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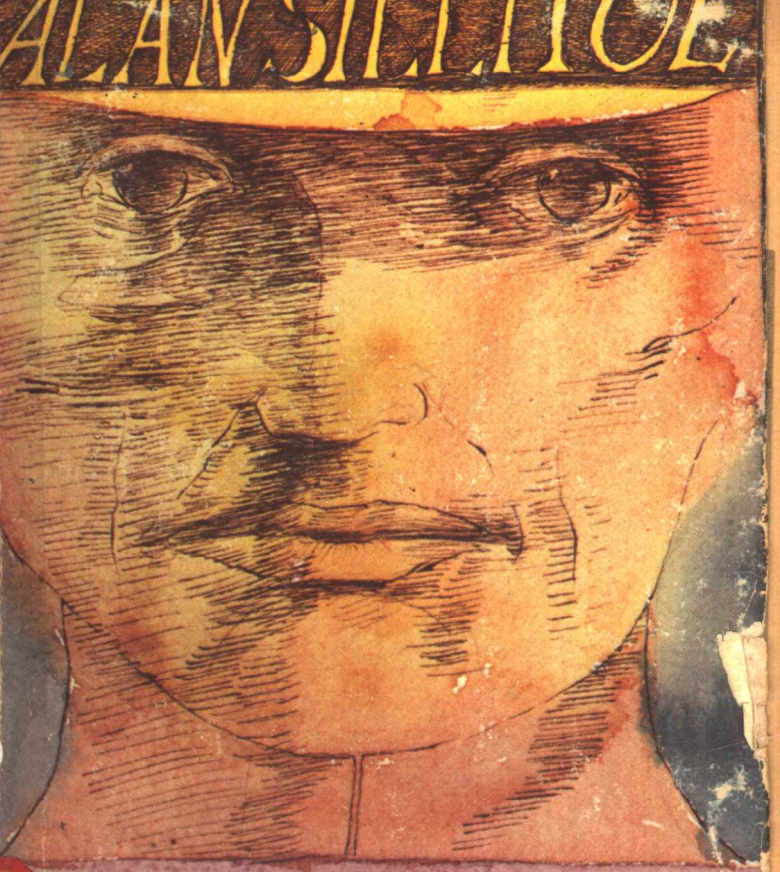

THE WIDOWER'S SON

BASKIN 1971

By the same author

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Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner
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The Death of William Posters
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The Widower's Son

Alan Sillitoe

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Part One

CHAPTER ONE

After his best friend had been killed by his side at the pitface Charlie Scorton decided to join the army. When he told his father that he was 'going for a soldier' he was ordered never to come back through that door wearing a uniform. It was a common enough shout in those days.

Standing six-feet tall in the tiny kitchen, Charlie demanded to know what was wrong with the army and its uniform. His father was a small ageing forty-year-old, bald and bearded, with lively eyes whose blue glitter had been put there by splitting coal for nearly three decades down the mine. He sprang at his son and belaboured his face with such violence that Charlie staggered under the shock. He locked his fists at his side and turned to go, ears stopped to his mother's craven weeping.

He went into the depot at Nottingham with a bruised face and two raw eyes. The sergeant laughed as he handed him the Queen's shilling, but was almost respectful when he signed his name in the finest copperplate.

He knew in his heart that his father had said the service of the dead over him, which could not matter anymore because his mind was dulled by the marching and countermarching at Aldershot, the turning and wheeling, musketry and guard duties, fatigues and parades, which soothed him no matter how hard and prolonged they were. To be tired was insubordination. To be slow on the uptake was insolence. It was criminal to be slack. Everyone was in a blinding rage; everything must be done at the double, or you joined the Jankers Men. He had to bend his nature to a higher will, and little else could get into his mind.

Being tall, and finding a sudden preternatural smartness in

himself – due as much to the coldness of spirit that came over him, as to inborn qualities – he was picked out for battalion marker. Before a regimental review, and after the intense and meticulous bulling-up of accoutrements in the barrack room, four of his mates had to carry him to the required spot on the parade ground so that not a speck of dust or a wrinkle would be picked up on boots or trousers or belt or rifle while walking there himself. If any such blemish caught the eye of the inspecting officer he was for it. This initiation into the torment of being something special only increased his taciturnity. A thousand men used him as a post on which to form their ranks.

As months went by and life slipped into a routine, he came from under the cloud of his disaster. He made friends, discarded a fraction of his silence, but retained the frozen image of his father's rage that had been stamped on him during the argument before leaving home. He learned to bite so hard on the bullet of his heart that it took little effort never to think of the old man again.

When he could, he met his mother at an aunt's place in Retford, a convenient point on the railway while stationed at York. He'd give her presents, or the few shillings he'd saved up, but never mentioned his father though she always hoped he would. She died and got buried while he was six thousand miles away.

Those locked fists that hadn't smashed into his father were used eagerly enough in many hand-to-hands on the North West Frontier. He was glad to get to India, hot as it was, having realised early that England was no place for a soldier. He loved it because he'd been born there and spoke the language, and missed it at all times, but a soldier had to be where the sun and action were, otherwise he might just as well have stayed down the pit – which place he likened to clawing at the walls of a dungeon with no possibility of ever getting out.

After five years in India he served in Natal, later in Gibraltar and Egypt, and during the Great War in France. More than half his army life was spent out of England, and he ended his time in Mesopotamia – or Messpot, as he called it.

His travels made him into a smart and knowledgeable sergeant, barely affable but indispensable to the famous regiment he belonged to. In the mess it was sometimes jokingly said that sergeants were a sight better at the pursuit of warfare than their officers. When the beer flowed many hinted that if given it as an exercise they could run the army any day. While he never said as much, Charlie often thought it possible.

He was once offered a commission, but turned it down because a ranker from the so-called lower-classes with a subaltern's pip on his shoulder had a hard time for want of money. He preferred the good life of three plain stripes, with just enough pay and not too much responsibility.

After twenty-four years he left the army, and came back to live in Ashfield because he thought it might be easier to land a job – and that living would be cheaper – where he'd been born and brought up. The pension, on top of his wages as a postman, made him a few bob a week better off than most people round about. A good soldier never looks back, was one of his sayings, but on that occasion he had to, because by then another factor was that he had a wife and son in Ashfield, as well as his sister living a few streets away.

When he'd been home a while he discovered that a score-and-four in the army hadn't been such a long stint after all, that people remembered him as clearly as if he'd only been away a short time. The friends of his youth were in their middle forties and easily recognisable, though most looked older and certainly walked less upright. His years as a soldier had not erased his past as much as he'd hoped they would. When he recalled it he hated it, and was piqued that he could no longer shun by distance all that had set him off in life. He looked on his time with the army as the making of him, only regretting that he had been forced into it by circumstances, and not by his own free decision.

When it looked as if his humdrum and not unhappy life was set in for good, his wife caught influenza one winter. It was weird and awful, because she was tall and well-built, with hardly an illness in her life. Such people often packed in at the first blow. He'd known it happen. Yet the day she was in bed giving birth to William, she'd insisted, between the pains, on

plucking a fowl for their dinners that night. And then when the 'flu struck she went out like at matchlight in the Hindu Kush, no word or smile through the choking that carried her off. He'd seen people die even quicker, and had grieved almost as much over some. By his wife's coffin he called back the first time: 'Dig, you bastards, dig!' the sergeant screamed in that first Afghan venture. There was a sound like a stone hitting a cushion when Leonard didn't get down fast enough, and so his bosom pal folded and was gone.

'It was the beer-gut gave it a noise like that,' said Oxo, and Charlie half-killed the swivel-eyed ingot for not keeping his remarks to himself, pummelled him by the *nullah* when the pair of them had been told off for the rearguard. Nearly lost his lance-jack's stripe over it. But the pain began to withdraw from his bones and veins at the fusillade over the grave by that remote sangar in the hills of Waziristan, and later after other short scuffles in half-eyed dumps where he had lost friends with a bitterness and bewilderment that could hardly be borne.

Here was a pain no battle would ease. He had to look, listen, talk, work and sometimes sleep for the rest of his life when even to live another minute hardly seemed on the cards. Yet he'd been trained to keep moving whenever he felt the black dog's weight, and the fact that he did so now was one more item to thank the army for.

The big diversion came in looking after his son William, and of finding some means to launch him in a career. And when he'd go away, as all male offspring must, there'd be nobody to account for but himself, which would be no trouble at all. He could be his own man again then. For all his suffering, sense of loss and anxiety in case his son too should be carried inexplicably off, he was not a man who looked oppressed by melancholy. His eyes alone might have showed it, but the curve of his lips would too often give it the lie.

Nevertheless there wasn't much room in the strait-jacket of life to move your limbs about, he told his sister Doris grimly after the funeral, adding – and she believed him – that if there wasn't young Billy to bring up he'd have hanged himself without thinking twice.

But he soon lost that narrow-eyed look of death that seemed too much out of place with his mouth and the habitual straightness of his back. People wondered when he'd be getting wed again, and the more familiar teased him on his rounds. He'd only smile, and say that married life was not for him.

His secret heart, treacherously, as he thought, had indeed caused him to wonder why he shouldn't find someone. But who'd want a man near fifty? A young girl looking for a grandad maybe, or a widow searching for somebody else to poison. Most of the personable and bonny girls were set up already, and if they weren't he wondered why not, and what was wrong with them. He made a faint approach to thirty-year-old Alice Brown who lived next-door-but-one, but was just as gently pushed off when he talked to her outside the chapel in which he'd been married a dozen years before.

Doris saw it all. 'Never mind, Charlie, there are plenty of other women.'

'Aye,' he answered, resenting her outspokenness, 'for other men' – a retort heard often in the mess when somebody had been jilted and you tried to hand them a flake of comfort.

But he wasn't disappointed. He had only been able to make the attempt because he hadn't really wanted to get married again. He stamped on it. Wedlock was another of those complete and finished lives he'd have to put behind. And what he got on the side would be his own affair. There was always a bit of that knocking around for an ex-soldier in Nottingham, fourteen miles away.

Charlie's son William was born in a street where, if the curtains of a house weren't open by half past six in the morning, it was thought that somebody had died during the night. An old woman might call and ask whether there was laying-out to be done, or an undertaker's scout would knock and wonder – with eyes agleam – about business.

At woodwork classes in school the boys made book-racks and took them to homes where there weren't any books. They sweated and felt pride over fancy rollers to hold lavatory paper where only newsprint was used. But it kept them busy, and that, the teacher swore, was next door to happiness.

His mother died when he was seven, so from then on he was brought up by his father, a rare happening that set William apart in the eyes of others and therefore his own. School pals thought him lucky to be singled out for an adventure so different from theirs, whereas women who lived in the same street looked at him as if he'd had an arm off.

A few boys in his class were left with only a mother because the father had died in the 'War to end Wars'. Some had flitted. Others had never turned up in the first place, but he was the only one to be lumbered with nothing but a father. The inside horizons had crumbled when his mother died, but he soon got used to his father waking him up in the morning. The earth revolved at night in his deepest dreams. The mist of living clung to him, and he learned to see through it.

Every Saturday afternoon Doris came over to sweep, scrub floors, change bedding, iron a shirt and tie for them each, and blow dust off the row of a dozen books. She pressed the trousers of their suits only once a month, because Charlie kept his creases in by laying them neatly between the mattress and the springs of the bed he slept on. He taught William to do the same, because a soldier often had no other way.

While Doris worked, Charlie and his son were out at the market buying the week's provisions. He would do a swift reconnaissance, then go back to the stalls he'd chosen to trade with. They went from one to another, Charlie seeming parsimonious and slow; fussy almost at getting what was marked on his list at the right price.

William noticed traits in his father that were in his aunt Doris when it came to shopping. If he stopped at the same couple of stalls week after week instead of chopping and changing about they would have got to know him and given him a better deal to keep his custom. But he couldn't tell him this, and in any case his father enjoyed doing 'the commissariat' in his own way.

While they were shopping Doris lit a fire under the scullery copper and filled the bath with hot water in front of the living-room fire so that Charlie could have his tub the minute he got back. When his father had finished and gone upstairs with a towel around his middle, William sat in the same water, but

with a bucket of fresh and a scoop standing on the hearth rug so that he could swill himself down and get properly clean.

He was glad to pull off his weekday clothes and feel the fire's heat before stepping over the rim. His father took only five minutes to get scrubbed, so the bath was still hot and he sat down slowly, ladling the soap-bubbles and water up to cool before he was totally in. He wondered when he'd ever get a first bath all to himself, yet wasn't too bothered because it was comforting to use his father's. The bucket of fresh was almost cold, and he shuddered as it poured over, glad to stride out and reach for the fire-warmed clean towel that was his alone.

Doris stayed to cook dinner. It was Charlie's luxury of the week, and maybe reminded him of life in India when he'd had his own servant. He dressed for it in a dark suit, white shirt, black thin tie, high collar and a gold watch at his waistcoat. He sat at the table in the tiny parlour, and barely glanced at Doris as she came in with the various platters. His hair was short and dark, almost shaved, no parting showing. After the meal he would stay at the table with a cup of milky coffee, smoking his weekly cigar.

William was spruced up in his best short-trousered suit, a parting like a knife blade down his sandy hair. He'd hardly seen his father before the age of seven. When Charlie came back from the War – a tall soldier in a khaki overcoat and laden with kit – he was a stranger, except for a shadowy picture far back in his mind, matched to the framed photo on the sideboard. He'd wondered when he would go off for good and leave him once more with his mother. But she died after a year, and the man stayed because he was his father.

He was always aware of his father trying to teach him something, couldn't remember when he hadn't known how many inches there were to a mile. The number was repeated at him till he knew it – 63,360 – as if it were the primal quantity in life. He wrote it out a hundred times without knowing its importance, a magical cypher he then had to parrot on demand in order to please his father.

Charlie went on to teach him other more interesting facts, and behind the laying out of signs and sketches William sensed

that his father wanted to tell him something absolutely profound – but wasn't really able to. This made him more eager to learn as if, should he take in everything now, his father might eventually reach those revelations which were of vital importance to them both. But his father constantly replenished his knowledge from books when he seemed at the end of his supply, and whatever he had to say, that William thought would be so important, he was never quite able to dig up.

During the week they'd eat by gaslight, but on Saturday Charlie set two brass candlesticks on the parlour table, took candles from the dresser drawer, and lit them before the meal began. He frowned once when Doris, thinking he'd forgotten, herself placed them on the cloth. He used the nearest candle to light his cigar from after dessert, and only he knew how close it had to be.

The platter was brought in with the first course of Yorkshire pudding and jam: 'If a compass bearing on a distant windmill is 260 degrees, what angle would you draw on the map?'

'Is it near Nottingham?'

'Closer to Worksop, I'd say.'

A coal fire burned in the grate. William contrived to make the answer appear a more difficult problem than it was, knowing it pleased his father if he puzzled a few moments over it. He taught him all he knew, but never hit him when he made a mistake. If he stumbled over the answer, Charlie would only frown, then patiently explain how it might be done, so that next time he would do it quicker.

When meat, potatoes and vegetables were set down for his father to serve, the questions were relatively slow. Charlie ate quickly, and didn't need to consider them because they took a mere second to formulate. William too had his world, but it was less placid because he had to be ready for pulling the next answer out of his brain. He couldn't mull too much on a coming cricket match at school, or wonder how he'd do in next term's tests, or hope he could add to his chemistry set at Christmas. Charlie wouldn't allow it. He had to be alert when he was with other people at table.

Knowing that the local magnetic variation was sixteen

degrees west, he subtracted it from the bearing to give the answer. It was basic stuff, but he was still young, and Charlie knew what he was doing by sharpening his brain to mental quickness. His idea was to train him, make him malleable and eternally curious for the time when he would be sent out into the world.

On one Saturday evening a month the training was curtailed, and Charlie ate hurriedly before leaving for a night out in Nottingham. He left the table half an hour early to catch his train, the cigar only half smoked as he put on his stetson-type hat, said good night to Doris, and went out by the scullery door.

At chapel on Sunday morning, William's back had to be as straight in his seat as it had been at table the evening before. 'Always keep your back straight,' Charlie dinned into him. 'People will respect you then, even if you haven't more than a shilling in your pocket. And if they respect you, you'll be all right. You can always go on from there.'

They'd walk home from chapel to a meal of stew and vegetables which Doris had cooked the night before, so that Charlie had only to warm it up on the stove. The afternoon was for walking a few miles towards Shireoaks, or into the Dukeries, taking Sheet 46 of the one-inch map and Charlie's prismatic compass in its leather case. He'd show him how to march on a bearing, and count the paces by putting a pebble into his pocket at the end of every hundred, and give an example of how to find their position from two (or three) conspicuous landmarks whose angles they'd take by the compass. He'd coach him on dividing the Horizontal Equivalent by the Vertical Interval in order to get the gradient of the slope, and then they'd sort out problems of Intervisibility through a series of contour lines plotted on the map.

William's feeling for landscape was accurate but easy going, almost a love of it, so that later it became so much part of him that he didn't know whether or not he'd been born from the leaves and rolling grass itself. At ten he could recognise the ground called 'dead' on which, from a seeming vantage point, you could not see an enemy advancing. It was a dip of the land

in which they were invisible and safe from your fire, and the name 'dead ground' was a sinister label for a place wherein all sorts of secret forces could assemble before destroying you, and after the unequal fight you ended up in that other piece of 'dead ground' called the cemetery.

But the more he saw what it actually looked like, the more it was obvious how to deal with it – if you had the power and equipment. 'Always watch it though,' his father emphasised. 'Detect it early so's you know it's there. Keep it in mind. A good soldier never neglects dead ground. No matter how well you deploy your platoon, there's always bound to be some.'

It was not by pure chance that he was fascinated by what his father had to teach. He also sensed its necessity. And perhaps Charlie recognised early on a foolproof device for keeping them close as father and son.

While rambling into a deep part of the Dukeries, where keepers no longer thought they were up to mischief, gun-shots leapt through trees and down from the sky at the same time, and his father asked how far off the firing was, and from what direction it came: 'One day you might have to take a bearing on it,' he said, 'and if somebody else does from a mile away, you can fix the devils, once and for all.' After a pause he added: 'As soon as your enemy fires, you'll know where he is. And if you're still alive, you've got 'im!'

William wanted to ask how many men he had killed during all his time in the army, but couldn't bring his question out. He imagined his father lying alone among scorching boulders, looking from behind cover in such a way that no one could see him, rifle loaded and cocked, ready for the slightest movement in front. He saw him as cool, rapid, and unkillable, always running forward, never back, moving on his belly like a snake, edging mile by mile nearer to that golden city of Baghdad, which he said was so filthy once you got inside it.

Another imparted skill was how to judge distance. 'You'll never regret knowing it,' his father said, one clear day at a junction of straight avenues in Clumber Park, 'whatever you do in life. When you come to fire a rifle or a gun you'll know its value. Any sharp-eyed chap can fire at a target whose range he knows, but it takes real salt in the eye to pick a man out of

the landscape and know how far off he is without being told. You've got to see him before he sees you, get the range, adjust your sight and fire.'

He knocked out his pipe: 'I'm going to walk a hundred and twenty paces into those fir trees, so's you'll learn to know what a hundred yards looks like. Then I'll do another hundred – two hundred altogether, see? You'll know what *that* looks like as well.'

William stood, cap in hand, as his father strode scientifically away, a derby-hatted figure who maybe imagined he had a whole platoon under instruction. He wondered what it was all about. Bemusement lay under his surface fascination, but he learned nevertheless to register the distance, and carry that two hundred yards vividly in his head.

Returning home through town the training went on:

'How many windows did that house have?'

'Which one?'

'The one we've just passed. DON'T turn round.'

He hesitated. He hadn't really noticed.

'Come on, look sharp! Your eyes took a picture as they went by. They allus do. Like one o' them cameras. Law o' nature!'

William's backsight turned somersaults inside him. He was right: they had. 'Eight?'

'Ten – but you were close. See what I mean?'

'Yes. I do.'

'How far off is that bridge?'

'Four hundred yards.'

'Four-fifty. A fair guess. How wide was it?'

'Twelve feet?'

'Damned good!'

He felt real happiness when he scored a hit, but his father's keenness at times embarrassed him.

'You've got to train your powers of observation,' Charlie went on. 'Don't just look at things. Describe 'em to yourself. Write it down, if it'll help. Always carry a little notebook with you. Use the King's English. If you know what things look like, you'll twig how far off they are. It'll mek a smart soldier out of you, as well as an intelligent man. Most people see nothing. They don't want to. Don't have to, I suppose. But if