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ANNE PERRY



A NOVEL

SHOULDER THE SKY

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If here today the cloud of thunder lours
Tomorrow it will hie on far behests;
The flesh will grieve on other bones than ours
Soon, and the soul will mourn in other breasts.

The troubles of our proud and angry dust
Are from eternity, and shall not fail.
Bear them we can, and if we can we must.
Shoulder the sky, my lad, and drink your ale.

—A. E. HOUSMAN

§ CHAPTER I §

IT WAS SHORTLY after three in the afternoon. Joseph Reavley was half asleep in the April sun, his back to the pale clay wall of the trench, when he heard the angry voices.

"They be moi boots, Tucky Nunn, an' you know that well as Oi do! Yours be over there wi' holes in 'em!" It was Plugger Arnold, a seasoned soldier of twenty, big-boned, a son of the village blacksmith. He had been in Flanders since the outbreak of war in August. Although he was angry, he kept his voice low. He knew it carried in the afternoon stillness when the men snatched the three or four hours of sleep they could.

The German trenches were only seventy yards away across this stretch of the Ypres Salient. Anyone foolish enough to reach a hand up above the parapet would be likely to get it shot. The snipers seldom needed a second chance. Added to which, getting yourself injured on purpose was a court-martial offense.

Tucky Nunn, nineteen and new this far forward, was standing on the duckboards that floored the trench. They were there to keep the men's feet above the icy water that sloshed around, but they seldom worked. The water level was too high. Every time you thought it was drying out at last, it rained again.

"Yeah?" Tucky said, his eyebrows raised. "Fit me perfect, they do. Didn't see your name on 'em. Must 'ave wore off." He grinned, making no move to bend and unlace the offending boots and hand them back.

Plugger was sitting half sideways on the fire-step. A few

yards away the sentry was standing with his back to them, staring through the periscope over the wire and mud of no-man's-land. He could not afford to lose concentration even for a moment, regardless of what went on behind him.

"They's moi boots," Plugger said between his teeth. "Take 'em off yer soddin' feet an' give 'em back to me, or Oi'll take 'em off yer and give yer to the rats!"

Tucky bounced on the balls of his feet, hunching his shoulders a little. "You want to try?" he invited.

Doughy Ward crawled out of his dugout, fully dressed, as they all were: webbing and rifle with bayonet attached. His fair-skinned face was crumpled with annoyance at being robbed of any part of his few hours of sleep. He glared at Joseph. "'Thou shalt not steal.' Isn't that right, Chaplain?"

It was a demand that even here in the mud and the cold, amid boredom and sporadic violence, Joseph should do his job and stand for the values of justice that must remain, or all this would sink into a purposeless hell. Without right and wrong there was no sanity.

"Oi didn't steal them!" Tucky said angrily. "They were . . ." He did not finish the sentence because Plugger hit him, a rolling blow that caught the side of his jaw as he ducked and struck back.

There was no point in shouting at them, and the sound would carry. Added to which Joseph did not want to let the whole trench know that there was a discipline problem. Both men could end up on a charge, and that was not the way for a chaplain to resolve anything. He moved forward, careful to avoid being struck himself, and grasped hold of Tucky, taking him off balance and knocking him against the uprights that held the trench wall.

"The Germans are that way!" he said tartly, jerking his head back toward the parapet and no-man's-land beyond.

Plugger was up on his feet, slithering in the mud on the duckboards, his socks filthy and sodden. "Good oidea to send him over the top, Captain, where he belongs! But not in moi boots!" He was floundering toward them, arms flailing as if to carry on the fight.

Joseph stepped between them, risking being caught by both, the worst part of which would be that then a charge would be unavoidable. "Stop it!" he ordered briskly. "Take the boots off, Nunn!"

"Thank you, Chaplain," Plugger responded with a smile of satisfaction.

Tucky stood unmoving, his face set, ignoring the blood. "They ain't his boots oither!" he said sullenly, his eyes meeting Joseph's.

A man appeared around the dogleg corner. No stretch of the trench was more than ten or twelve yards long, to prevent shellfire taking out a whole platoon of men—or a German raiding party making it through the wire. They were steep-sided, shored up against mud slides, and barely wide enough for two men to pass each other. The man coming was tall and lean with wide shoulders, and he walked with a certain elegance, even on the sloping duckboards. His face was dark, long-nosed, and there was a wry humor in it.

"Early for tea, aren't you?" he asked, his eyes going from one to another.

Tucky and Plugger reluctantly stood to attention. "Yes, Major Wetherall," they said almost in unison.

Sam Wetherall glanced down at Plugger's stockinged feet, his eyebrows raised. "Thinking of creeping up on the cook, are you? Or making a quick recce over the top first?"

"Soon as Oi get moi boots back from that thievin' sod, Oi'll put 'em on again," Plugger replied, gesturing toward Tucky.

"I'd wash them first if I were you," Sam advised with a smile.

"Oi will," Plugger agreed. "Oi don't want to catch nothin'!"

"I meant your feet," Sam corrected him.

Tucky Nunn roared with laughter, in spite of the bruise darkening on his jaw where Plugger had caught him.

"Whose boots are they?" Joseph asked, smiling as well.

"Moine!" both men said together.

"Whose boots are they?" Joseph repeated.

There was a moment's silence.

"Oi saw 'em first," Plugger answered.

"You didn't take them," Tucky pointed out. "If you 'ad, you'd 'ave them now, wouldn't you!"

"Come on, Solomon." Sam looked at Joseph, his mouth pulled into an ironic twist.

"Right," Joseph said decisively. "Left boot, Nunn. Right boot, Arnold."

There was considerable grumbling, but Tucky took off the right boot and passed it over, reaching for one of the worn boots where Plugger had been sitting.

"Shouldn't have had them off now anyway," Sam said disapprovingly. "You know better than that. What if Fritz'd made a sudden attack?"

Plugger's eyebrows shot up, his blue eyes wide open. "At half past three in the afternoon? It's teatoime in a minute. They may be soddin' Germans, but they're not uncivilized. They still got to eat an' sleep, same as us."

"You stick your head up above the parapet, and you'll find he's nowhere near asleep, I promise you," Sam warned.

Tucky was about to reply when there was a shouting about twenty yards along the line, and a moment later a young soldier lurched around the corner, his face white. He stared at Sam.

"One of your sappers has taken half his hand off!" he said, his voice high-pitched and jerky.

"Where is he, Charlie?" Joseph said quickly. "We'll get him to the first-aid post."

Sam was rigid. "Who is it?" He started forward, pushing ahead of both of them, ignoring the rats scattering in both directions.

Charlie Gee swiveled and went on his heels. Joseph stopped to duck into the connecting trench leading back to the second line, and pick out a first-aid pack in case they needed more than the field dressing the wounded man should be carrying himself.

When he caught up with them Sam was bent over, one arm around a man sitting on the duckboards. The sapper was

rocking back and forth, clutching the stump of his hand to his chest, scarlet blood streaming from it.

Joseph had lost count of how many wounded and dead he had seen, but each man's horror was new, and real, and it looked as if in this case the man might have lost a good deal of his right hand.

Sam was ashen, his jaw clenched so tight the muscles stood out like cords. "We have to see it, Corliss!" His voice shook in spite of everything he could do to steady it. "We have to stop the bleeding!" He looked at Joseph, his eyes desperate.

Joseph tore open the dressing and, speaking gently to the injured man, took his hand and without examining it, pressed the bandage and the lint over the streaming wound, then bound it as well as he could. He had very little idea how many fingers were left.

"Come on, ol' feller," Charlie said, trying to help Corliss to his feet. "Oi'll get you back to the doc's and they'll do it for you proper."

Sam climbed to his feet and pulled Joseph aside as Charlie and Corliss stumbled past.

"Joe, can you go with them?" Sam said urgently. He swallowed, gulping. "Corliss is in a hell of a state. He's been on the edge of funking it for days. I've got to find out what happened, put in a report, but the medics'll ask him what caused it. . . . Answer for him, will you?" He stopped, but it was painfully apparent he wanted to say more.

Suddenly Joseph understood. Sam was terrified the man had injured himself deliberately. Some men panicked, worn down by fear, cold, and horror, and put their hands up above the parapet precisely so a sniper would get them. A hand maimed was "a Blighty one," and they got sent home. But if it was self-inflicted, it was considered cowardice in the face of the enemy. It warranted a court-martial, and possibly even the death sentence. Corliss's nerves may have snapped. It happened to men sometimes. Anything could trigger a reaction: the incessant noise of bombardment, the dirt, body lice. For some it was waking in the night with rats crawling over

your body—or worse, your face. The horror of talking one moment to a man you had grown up with, the next seeing him blown to bits, perhaps armless and legless but still alive, taking minutes of screaming in agony to die. It was more than some could take. For others it was the guilt of knowing that your bullet, or your bayonet, was doing the same to a German you had never met, but who was your own age, and essentially just like you. Sometimes they crept over no-man's-land at night and swapped food. Occasionally you could even hear them singing. Different things broke different men. Corliss was a sapper. It could have been the claustrophobia of crawling inside the tunnels under the earth, the terror of being buried alive.

"Help him," Sam begged. "I can't go . . . and they won't believe me anyway."

"Of course." Joseph did not hesitate. He grasped Sam's arm for an instant, then turned and made his way back over the duckboards to the opening of the communication trench. Charlie Gee and Corliss were far enough ahead of him to be out of sight around one of the numerous dogleg bends. He hurried, his feet slithering on the wet boards. In some places chicken wire had been tacked over them to give a grip, but no one had bothered here. He must catch up with them before they reached the supply trench and someone else started asking questions.

Morale was Joseph's job, to keep up courage and belief, to help the injured, too often the dying. He wrote letters home for those who could not, either through injury, or inability to put to words emotions that overwhelmed them, and for which there was no common understanding. He tried to offer some meaning to pain almost beyond bearing. They were already in the ninth month of the bitterest and most all-consuming war the world had even seen.

To begin with they had believed it would be over by Christmas, but that had been December of 1914. Now, four months later, the British Expeditionary Force of almost one hundred thousand men was wiped out, either dead or injured, and it was critical that new recruits be found. Kitchener had

called for a million men, and they would be fresh, healthy, not having endured a winter in the open in the unceasing cold and rain. They would not have lice, swollen and peeling feet, or a dozen other miseries to debilitate them.

Joseph crossed the reserve trench and saw men moving. A soldier was singing to himself, "It's a Long Way to Tipperary," as he poured water out of a petrol can, wrinkling his nose at the smell. He balanced the Dixie tin over a precarious arrangement of candles to heat it. He raised a hand to Joseph and smiled without distracting his attention from his task.

The men in this segment were from the Cambridgeshire villages around Joseph's home of Selborne St. Giles. Most of them knew each other by their local nicknames. Joseph was thirty-five, and for the years leading up to the war had been a lecturer in biblical languages at St. John's College in Cambridge. Before that he had been in the ministry. He knew most of these men's families. His own youngest sister, Judith, was twenty-four, older than many of these. He thought of her with a twisting confusion of emotions. He was intensely proud of her that she had volunteered to use her one distinctive skill, driving, to come here and work wherever she could help. She had been both a joy and a menace on the roads at home, but here she coped with the mud, the breakdowns, the long hours, and the horror of wounded and dying men with a courage he had not known she possessed.

The trench was climbing a bit, and drier. The slit of sky overhead was blue, with a thin drift of clouds, like mares' tails.

Joseph was afraid for Judith in many ways. The obvious danger of injury or even death was only a part of it. There was also the vulnerability of the mind and heart to the destruction around her, the drowning in pain, the loss of so many young men, and the inability of the ambulances to do more than carry them from one place to another, very often too late. He knew the questions that tormented his own mind. No sane person could be wholehearted about war, not if they had seen it. It was one thing to stand in England in the early spring with the hedgerows beginning to bud, wild birds

singing, and daffodils in the gardens and along the banks under the trees, and speak of the nobility of war. It was an idea, at times, even a noble one. Most people despised the thought of surrender.

Out here it was a reality. You froze most of the time. You were always cold and usually wet. All waking hours were occupied with monotonous routine: carrying, cleaning, digging, shoring up walls, trying to heat food and find drinkable water. You were always tired. And then there were the short interludes of horror: fear crawling in your stomach, shattering noise, and the blood and the pain, men dead, young men you had known and liked. Some would still be crippled long after the war passed into history; the nightmares would never be over for them.

Germany had invaded Belgium, and a matter of honor rested on it. Invasion was wrong; that was the one thing about which there was no question in anyone's mind. But the few German soldiers he had seen were in every way but uniform indistinguishable from the young Englishman beside him. They were young, tired, dirty, and confused like everyone else.

When a successful raiding party captured someone and brought him back, Joseph had often been chosen to question him because before the war he had spent time in Germany and spoke the language not only fluently but with pleasure. Looking back on those times now was a wrenching, muddled sort of pain. He had been treated with such courtesy, laughed with them, shared their food. It was the land of Beethoven and Goethe, of science and philosophy, of vast myths and dreams. How could they now be doing this to each other?

Joseph turned the last corner and went up a couple of steps where he caught up with Charlie Gee and Corliss, but the trench was still too narrow for him to help. Two men could barely walk side by side, let alone three.

The main dressing station was in a tent a few yards away. At least it was dry, and no more of a target than any other structure. It was quite spacious inside. After a bad raid they had to deal with dozens of men, moving them in and out as

rapidly as ambulances could take them back to proper hospitals. Just now there was a lull. There were only two men inside, gray-faced, their uniforms bloodstained, waiting to be moved.

Charlie Gee gave a shout and a young doctor appeared, saw Corliss and immediately went to him. "Come on, we'll get that fixed up," he said calmly. His eyes flickered to Joseph and then back again. It was easy enough to see in his haggard face, hollow-eyed, the fear that a hand wound was self-inflicted.

Joseph moved forward quickly. "We did what we could to help the bleeding, Doctor, but I don't know exactly what happened. He's a sapper, so I imagine something collapsed underground. Maybe one of the props gave way."

The doctor's face eased a little. "Right." He turned back to Corliss and took him inside.

Joseph thanked Charlie Gee and watched him amble back up the connecting trench toward the front line again.

An ambulance pulled up, a square-bodied Ford model T, a bit like a delivery van. It was open at the front, with a closed part at the back that could carry up to five men, laid out in stretchers, more if they were sitting up. The driver jumped out. He was a broad-shouldered young man with short hair that sat up on the crown of his head. He saluted Joseph then looked at the more seriously injured of the two men waiting, whose right leg was heavily splinted.

"Don't need ter carry yer," he said cheerfully. "Reckon an arm round yer and yer'll be fine. 'Ave yer in 'ospital in an hour, or mebbe less, if Jerry don't make too much of a mess o' them roads. Cut 'em up terrible around Wipers, they 'ave. An' 'Ellfire Corner's a right shootin' gallery. Still, we'll cut up a few o' them, an' all. Looks broke all right." He regarded the splinted leg cheerfully. "Reckon that's a Blighty one, at least for a while, eh?"

"Oi'll be back!" the soldier said quietly. "Oi've seen a lot worse than broken legs."

"So've I, mate, so've I." The ambulance driver pursed his lips. "But this'll do for now. Now let's be 'avin' yer."

Joseph moved forward. "Can I help?" he offered.

"Blimey! 'E don' need the last rites yet, Padre. It's only 'is leg! The rest of 'im's right as rain," the ambulance driver said with a grin. "Still—I s'pose yer could take the other side of 'im, stop 'im fallin' that way, like?"

Quarter of an hour later Joseph was refreshed by really quite drinkable tea. Unlike in the front trenches, there was plenty of it, almost too hot to drink, and strong enough to disguise the other tastes in the water.

He had almost finished it when a car drove up. It was a long, low-slung Aston Martin, and out of it stepped a slim, upright young man with fair hair and a fresh complexion. He wore a uniform, but with no rank. He ignored Joseph and went straight into the tent, leaving the flap open. He spoke to the surgeon, who was now tidying up his instruments. He stopped in front of him, almost at attention. "Eldon Prentice, war correspondent," he announced.

Joseph followed him in. "Bit dangerous up here, Mr. Prentice," he said, carefully not looking toward Corliss, who was lying on one of the palliasses, his bandaged hand already stained with blood again. "I'd go a bit farther back, if I were you," he added.

Prentice stared at him, his chin lifted a little, his blunt face smooth and perfectly certain of himself. "And who are you, sir?"

"Captain Reavley, Chaplain," Joseph replied.

"Good. You can probably give me some accurate firsthand information," Prentice said. "Or at least secondhand."

Joseph heard the challenge in his voice. "It's cold, wet, and dirty," he replied, looking at Prentice's clean trousers and only faintly dusty boots. "And of course you'll have to walk! And carry your rations. You do have rations, don't you?"

Prentice looked at him curiously. "A chaplain is just the sort of man I'd like to talk to. You'd be able to give me a unique view of how the men feel, what their thoughts and their fears are."

Joseph instinctively disliked the man. There was an arrogance in his manner that offended him. "Perhaps you haven't

heard, Mr. Prentice, but priests don't repeat what people tell them, if it's of any importance."

Prentice smiled. "Yes, I imagine you have heard a great many stories of pain, fear, and horror, Captain. Some of them must be heartrending, and leave you feeling utterly helpless. After all, what can you do?" It was a rhetorical question, and yet he seemed to be waiting for an answer.

He had described Joseph's dilemma exactly, and the emotions that most troubled him, awakening a feeling of inadequacy, even failure. There was so little he could do to help, but he was damned if he would admit it to this correspondent. It was too deep a hurt to speak of even to himself.

"Nothing that is really your concern, Mr. Prentice," he said aloud. "A man's troubles, whatever they are, are private to him. That is one of the few decencies we can grant."

Prentice stood still for a moment, and then he turned slowly and looked at Corliss. "What happened to him?" he asked curiously. "Bad ammunition exploded and took off his fingers?"

"He was down the saps," Joseph said tartly.

Prentice looked blank.

"Tunnels," Joseph explained. "The intention is that the Germans won't know where the tunnels are. They get within a yard or two of their trenches, then lay mines. If a mine had exploded there'd be nothing left of any of them."

"He's a sapper? I hear that men reaching their hands above the parapet level sometimes get hit by snipers." Prentice was watching Joseph intently.

Joseph drew in breath to reply, and then changed his mind. Prentice was a war correspondent, like any other. They all pooled their information anyway—he knew that. He had seen them meeting together in the cafés when he had been behind the lines in one of the towns at brigade headquarters, or even further back at divisional headquarters. Nobody could see everything; the differences in their stories depended upon interpretation—what they selected and how they wrote it up.

There was movement at the entrance, and a sergeant came

in. He saluted Joseph, ignored Prentice and spoke to the doctor, then went to Corliss. "What happened, soldier?"

Corliss stared up at him. "Not sure, sir. Bit of the wall fell in. Something landed on my hand."

"What? A pick?"

"Could be, I suppose."

"Hurts?"

"Yes, sir, but not too much. I expect I'll be all right."

"Sapper without 'is fingers is not much use. Looks like a Blighty one." The sergeant pushed out his lip dubiously, but his voice was not unkind.

Joseph took a deep breath and let it out, feeling his muscles ease a little. If Corliss had been as close to the edge as Sam feared, he might have been careless, might even have been partly responsible for the accident, but that was still not a crime. If someone else had been injured he should be put on a charge, but he was the one in pain, the one who would spend the rest of his life with half a hand.

"Nasty injury," Prentice remarked, taking a couple of steps over toward the sergeant. "Eldon Prentice. I'm press." He looked down at Corliss where he was lying. "Looks like you'll see home before the rest of your mates."

Corliss gulped and the fraction of color that was in his face vanished. His teeth were chattering and he was beginning to shake. Perhaps Sam had been right and his nerves were shot.

There was a long silence. Suddenly Joseph was aware of the tent being cold. The air smelled of blood, the sweat of pain, and disinfectant. There was noise outside, someone shouting, the faint patter of rain on canvas. The light was fading.

Should he say anything, or might he only make it worse? The doctor was unhappy, it was wretchedly clear in his tired face. He was a young man himself. He had seen too many bodies broken, too much hideous injury he could not help. He was trying to dam rivers of blood with little more than his hands. The shadows under his eyes looked even more pronounced.

Joseph knew the sergeant vaguely. His name was Watkins. He was regular army. He had probably seen most of his friends killed or injured already. He believed in discipline; he knew the cost of cowardice, even one man breaking the line. He also knew what it was like to face fire, to go over the top into a hail of bullets. He had heard the screams of men caught on the wire.

Joseph turned to Prentice. "It's a pity you won't get to go along the saps some time," he said, his voice drier and more brittle than he had meant it to be. "You could write a good piece about what it feels like to crawl on your hands and knees through a hole in the ground under no-man's-land, hear the water dripping and the bits of earth falling. A bit close to the rats down there, but it can't be helped. They're everywhere, as I expect you've noticed. Thousands of the things, big as cats, some of them. They feed on the dead, especially the eyes. You want to cover your face when you're asleep." He felt an acute satisfaction as he saw Prentice shiver. "But then you won't be able to go that far forward, will you? War correspondents don't. They'd get in the way. You only have to watch what other men do, and then go off somewhere safe and talk about it."

"And what do you do? Pray about it, Chaplain?" Prentice snapped. "God Almighty! You're a joke!" His voice was shrill with contempt. "You're no more use here than a maiden aunt in a whorehouse. If your God gives a damn about us, where is He?" He jabbed his hand viciously in the direction of the front line, and no-man's-land beyond. "Ask him," he pointed at Corliss, "if he believes in God when he's down one of his saps!"

"If you had ever been out there at night, when they're shooting, you would know there's nothing else to believe in except God," Joseph answered him with bitter certainty. "If there's any real, physical place to convince you there is a hell, try no-man's-land in winter. To sit in a nice warm pub with a glass of beer and write stories for the breakfast tables in England sounds like heaven in comparison."

"Look . . ." Prentice began.