

FIRST OVER THE TOP

BY DAVID MCVEY

‘You’d never believe there was a war on, eh, my lord?’ said the commandant.

We were on the roof, looking over the back of the house, across the stables and the other estate offices to banks of woodland with bracken-strewn moor beyond. Informal gardens, still fresh and fragrant, ringed the house closer to. We turned and, in a few brisk paces, reached the parapet and surveyed the view from the front of the house; in 1914 there had just been the neat steps that led from the main door to the carriage drive and then a broad sweep of lawn with a fenced-off deer park at one end. Beyond the wooded park was the gleaming silver firth, with islands shimmering in the haze like things of fable.

As we looked out now, far below us on the carriage drive a huddle of men in khaki drill were being lectured on some military niceties. The lawns were invisible, hidden beneath rows of tents and huts and other temporary buildings, the grass itself gashed by the tracks of motor-lorries and motor-cars, lines of which were drawn up on what had been the deer park. On the remaining area of fenced-off grass, soldiers were ever marching, drilling, presenting and shouldering arms and marching again, trampling the parched grass to brown dust.

And then there was the noise, of shouting, of barked orders, of bibulous laughter from the canteen tent and the unceasing growl and roar of motor engines, pierced by the occasional crack of firearms from the moor far beyond the house.

And yet, I thought, I had invited this invasion. It had seemed the patriotic thing to do.

‘Hush, hush, of course,’ said the commandant, ‘but there’s a big push coming. We’re going to drive the Hun back to where he belongs.’

‘And all this lot...’ I said, indicating the mass of soldiery with a sweep of my hand.

‘Yes, they and all the other volunteers will be the ones to do it.’

‘And I’m going to have to give up the whole house?’

‘Oh, not the whole house, my lord. You’ll be left sufficient rooms for you and your family. Most of the new hospital will be in the temporary huts and tents in the park. The building will be used for administration, nurses’ quarters, officers’ wards...’

‘We’re expecting heavy casualties, then?’

He just smiled a rather forced smile and suggested ‘Shall we pop down to the canteen and have a cuppa?’

Our local volunteer battalion was in training not far away from the officers’ canteen and I recognised many of the voices that gargled death cries as they bayoneted stuffed sandbags dangling from wooden frames.

‘Good show from your people,’ said the commandant.

And it was; the men training outside included Buchanan, my estate manager and young McKillop, who had worked in the stables. And there were many other local men, too, from the sawmill and the neighbouring farms, even MacLean, who had been the trade union shop steward in one of the local factories. I’d often been the subject of denunciations in his street-corner speeches, so I had heard, and it had been rather surprising to see him join up.

By the time we left the tent, the soldiers had finished their exercises and were queuing up outside the other ranks’ canteen. I stopped to chat with them for a bit.

‘We’re ready to show them what’s what, Lord Lammermuir,’ said Buchanan.

‘I’m sure you’ll do us all proud, eh, McKillop?’

‘I’ll dae my best, sur,’ said McKillop, a quiet, shy lad.

‘Aye, we’ll make sure the world’s safe for the toffs to keep exploiting the workers, *Mister* Lammermuir,’ laughed MacLean. Buchanan tut-tutted like an old woman.

‘Well, make sure you all get back, anyway,’ I said.

‘Och, we’ll be back. You’ll see us again, nae doubt about that,’ said MacLean.

As June wore on, the military city on our doorstep began slowly to empty. There were fewer voices, fewer marching and drilling and training soldiers, fewer vehicles. It became a quieter place altogether.

‘Not a word,’ the commandant said to me at one point, with a conspiratorial air, ‘but the Big Push is happening soon. Your boys will be in there, I think.’

Before the last soldiers departed, the commandant, who had a sense of theatre, arranged for a farewell parade along the carriage drive past the house. A party of top brass and civilian guests, including me, stood on the front steps, which were freshly garlanded for the day, awaiting the marchpast. I had never been a military man and felt rather awed amongst those generals and colonels and majors with their smartly-brushed uniforms, shining belts and epaulettes and their alarming moustaches. There was little chat; we had so little in common.

And then, from the direction of the point where the drive turned in off the road, we began to hear the war-skirl of the pipes, the visceral thud of big drums and the steady beat of marching feet. The leading pipe band swept past in an almost visible wall of wailing sound, and then came the first files of soldiers, all turned out immaculately, glengarries worn at identical angles, boots dazzlingly polished and kilts swinging in united rhythm.

With a start, I saw that it was our local volunteer battalion who were in the van, our Kitchener’s boys. There, in the leading echelons were the boys who had worked in the gardens, on the farm, in the house, across the estate and in the village. Buchanan and McKillop were both there in the front row and McLean was only a few lines behind them. As he came abreast of our party he turned towards us, punched a fist in the air and laughed, ‘We’ll be back, Mr Lammermuir, up the Revolution!’ I smiled wryly but I heard the most senior general mutter something to an aide-de-camp about putting that man on a charge. I protested that it really wasn’t necessary and was greeted with a hostile, silent glare, as if I’d let the side down.

Days later the camp was a silent, eerie void. Marquees flapped lazily in the dry summer breeze and the hot sun brought a stink of creosote from the huts. There were a few sentries and medical orderlies about but the life and the murmur had gone. The house, though, was alive and bustling. I had moved the family into the small suite of rooms my father had occupied in his last years, while the corridors in the rest of

the building echoed with hurrying officers and civilians and female secretaries setting up offices and manoeuvring filing cabinets and medical stores and equipment. The house was no longer my family's and perhaps never would be again. I smiled; McLean would approve of that.

In the first days of July the papers were full of The Big Push. Laidlaw, my Head Groom, was seventy if he was a day but he'd still have joined up if they'd let him. Once he said to me, 'Our lads were among the first over the top sir, so I've heard. I'll bet they gave them Germans a right beating.' Then he paused before continuing, 'I hope they all made it back safe, right enough.'

'We'll see them again, Laidlaw. McLean promised me.'

'Ach, McLean?' snorted Laidlaw, filling his pipe with a debauched-looking mix of tobacco, before going on, 'Mind, for all he's a bit of a blowhard, he's a good man, McLean. We'd all be the poorer if there was naebody like him.'

And now I have to be less definite in my recollections. Did I, in fact, a few nights later, wake from a troubled sleep? Did I stir and rise and go downstairs onto the terrace to seek some relief from the steamy summer night-warmth? And was I leaning on the cold stone parapet, puffing on a cigarette as tree-filtered moonshine flickered on the scene like an enchantment, rather than merely dreaming it all?

Did I then hear a distant, echoing night-skirl of sad, muted pipe music? Was I actually standing there, in warm air that felt suddenly thick and heavy and resonant with sound, as I became aware of movement far to my right? Did I lean over the parapet, not far from where I'd stood with the gruff generals in cheerful daylight, and watch as a grey file of marching soldiers emerged from the trees? As they came right past the steps, was it really true that there was no sound of marching feet, just that distant, eerie pipe music as they passed, Buchanan and McKillop and McLean among them? No smiles and jocularities now, just unsmiling grey faces turned towards me. Did I look away briefly, and turn back, to find that there was nothing there, that the pipe music had ceased? Did I suddenly feel very alone, more alone, perhaps, than I had ever felt before? Or was it, indeed, just a dream or some other crazed imagining?

Even next morning I was unsure whether this had happened or had occurred solely in my head. And then it struck me that it didn't matter;

more important was what it all meant, if anything. McLean had promised me they'd be back, that I'd see them again, and now I had.

Slowly, the house and gardens and grounds began to fill up again; motor ambulances ran out to the railway station and came back bearing sad, broken remnants of men. The men arrived in no order; Highlanders, Cockneys, Irish, Glasgow men, Australians and Canadians. Our own lads, if wounded, could easily be in hospitals in Sussex or Yorkshire or, perhaps, still back in France.

And then Laidlaw came with the news that our lads, first over the top as he'd said, had been cruelly mauled in the attack with many posted missing. 'McKillop's unaccounted for, and McLean, Freeland, Buchanan and Durie. But it's a mad place, a battlefield, sir, and they could turn up yet; aye they could be back yet.'

I shook my head. 'They're dead, Laidlaw, I know they are.'

Work had begun on a cemetery in the paddocks beyond the Lime Walk. Many lads had hung on tenaciously all the way from the conflagration on the Somme, carried bodily by their comrades, bundled into motor ambulances and trains and ships only to fade away in an East Lothian garden where the birds sang. By the end of July, there had been many interments. I was returning from one of the funerals, along the Lime Walk, accompanied by Laidlaw. He wore full Highland dress and his medal ribbons from long-forgotten African campaigns in Victoria's time.

'Some of our lads are in a hospital over Glasgow way, sir,' he said. 'The battalion was cut in two by machine guns on the first day of the push. McLean and the rest of them were dead minutes after they went over the top.'

'It's a sad time for us all, Laidlaw.'

'Sir, do ye mind my asking - ye said ye knew Buchanan and McKillop and all those lads were dead. How could ye *know*?'

I hesitated. Laidlaw was a loyal Presbyterian who viewed my flaccid Episcopalianism with a sad pity, yet there seemed little reason to spare him the whole story. We had reached the formal gardens where there were several soldiers in wheelchairs and on crutches making their halting way about in the fresh air. We found an unoccupied bench by a

box hedge, sat down, and I told Laidlaw my story, including my doubt about whether it had been real or a dream. I asked what he thought.

There was a silence as he coaxed his pipe into life, before he began, 'Well, sir, I can't say what you saw or didn't see,' ...puff, puff... 'But ghosts? Man, if you count up the number of our lads that are dying in this miserable war, aye, and against the Turks as well, ye wonder if there's room for so many ghosts in all the world.' More fiddling with his pipe, then, 'I'd rather think our boys are with the saints in Glory, even that rascal McLean, and that what ye saw was a dream, a vision like the Lord gave to Joseph. Let's no talk of ghosts.'

We sat quietly for a while. I couldn't think of a better way of looking at things. Perhaps McLean had been wrong; they hadn't come back. But others had, and as Laidlaw and I sat on in warm pipesmoke-flavoured sunshine, we greeted some of the walking wounded and chatted to them. I found myself wondering how many more fine young men, high-born or low, would return home broken and shattered, and how many would lie forever beneath other green fields in France and Flanders.