

Un Mémoire De La Grande Guerre

A novel of the First World War

(that's the one with trenches and Kaiser Bill...)



by

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Whilst I have always had a keen interest in military history and - within the limits of decency - many brave warriors. I am indebted to the kind gentleman of the Southbourne Tabletop & Boardgamers, and Wessex Wyverns, wargames clubs for their input and assistance concerning technical matters pertaining to the Great War era, and for their 'wargaming' a suitable plot.

1914

Chapter One

My name? Pierre Dubois. Two months ago I was a dresser at the Folie Bergere. 10 Francs a week... but it was I could afford. And now? Now is War! I was called up; back to the colours. 'Mange a la gare d'Est'. 'Eaten by the Eastern Station'. We had such high hopes for 'Plan XVII'. But it was not to be...

And now I and my unit have moved north to halt the Bosch as they try to sweep in on Paris – cruelly violating Belgian neutrality as they go. I am told les Anglais are on our left – 'all ten of them' is the joke.

"Corporal Dubois!" called Captain Lacoste.

"Sir!" despite his tiredness Pierre saluted smartly.

"I understand you speak English?"

"Oui".

"Then you will remain with me as my interpreter. Our guests speak French... but I wish to know what they say between themselves".

"I understand, Sir", Pierre too didn't trust the English – followed to the requested farmhouse...

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Captain Gordon Bennet of the 1st Borsetshires knew his men were glad of the rest, after their long retreat from Mons. Trouble was the Germans were hot on their heels. This was nothing like South Africa – no time to dig in. His orders from General Lowe were to, 'cooperate to the greatest extent with the French '(sic). Well, if it didn't work out he'd withdraw his company and catch-up with the rest of the BEF...

"*C'est tout!*" Nicole Renaud angrily returned the rehearsal room. "I was accosted *again!* Just because I am a *dancer* no gentleman should assume I am a *courtesan!* And now!" (she railed) "Madame Descartes – she tells me I am not good enough to dance the can-can!"

The others dancers knowingly looked at each other. "She is right", Madeline spoke. "You are not".

"Your answer lies elsewhere", Claudette agreed- and in empathy passed Nicole a leaflet about nursing opportunities for *l'Armee...*

"I do not miss Pierre", Nicole promptly blushed and denied.

"No one said you did", Madeline smiled, though they all knew the truth...

"*Auf nach Paris!* On to Paris!" General Paul Von Totenhosen cheered his footsore men as he rode past. 'And then east to fight the Russians', he then privately mused. This whole war was a gamble. If *only* the English had been clear about their intentions to fight. If there was no quick victory... it could go on for years... "Next we take next those crossroads", he directed his aide, Klienhouse. "Mr Asquith's contemptable little army will soon scurry for home and leave the French in the lurch..."

"*Javol Herr General!*" Klienhouse clicked his heels, salute, and went to issue the necessary orders.

"A *common* nurse!" back in England Colonel Colin Darcy (retired) was horrified at the prospect.

"Father", Elizabeth denied him, "we must all do our *bit*. Princess Alexandra herself has called for volunteers".

"You'll be just like Florence Nightingale", her mother was wistful.

"Pah!" Darcy was unconvinced. "Has my telegram from the War Office arrived yet?" he couldn't understand why he hadn't be recalled to the colours, unaware his old regiment was about to engage the enemy on the European mainland for the first time since drubbing Napoleon at Waterloo...

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"Blimey Chalky!" 'Smudger' Smith remarked. "Those red trousers. The Frenchies ain't got no idea about camouflage!"

"Least we ain't retreating no more", he grumbled back. "Hey up!" he saw movement ahead – thick German columns – an easy target. Confident? Or inexperienced?

"Move forward and occupy the buildings, Chaps!" Lieutenant Hay ordered. "Our allies are having trouble holding off enemy infiltrators..."

“Gotten himmel! The enemy have more strength than we thought!” Lieutenant Fritz Schmidt was alarmed by the accuracy of the English rifle fire as attack after attack stalled. “Inform the General we need more men here! We need to outflank them!”

“Corporal Dubois!” Captain Bennet informed the courier in impeccable French. “Be so good as to inform Captain Lacoste I can hold this wood and have reinforced the village. If he stays for the night so will I?”

“*Monsieur le Capitaine*”, Pierre agreed and saluted smartly. He was glad to return to his unit. The English were pleasant enough chaps... but their food was terrible. Tins of ‘bully beef’ and awful bread and - worst of all - no wine...

“Finally they stand and fight?” astride his horse at the front, like his father before him at Sedan, years before, General Von Totenhosen remarked to Klienhouse. “Order up the reinforcements. We have them pinned. We will take them here and then advance”.

“*Javol Herr General!*” Klienhouse clicked his heels, saluted and – as he made to ride off – heard a groan.

“Schieser!” Paul realised he had been hit. “Never celebrate too soon, eh?” he saw the blood stain his uniform as – back at headquarters – General Von Kluck ordered a turn to the south to crush the allies – then on to Paris!

“Medic for the General!” Klienhouse demanded.

Chapter Two

My name? Ivan Denesovitch, major in the Imperial Russian Army; veteran of the Japanese war. Under the respected Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolaevich, second cousin to our beloved Tsar, we have captured the Austrian fortress of Lemburg¹, and now control the enemy province of Galicia. Yet we must press on, for the Germans have defeated us in Prussia, and we must aid of Serbian co-religionists and brothers. Ahead of us lies the Carpathian mountains... and the ‘Fritzes’ are not yet as beaten as many hope...

Ivan studied the village through his opera glasses. All looked quiet. He had with him two companies, a gun and some cavalry. He was now attached to staff of General Smirnoff, a ‘desk jockey’ who was happy to take the credit for

¹ Now Lviv in the Ukraine (Ed.)

Ivan's tactical acumen. So be it. The war would be over by Christmas anyway, and he could return to the pleasures of garrison duty on St Petersburg...

"It's getting dark", the general observed. "Take the village before nightfall".

"Yes Sir", Ivan went off to plan the assault...

"Captain Swartzenadder!" putting down the field telephone General Hertz Van Rental sighed the receipt of new orders. "We hold them here.

Apparently... The staff insist we must not retreat to the mountains. It would make the Spring counter-offensive so much more... *problematic*".

"Sir..." the young man from Linz rolled his eyes he understood. "I'll have the men dig in", he knew they'd only just arrived at the village...

"*Ivan comes!*" up then went the cry...

'*Scheisse...*' Swartzenadder knew some of his troops to be reliable Austrians - other's 'reluctant Croats'. Why people weren't happy with the dual monarchy confused him... but he trusted the cavalry – gayly clad hussars , ulhans and dragoons, would cover their flanks...

"Flank attack!" Ivan ordered. 'Both!' if their numbers were about even the Austrians clearly had inferior resources of cavalry. Rifle fire cracked and his assault force suffered their first casualties...

Pinned in the village they had been ordered to hold the enemy artillery fire wrecked havoc with the Austrian's precious machine guns. '*Scheisse...*' Swartzenadder exclaimed again... and then it all went black.

"Fools!" Denesovitch watched the Austrian cavalry – pinned by gunfire – swamped by the Cossacks. Yet it was clear they wouldn't give up the village without a fight. As he and his unit prepared to attack... a sudden Cossack sweep seemed to take the enemy artillery and command from behind. Then it was in with the bayonet, to take the village....

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All was carnage. Awakening from his wound Swartzenadder saw he'd been left for dead. The bodies showed the Russians had moved on. Of General Van Rental there was no sign. Could he make his way safely home? He only knew that he must try...

1918

Chapter One

All was not quiet on the Western Front. "*Raus! Schnell!*" General Von Totenhosen insisted. Although obliged to retreat through Belgium he was sure the line could be held and the Allies forced to conclude a favourable peace, just as the Russians had.

Maybe that was optimistic? Despite the promise of air cover the Allied assault began with bombing from aircraft – and heavy fire on his first line. The inexperienced Americans before his position charged forward... and were easily slaughtered. "*Schieser!*" Totenhosen saw he was once again wounded, and was obliged to leave the field. Obligated to take over Klienhouse saw the hated Allied tanks begin to advance – but artillery power soon saw to them; and their advance was stalled.

"Here they come!" he saw that – huge damage done to the forward units by their superior fire – the Allied main formations now went 'over the top'. Fire increased – and the French waivered. Not so the British. Soon the first line of trenches was captured. Klienhouse considered a counter-attack... but knew it was fruitless without further reserves. If retreat was unthinkable... maybe – with Germany's allies deserting her – it was time to think the unthinkable...

TO BE CONTINUED...