

Mustering the drought-blistered paddocks,
he used his stirrup iron to brain
the lambs that would not walk.

Drenching a race full of rams, one lowered its head
and crushed his fingers against the rail.
He gave it fifteen shots of Thibenzol
and laughed as it buckled dead drunk into the dirt.

Obsessed with death, he took an axe,
stepped into the back of a truck filled
with crippled sheep, and went to work.
Surfacing, his shirt and jeans splattered
with blood and bone,
he threw down the axe, wiped his hands,
and turned to the applauding silence of the paddock:

“You should’ve seen the claret!”

(from *Jerilderie*)

DOUG BUCKLEY

THE FAIR-MINDED WOMAN

I only ever saw a couple of females up on the Line in France. One of them was the fair-minded woman and she sticks in the memory like sweet-and-sour, mostly sweet. Christmas Day it was, back in 1917, and it still makes a man smile.

Sel Tankard remembers her too. He was from well down south near Bundaberg, and a friend even though he was a sergeant. He had a high spot where he could see the German Line for fifty yards. “Come and have a look at this,” he says from behind his field-glasses.

I never took to fraternising with field-glasses. If you could see the Germans they could see you, so I wasn’t the one to volunteer for looking into the glasses. But he drops them down to me.

“What do you make of that?” He’s looking at me but pointing forward, and scrambling down from his possie so I can climb up. “At the stump. See anything?”

So I got up there. And after a while I picked up what he meant.

“It could be a bit of rag. I think it’s getting higher.”

Sel angled himself across to another high ledge. I tossed him his glasses and watched him while he focussed in.

“It’s a hand.”

I grabbed my 303, I didn’t take to waiting round in those days.

“No. Not yet,” he says, “there’s something funny going on. We’ll keep an eye on them for a bit.” He slung the glasses back across to me. “You scan along the rest of the sector. You can see more from where you are.” So it wasn’t such a good possie.

You get to know your part of the Line when you’re not on the move, and your opposition. “How many of them would there be in our sector Sel? Ten? Fifteen?”

“Five. I’d put it at about five.”

“And how many wounded?”

“Another twenty-five wounded. Thirty altogether I’d say.” Then he grabbed the glasses again.

He must have had them jammed against his forehead for ten minutes. “There are seven of them,” he announced at last. “Did I say five? There are seven hands waving. Seven men.”

It turned out that he was nearly right.

“So what do we do?”

“Buggered if I know.”

As we studied them we realized that the hands were getting higher and higher, and heads were starting to appear. Some of our fellows would have noticed them. “No firing until directed,” Sel orders and they passed it along.

One by one, seven grey shapes appeared full length in front of their trenches, plain as day, with their hands up in the air, poor buggers, like you see on the television. Seven clear targets, walking slowly towards us.

Naturally we wondered what sort of a trap they might be working. They could have had hand-guns in the backs of their belts I suppose but I don’t remember thinking of that.

Of course I didn’t know at the time that one of them was the Fair-Minded Woman. I’ve been meeting her and her mates ever since I

came back, the fair-minded type. You'd of met them too, though I dare say they wouldn't of stuck in your mind so much. Naturally.

We could almost see their faces when a funny thing happened. One of them gave an order and they all stopped walking and just stood there. We were getting a bit worked up of course. They were lucky some tear-away didn't ping them then and there, with the tension.

"No firing till ordered," Sel yells and the German opposite to me flinched, poor bugger. You would have too. It could have been "Fire" for all they knew I suppose, but it wasn't. We just had to watch them, and keep our heads down, specially since Sel had told us about a new machine-gun the Germans had brought in over-night. You don't tangle with them bastards if you can help it and we didn't know their traverse of fire yet. The seven could have been a trap. In my book anyway.

So they're just standing there. Then one of them in the middle, must have been their NCO, drops one hand slowly to his head. Then he tips his helmet to the ground and shoves his hand back up again fast. He's standing there bare-headed.

I suppose that would be when I first noticed that mine was a woman. I don't remember as how her hair was long or anything, though it must've been. But she was a woman all right. They have a habit of looking different even at a distance. There were two or three beautiful nurses of our own back a little bit, but precious few I can tell you, and never up on the Line.

"I think mine's a woman Sel," I whispered but I don't think he heard.

I couldn't take my eyes off of her. It seemed to be the sort of thing the Hun would do, pick out a few belligerent sort of women and train them up with rifles.

Then their leader suddenly did the funniest thing I ever seen before or since. He started clapping. He didn't bring his hands down or anything, he kept them way up above his head, just clapping, and we were even more confused.

After they saw he never got shot for it, the others did the same. There they all were, applauding us. We hadn't shot them so they clapped us, the silly buggers.

But it worked. You can't shoot a man while he's clapping for you, can you? Their leader clapped us at first because we hadn't shot his gang for coming out unarmed. Then the rest of them were clapping us because we never shot their leader when he clapped. We were trapped. We never

took prisoners but here we were taking a party of seven and a couple a dozen wounded, out of flattery. You have to hand it to them.

Some of them never even bothered to keep their hands up. They just stood there clapping away as if they were at a concert, and grinning, some of them. But my woman didn't grin, I remember that.

We were well and truly stumped. I was anyway.

"Nobody move," says Sel, "just keep me covered," and he stands up and climbs right out into the open. We didn't know for sure where their new machine-gun was, so what Sel did seemed pretty stupid to me, but he did it, standing up there, exposed as you like.

Mind you, I'm not so sure he knew what to do next. They wanted like hell for us to trust them. And Sel did. But it wasn't a premeditated sort of thing, all of a sudden Sel just trusts them.

Not only that. When Sel stood there for a second or two without his head being shot off by a sniper or somebody, he suddenly drops his rifle and tosses off his cap.

Now there's something a soldier never does. I've been on charge back home at the Kensington pony track for going to breakfast without locking up my rifle. But it didn't worry Sel. The rifle fell to the ground next to his feet and his cap dropped right back into the trench near me. Then he starts clapping, like them.

You don't have to believe it. But it happened all right and I remember it every now and then. Of course Sel never got a medal for it. It wasn't the usual sort of thing. But it was exciting, you'd appreciate that, very exciting for a young bloke. Different from the excitement of the War.

Then another one of our blokes did exactly the same. Drops his rifle and climbs to the surface and starts clapping just like Sel.

So I did too, don't ask me why. It was a bit of a struggle getting out, and some of the boys were starting to yell at me, but I only had one idea, to get up there with the others and bloody well clap.

There we all were, seven of them including the girl, and three of us. Mutual admiration or something, all clapping away. B Platoon got the shock of their lives I believe.

Then the seven of them started walking towards us again, very slowly. So we started walking towards them, slow also.

She was a female all right, a real live woman, clapping me, and I was clapping her. Quite an unusual way to meet a girl.

Well Sel was a few paces in front of us and he walked right up to his first bloke and you know what, he hugs him. Plain and simple. In those

days sportsmen never hugged each-other like you see today, never, and certainly not soldiers. But there it was. Enemies too. And right in the middle of bloody no-man's land.

You get swept away with things sometimes don't you? The look on the girl's face was as much as to say she wouldn't mind doing the same thing, so we did. Not only a hug but a bloody great wet kiss, fair on the mouth. Then another couple of hugs to do it properly. "Thank-you," she says in a cut-off German kind of way. Then she mumbles about it being Christmas Day, and something about the wounded.

I looked around towards the other bloke of ours that was mug enough to come into the open, and he was at it too. Of course him and Sel only had blokes, but there they were hugging them in turn, two or three each.

At that point I noticed that nobody had taken on the last one of their seven. He was on my flank, a good way off to the right. It came to me that he might be the Joker in their pack with a hand-mine up the back of his shirt. But like I say, by now I was all excited in a peculiar sort of way, and I was dead set on showing the Germans we had nothing against them if they were dinkum.

I needn't have worried. He was heading towards me, which is the last thing he'd do if he was going to use a hand-mine, and he wasn't clapping which he probably would have kept up. So I knew he'd be all right, the poor little bugger, just a bit shy or something like that.

Then I noticed his shape.

Damn me if it wasn't another female, and a full-blown woman this time, not just a girl like her friend.

It was another shock. But I wasn't going to be put off. I take to anybody if they're a decent sort, even if they're a woman.

"I'm an Australian," says the Fair-Minded Woman, from the distance, "I think you should know."

What was going on was this. By Christmas Eve we knew for sure from the moans that they were running out of pain-killer, Sel being of the opinion that they might be cut off from their Battalion. So the Fair-Minded-Woman had taken it on herself to sneak across early on Christmas morning with some morphia. Game! Then she found the Germans and their nurse were willing to come over for the sake of their wounded.

So we were standing together in the snow. I could tell by the look on her face that she'd be satisfied, in the line of duty, to let things stand as they were, though probably a bit happier if I doled out the same treat-

ment as I had to the German nurse. But as I say, she was the Fair-Minded Woman. They'd never nail her for false pretences. She didn't want me to be under any misapprehension such as thinking she might be an enemy that needed being decent to.

"I'm an Australian," she says, fair-minded, "you don't have to kiss me."

BRIAN WALKER

TUBER, OR NOT TUBER?

(Apologies to W.S.)

What is this brittle thing,
the potato chip? One thin slice
of life boiled in midnight oil
till it is fresh and crisp?
Life will not grant us many moments
that sound good as they taste.
O subterranean reservoir
of nourishment, Tuberius,
cross-sectioned by commercial swords,
where is your rounded majesty?

BARBARA GILES

INVICTUS

Faced by his end he will not be persuaded.
Pascal's craven wager's not for him.
He takes no comfort, knowing of no purpose,
acknowledging no plan but dust to dust
magnificently faces his undoing.

My easy pantheism, my bond with earth
less admirable than his iron disbelief.
And yet he weeps, in leaving us behind.