

## OYSTERS FROM SWEETINGS'

Treaty of Union World Exclusive! A newly discovered masterpiece by the British Empire's greatest writer - John Buchan.

OUR MESS doesn't go in for name-dropping snobbery and that sort of guff, and this war has nothing to do with rot like race or rank or class or property. But it is about stopping rootless cosmopolitans in the form of Boche or Bolshevik from getting up this sort of show all over again. And it is about the right of a chap to put people off his estates when he doesn't want them there: and that's just as true for the high Kaffir grasslands about Blauefoomwoonstein as it is for the high and purple glens of Ross-shire in the grouse and stalking seasons!

So when I heard someone cry, "What Ho! Dick, I think you've got the battalion", I whirled round to see my batman swim up to the firing-step with an important message. Old Watty (the Watty-Homes have kept for us on the high veldt about Ettrickdale for generations) had just lost another leg, but that's nothing to a white man like Watty.

"What Ho! Dick", he cried, "you've got the battalion and an invitation from Lady Mary to the start of Archie's grouse in Ross-shire tomorrow, unless I am very much mistaken".

I drop-kicked Watty - he had been a tolerably good wing-half in his day - back down to the support line, and ripped asunder the letter he'd brought.

I knew it was for me, for it was addressed in a lithe and boyish hand to -

Sir Brigadier Richard (Dick) Hannay, VC

## The Hottest Part of the Front

### The Front.

And I knew it was from Lady Mary, for she had enclosed a photograph of herself in her new Boy Scout rig of tunic, cap and khaki shorts.

Archie - you probably know of him as Lord Archie Roylance, one of our greatest landowners - is Lady Mary's father, of course, and made his pile prospecting with half-breed trackers up in Transvaal and teaching the natives how to croft in Matabeleland. And, just as Old Watty had said, he was indeed having a shoot on his high moors at Crask the very next day.

But there was something strange about the invitation too: a dark sense of foreboding, of impending disaster, of assault on the established social order. And it quickly put me in mind of the early days of the quest for the Black Stone, of which you may have read something in the newspapers recently (though they didn't tell the half of it, and that half badly).

Now, Archie's place at Crask - the keep is 13th century, and most of the rest is no later than the 16th - is rather modest for a man of his resources, but at 300 rooms it was certainly big enough for our little party. (Perhaps I should say, by the way, that it has been in the family for centuries, and though Archie still owns Matabeleland, this little corner of England, where the wide sun-steeped spaces of the upland veldt sweep down like some dark scented glen on the Berg, has always been home to him).

As well as Archie, Lady Mary and me, the party was composed of the Honourable Sandy (we'd gone up to Harrow on the same day) Arbuthnot, who had recently been skulking in Damaraland and the long grass of the Lebombo Flats on secret work, and our old friend

Peter Pienaar, fresh from making a great name for himself in the Flying Corps.

Micky was also there: you probably know of him as Lord Michael Forsyth, one of our greatest merchant bankers and a man of incorruptible loyalty to his native land. Sir Edward Leithen, the leading barrister, was there too, still convalescing (for Loos was no picnic, as everyone knows), along with Lord Brasenose (who'd got his brigade on the eve of Arras), and Viscount Newdigate - a young blood with a wound stripe, who'd done rather well in that dreadful business at the Delville Wood.

There was also a pair of white-feather university types, who preferred to eat in the kitchen - one of them a quavering professor, and the other his amanuensis: a poor, broken-down tout in spectacles and a conchie's beard. In the general vicinity there were some scores of field-hands, while the crofters' widows lodged in ample huts on the lower shore, and there was in addition a kraal of Zulu beaters (for Archie has rather a lot of land in Natal too) to drive the birds down to the butts.

Now, the Ross-shire grouse is not a skeery bird at the best of times, and it took the Zulu some time to rise them. But then old Pienaar let forth a great hulloo in the old Taal - for of course he had seen the Impi before any of us - and the birds began to come down on us like the Boche did that day I won my ribbon at Lone Pine (though to tell the truth I was only out there to stop our subalterns blowing themselves to glory).

I was still filling my pipe when Archie, who'd had a lot of point-blank sport in the Mashona Rising, dropped the first brace in the blink of an eye. Old Aitken - a half-breed cur that Archie hadn't the

heart to shoot - dragged the birds to Lady Mary's pretty feet and looked up adoringly at her, panting for his biscuit.

But Lady Mary cuffed him aside and cried, "Great God, there is a secret message in code attached to one of these birds".

This was a puzzler at first: but Sandy has always been deep in secret work - as you know - and codes are an open book to him.

After a moment's deep thought, he cried, "Great God, a gang of rootless cosmopolitans have taken over our provincial settlement at Edinburgh! They are sending messages to our crofters, calling on them to rise up and expropriate our great landed estates in a vicious spirit of small-minded class antagonism and out-dated national sentiment!".

In this moment of crisis, I heard a sudden crash. Lady Mary had fainted from shock! In an instant Sandy, hard as iron after a lifetime on the high veldt above Blauefoomwoomstein, was on his knees, and his trusty old hand, schooled in the old days on the great voortrekker mule trains to Kimberley, was thrust into her scouting rig.

"Great God, Sandy", I cried, "will she live or will she die?"

"Great God, Hannay", he cried, "it's an old dodge which I learned as a boy from the Ndebele on the high veldt above Blauefoomwoonstein in the days when the Impi was stamping mealie at the kraal and Chaka was far too small for the Great Test of the Sacred Stone. If this won't do the trick, nothing will!".

Sandy was foaming at the mouth. I remembered that terrible night in Stamboul when he'd shared a moment with a boyish belly-dancer from Aleppo who'd just come down the old Silk Road from Samarkand. (You'll probably know the place: it's a little private

cabinet near the Harem, down that back lane which runs from the Kurdish Bazaar in Galata to the old Nubian slave-ferry at Ratchik).

Although she was still quite unconscious, Lady Mary let off a hideous shriek. My heart pounded with joy!

Never had I seen such a vision of pure loveliness: the fine womanly line to the curve of her jaw, her loose and honest limbs, her Scout cap set on a torrent of wild hair like spun gold in a Border gloaming, and her eyes grave and deep like a winter trout-pool up on the high veldt as we rode out one silver morning to hunt-down young springbok!

Now old Pienaar was on his knees too.

"Great God, Dick", he cried, "there is second secret message which is attached to Archie's second bird".

I had never until that moment seen old Pienaar look so serious, though we have been - as you probably know - in some devilish tight fixes in our time. It was a telegram from the Front. In solemn tones, Pienaar read it out.

"Return at once. Big Push tomorrow. Bring a barrel of oysters from Sweetings' if you can".

"Great God, Hannay", cried Sandy, "isn't this what you writers call a timelock? Do something man, do something!"

Now, I don't mind admitting I was in a blue funk at this, and for some moments would rather have been quodded with the artist types in Broadmoor. Trench-fighting with the Boche in cold steel is grand sport of course, but shooting down a man - even a rootless cosmopolitan - in cold blood is a beastly business.

I noticed that Lady Mary had recovered from her faint. She had changed into a yachting cap, squadron blazer and grey flannels, and was looking very nautical.

"It sounds a perfectly beastly business to me too", she piped.

I looked sternly at her and said in a very deliberate way, "A lot of good things are beastly to begin with, Lady Mary".

At this she cried, "Anyway, Bolsheviks are just like trouts. They are cold-blooded creatures and don't feel pain the way normal humans do".

This put some spine into all of us, and we rushed back to Archie's castle at Crask to make preparations for the attack, and to call-up reinforcements from the surrounding estates.

But the white-feather professor (I don't think I caught his name) importuned the great landowner - on the steps of his own castle! - and Archie had to speak rather sharply with him.

"Just take your money, man, and get out now!"

"But what shall we say?", wailed the old professor, who at the same time cried to his servant, "Take a note, Fry, write down everything you're told!"

Lady Mary cried, "Just say they wilfully overcrowded themselves and became overpopulated as a result. And say we tried our best to stop them leaving, but they just wouldn't listen to us".

Added Archie, "Some of them even burned down their own cabins, you know, and hoped to blame us for the deed. Will that do?"

"Thank you very much, your lordship", the tout said in a humble tone: and he and his companion were thrown off the property at once, with a strong warning about the dogs.

Events began to move quickly now. A runner was sent over the Haripol Pass to Machray Lodge, to rouse-out Micky's natives at once. A second was sent down by the River Doran to the strictly-

private beach at Brasenose House where there was still a tidal stockade of redundant crofters (for the S.S. Manitoba had been sent to the Front).

Old Peter Pienaar took his sjambok down to Newdigate's place at Inverlarrig, to stand-to the Impi there. Sandy loped over to his property at Glenraden, and promised to be back with every able-bodied man and boy within the hour. And Archie sent me up the river (there was a grand late-run fellow under the black bonnet in Davie's Pot) to Strathlarrig House, where I mustered Sir Edward's Zulus as quickly as I could.

These were a desperate few hours, and I don't mind admitting that I might have forgotten some things, and might have put some things down in the wrong order. But when everyone was assembled, we made a splendid sight. As soon as Archie blew his hunting horn - just as we do at the Front - we all set off in the open Bentleys in grand style, with topees, horns and every Purdey we could lay hands on.

A radiant Lady Mary sang Cherry Ripe at the top of her voice and held aloft a gigantic Union Flag on a mighty pole, while the crofters, field-hands and Zulu Impi (in full battle-dress) brought-up the rear.

I'll draw a veil over that Hellish trek, except to say that it was quite as terrible as our famous night march under Boche gunfire from the Loos cross-roads up to the regimental bath-house at Beaumont Hamel. Lots of the chaps didn't make it (which is why you'll see Zulu names to this day on all the war memorials that run in a broad and noble swathe down throught the western Lothians).

But soon we were close to the Bolshevik lair. Peter Pienaar took a raiding party out, and quickly returned with some extraordinary news. The raiders had captured a rootless cosmopolitan in a fur-

coat and a bathchair. He said he was called Iain Aonghas MacAoidh (though goodness knows what his real name was) and the skellum quickly squealed.

Apparently the Bolsheviks were discussing issues with which they had no proper business - such as land reform! - and seemed to think they were some sort of Parliament!

"Great God, Dick", I heard Archie cry, "if we don't put a stop to this they'll start to interfere in Imperial affairs next!"

Time was very short now, for we all had to get back to our battalions in time for the next Big Push. There was nothing for it but to press ahead with the attack.

Just before we went in, Archie said, "There are some things no one has the right to ask of any white man, Dick. I pray that Good will come of it. But I may be sending you to your Death. Great God, what a damned hard taskmaster Duty is!"

Then we closed with the enemy, and the fighting began. Now, cold steel is a hard school and I won't go into details about what happened next (for Lady Mary might read this) beyond saying that it was a beastly business, and some beastly things had to be done. As events turned out, it was a damned close-run thing too, and for some time the very fate of civilisation hung in the balance.

But Good did indeed come of it: and when the end was near, we slipped the Zulu from the leash as quickly as we could. What a climax that was! Archie - that's Lord Archie Roylance, one of our greatest landowners - said he hadn't enjoyed such slaughter since he started improving his crofters in Matabeleland.

And when it was all over, we even had our photograph taken. You'll be able to see it soon, for it is coming out in the next volume of the battalion's Official War History.

By this stage, Lady Mary - that's Archie's daughter, of course - had changed into a girlish frock and a straw boater with flowers in it, and was looking very summery. You can see her in the centre of the photograph, I'm told, surrounded by Zulus and crofters, and still holding her Union Flag proudly aloft.

And I understood then what a precious thing this little England is, how old and kindly and comforting, how wholly worth striving for. The freedom of an acre of her soil is cheaply bought by the blood of the best of us!

I turned to Sandy and cried, "Lady Mary and I are to be wed, Sandy, once this Hellish war started by international finance capital is over and won".

"Great God", Sandy cried, "I thought she were a boy! To the victor the spoil, Hannay! May the best man win, etc. etc".

And at that we all left for our battalions and the Next Big Push. I got the night train up to town, lunched at my club, collected the oysters at Sweetings', and made it up to the firing-step in time for that glorious moment when I took my Loyal Highlanders over the top and out into the gas-curtains and thunderous poppy-meadows of No Man's Land.

We took no casualties at all that morning, by the way, apart from the barrel of oysters - but that, of course, is another story altogether.

(as found in a secret archive by Iain Fraser Grigor)

For: Short Story.