a tin behind the counter, searching for matches to light two more cigarettes, and then she came back to Jack's table. "You'll get me a good hiding if you let on that I've told you about Ned. You know that?"

“Shippe, we’re stopping murders, here. That’s what we’re talking about.”

She took the tab from her mouth and spat on it. “These things can’t settle a girl like a pipe. Give me my Sweet Rosemary, any day.” She was working at the counter again, with her back to him, when she said, “Tupner, your man in St Mary’s churchyard. He’s got a line to Ned. But you don’t tell anyone else and you don’t tell the Chief I said.”

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At one o’clock, Mrs Shipley turned poor Daphne Butts and Frankie Rees out of the house. Thursday was the landlady’s half day and the girls had to look after little Beryl while her mother went to the pictures.

“This ain’t right, Missus-Shippe.” (Sometimes Daphne called her Mississippi.) “The fog’s already coming down and it’ll be freezing.”

“It’s part of the rent,” she said as they knew she would. “You look at your tally cards. It says it on the front, doesn’t it? Doesn’t it say, ‘And minding the child on Thursdays?’”

But Frankie was sure they would get something if they persisted. “You ought to give us enough to sit in Mason’s. For the littl’un’s sake.”

She said she’d do nothing of the sort. Then, because she liked the way they squealed when she shoed them into the alley, she slipped a florin into Daphne’s coat pocket. “Now get along and no spoiling the nipper,” she said. “Mind you stay together, the three of you. D’you hear me?”

She locked the smoky tearoom but didn’t leave the alley until she had stretched light pig skin gloves over her hands and checked that her everyday hat was pinned primly to her head. She worried that the gloves looked too cheap. She shouldn’t have bought them, really.

Then Mistress Shipley headed down Goodladies Road. The succession of shopkeeper’s awnings sheltered her from the afternoon drizzle. A woman in her thirties – ‘I could look like that if I had the time and the husband’ – came out of a poky library and crossed the pavement to a bicycle at the kerb. She dropped the books in the

wicker basket at the front, took the cloth cover off the saddle because it had got too damp and, with a ladylike scoot, manoeuvred herself into the middle of the road. "She's got nothing to do," grumbled Martha and made a note to find out the woman's name.

It was an unpleasant afternoon. Too damp and too grey, with a mist that made Goodladies altogether too dirty. It made Martha cough. No-one was interested in the enamel signs for Esso Ethyl or Pink Paraffin and, even if they responded to the advertisements for Morrel Lozenges or Players, they did so with little cheer.

Ma was on her way to her regular matinee at The Gaumont. Bogie was starring in *The Big Sleep*. She had seen it the first time round and remembered how his face in the foyer had made her long to watch him from the darkness of the stalls.

"They squealed like pigs," she giggled to herself as she hurried along the pavement. "Like little pinkie pigs. They always do."

By the time she reached the picture house, worry had got the better of her cheerfulness. "Bloody outsiders," she muttered as she searched her purse for the ticket money. "Bringing trouble to our girls, again. Always outsiders."

"Are you all right, Mrs S?" enquired the cashier.

"Just remembering what Emily Dawson told me."

"Emily Dawson? I don't remember any Emily Dawson."

"No," said Mrs Shipley as she collected the ticket. "She was dead before the war."

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Second-hand raincoats and hardly done hair gave the girls a cheap and ragged look as they trotted through the dirty cobbled streets. Daphne steered the pushchair, because Frankie liked to dance about and couldn't keep the wheels straight. They laughed, bouncing into each other's shoulders as they worked to manage their high heels on the broken pavements. Curly-topped Beryl Shipley made no sound. She didn't complain that her knees were red with cold, or that the socks in her open-toe sandals were soon wet from the mist. If her clothes were grubby and hadn't been changed for days, well, that made them all the more comfy. With her woollen dolly, she watched

and listened contentedly. She was at that stage when she could understand more than she let on.

“Have you seen the new girl with that lovely hair?” Francine bitched. “Thinks she’s a bloody film star, she does. She wants to be careful with hair like that. A girl could get it in her mind to cut it off. Bring the cow down to size.”

“Give it time, Fran. You know that the blokes will take a couple of weeks to get the whiff of fresh meat out of their nostrils. Even my church beggar will be unsettled. He’ll get me under the railway arches at eight o’clock tonight and he’ll have his fingers all over my Africa and Asia but he’ll be thinking of her. They’re all the same, behaving like little brothers with runny noses over a pot of new stew, but all stews go off before long.”

“We ought to do something about her,” Francine insisted.

“Jealousy’s a wicked thing.”

“Nothing’s wicked about bringing a new girl into line. That’s not jealousy, is it Baz?”

They crossed the road at a junction, Daphne pretending to race with the pushchair. She made revving engine noises. “Little Beryl doesn’t know anything about jealousy. Not at your age, do you, Baz?”

“Course she does. It’s natural.”

“Nonsense. There’s nothing like that in her head. Not ‘til grown ups put it there. It’s like thinking sex is dirty; that only comes from grown-ups.”

Frankie laughed. “Bloody dirty when I do it, it is,” she crowed. “Otherwise, I wouldn’t do it.”

Before they were half way to the shops, the mist changed to a blanket of fog. Sensible folk stayed indoors but others still walked about, becoming shapes in the grey cloud; the girls couldn’t recognise them. A young man without a jacket stumbled over a kerb, opposite. And another called out, ‘Have you seen them?’ The shapes were all men; the girls didn’t see another woman on the streets after two-thirty.

They kept talking to each other.

“Things ain’t so bad,” said Daph when her friend complained about Shipley’s bossiness. “With ships coming in or ratings ready to

leave, there's always a man wanting a girl in a hurry." The city was good to them, she said, with plenty of money about. "Just look at the bikes coming out of the gates when the dockyard hooter goes. Never seen so many bikes, I ain't, and every one of those blokes has got a job and five bob in his trousers"

"Won't last for ever," Frankie warned. "Can't do. Who needs a Navy, Daph, when we've got no war to fight?"

"Then sack the matelots and get them to build houses. Need houses, don't we? Didn't Hitler see to that? Just look at the new homes they're putting up under the hill. They're little palaces, they say. And every family what was bombed out is going to get one. Thousands and thousands, Frankie. Just think of the money our men will be earning."

"So you're saying those blokes on bikes aren't worried."

True, some of them mentioned their concerns about the future, but some men always took to muttering when doing a girl that they ought not to be with. It was part of their nerves. "Just look round," Daph continued. "Just look at the number of us. More girls are working now than ever before. So, there's got to be money to be had. It stands to reason."

"I don't care!" Frankie protested. "I don't care how good it gets. I don't want to be stuck here!"

Daphne laughed at her. "Then you should have married a Yank instead of your Navy stoker. Marry an American. That's what Minnie Warner did and she says they've got everything over there. I've seen the letters to her mum. The shops are full of food and clothes that you wouldn't believe, she says."

"I only married my Freddie because Min ran off with my movie star. That was the Chief's fault. He bloody introduced them."

"No. It was me. I got them together," Daphne said. "I should have grabbed him for myself."

"You're wrong, Daphne Butts. It was Gutterman. He told me. He told me he said it was all right for Minnie to go."

"Yes, but that's not the same, is it?" But Daphne couldn't bear to argue. "Don't let's niggle, Fran," she said quietly. "Not here. It's scary in the fog. I don't like it. It's worse than I can remember."

Twice, they lost their way and had to look for the street names on

the corners. Once, the name plate was so high up that Daph had to step out into the road to see it properly. A bike without lights nearly crashed into the pushchair.

“Come on,” said Frankie as the pair recovered. “We ought to go back. It’s too dangerous out here. One of us is going to get killed.”