



'Intensely atmospheric'

Literary Review



Jim
Kelly

The
Skeleton
Man

A PHILIP DRYDEN MYSTERY

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The Skeleton Man
by
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St Swithun's Day
Sunday, 15 July 1990

It was a child's high stool, commandeered for the execution.

I stood with my back to the wall, part of the crowd, not the mob, but even then I knew that such a line could not be drawn: a line to separate the guilty from the innocent.

Twelve of us then, and the accused on the stool, the rope tight to the neck.

Again the question. 'Why?' Each time marked by a blow to the naked ribs, blood welling up beneath the skin.

I could have answered, ended it then. But instead I pressed my back against the cool wall, wondering why there were no more denials, wondering why life had been given up.

The victim's knees shook, and the legs of the stool grated on the cellar's brick floor. Outside in the night there was a dog's bark, heard through the trapdoor above, and twelve chimes from the church on the hill.

Then the ringleader did it, because he had the right that was in his blood. Stepping forward he swung a foot, kicking the stool away.

The body, a dead weight, fell; but not to earth. The plastic click of the neck breaking marked the extent of the rope, followed by the grinding of shattered vertebra as the body turned, its legs running on air. The moment of death stretched out, calibrated by the rattle in the throat. Urine trickled from the bare feet, yellow in the torchlight.

*I fainted, standing, for a heartbeat. When I looked again
the arms, bound and ugly in death, were lifeless.*

It was justice, they said, licking parted lips.

Justice in Jude's Ferry.

Seventeen years later

St Swithun's Day

Sunday, 15 July 2007

Whittlesea Mere

I

The Capri shook to the sound of snoring, and through the fly-spattered windscreen of the mini-cab Philip Dryden contemplated the Fen horizon. Humph, the driver, slept peacefully, his lips brought together in a small bow, his sixteen stone compressing the seat beneath him. Around them the drained wasteland that had once been Whittlesea Mere, an inland lake the size of a small English county, stretched beyond sight. Overhead a cloud the size of a battleship sailed across an unblemished sky.

The cab was parked in the cool shadow of a hawthorn, the only tree visible to the naked eye. They'd presented themselves at 9.00am precisely that morning at the checkpoint to Whittlesea Mere Military Firing Range, and been directed down a potholed drove to the assembly point: the wreck of a wartime tank, ferns hanging from the dark observation slit. They hadn't seen another human being since they'd been waved through the gates, which had not stopped Dryden imagining they were being watched.

The reporter smoothed down his camouflage tunic and felt the familiar anxieties crowding round. This isn't a war zone, he told himself, it's a military exercise.

And I'm not a soldier, I'm a reporter. I'm here to write about it, not take part. But the sight of a line of soldiers marching towards them, raising a cloud of desert-red peat dust, made his heartbeat pick up. A trickle of sweat set out from the edge of his thick jet-black hair, down towards his eye. He brushed it aside, aware that another one would quickly take its place.

Dryden checked his watch: 10.15am. The time had come. He fingered the webbing inside the blue combat helmet he was holding. The neat carved features of his medieval face remained static. He got out, the Capri's rusted door hinges screaming, and circled the cab to Humph's open side window.

'You can go,' he said, waking the cabbie, watching as he struggled to remember where he was and what he was doing.

'Really . . .' said Humph, wiping his nose with a small pillowcase. 'Can't I stick around until they start trying to kill people?'

Dryden tried to smile. 'Just remember. Same place, five pm. And for Christ's sake don't leave me here.' Boudicca, Humph's greyhound, dozing on a tartan rug in the back seat, yawned in the heat, trapping a bluebottle. Humph turned the ignition key, the engine coughed once and started, and he pulled away at speed, leaving an amber-red cloud as he raced towards the safety of the distant checkpoint. Dryden, alone, felt the hairs on his neck bristle.

The soldiers approached the tank and at a word

from an officer made temporary camp. They sat, feet in the ditch, and broke out water bottles while a billycan was set up on a portable gas ring. Winding chimneys of white smoke rose from cigarettes in the still, hot air. Dryden sensed their collective antagonism to the presence of the press, and watched, oddly fascinated, as one soldier dismantled and oiled an automatic rifle. Another stood, walked a few yards downwind and urinated into a ditch.

Sensing the calculated insult Dryden looked away and heard laughter at his back, then footsteps approaching. He turned to face a heavy man with a crown on his jacket. The officer made his way through the gorse, picking up his legs and arms as he walked, a self-conscious compensation perhaps for the onset of middle age. Dryden guessed he was in his late thirties, but a military uniform had never made anyone look any younger. The major's hair was boot-polish black and shone unnaturally, but his complexion was poor, blotched as if his face had been scrubbed with a nailbrush. Cross-checking his position on a hand-held GPS with a map in a plastic see-through wallet he noticed Dryden, and was unable to hide a frisson of annoyance.

'Dryden?' he asked. 'Philip Dryden – from *The Crow*?' They shook hands, the soldier's grip was surprisingly weak, the voice higher than he'd expected but holding some warmth, despite the clipped tones. 'Broderick. Major John Broderick.' He seemed embarrassed by the informality of the first name and turned

to scan the horizon. ‘You’ve signed the blood sheet?’ he asked.

Dryden nodded. At the gate he’d been presented with an official form for signature which effectively removed his right to claim compensation if some idiot with a long-range peashooter turned him into a human jigsaw.

The major smiled, taking five years off his age: ‘Just routine. Only with live firing we insist. Regulations. You lot in the press would be the first to get on our case if we broke the rules.’

Laughter rolled along the line of men by the ditch, and Dryden wondered what was funny. Excluded, he looked towards the north where the guns must be, hidden beyond the horizon.

‘So they’ll fire over our heads, right?’ he asked, realizing immediately that there was little alternative. ‘Sorry. Stupid question.’

The major nodded.

‘When does the shelling start?’ Dryden asked.

‘Maroon – that’s the signal flare – goes up 10.50am. They’ll hit it on the pip. Ten minutes later they open fire with an eight-minute bombardment, then we go into the first line of attack and stop. Then, 11.20, another maroon, followed by a further five-minute bombardment at 11.30. Then we move forward to the targets.’ Broderick rubbed his hands together. ‘Pictures?’

Dryden swung round a digital camera. ‘I’m a one-man band.’

‘Great.’ The major smiled. That was all the military was ever interested in, thought Dryden – pictures to send home, pictures for the scrapbook, pictures for the mess wall, pictures in the local paper, pictures for the MoD. Sod the words.

Broderick looked up at the sky. ‘St Swithun’s Day,’ he said. ‘Looks like we could have a good month.’ The battleship cloud was a distant smudge to the east, and the rising sun was already compressing their shadows around their boots.

Dryden slapped a mosquito against the back of his hand. ‘You Territorial Army too?’ he asked, keen to talk about something other than the weather.

‘Sure, sure. These are my men,’ he said, managing not to make it sound proprietorial.

‘So what do you do in Civvy Street?’

The major looked him in the face. ‘Business,’ he said, ducking the question.

A maroon thudded from the direction of the checkpoint, the signal that they had ten minutes before the bombardment began. The dull percussion in the sky was marked by a purple blotch and matched by a solid jolt through the earth.

The men stood and gathered round, following Broderick up onto the top of the old tank. The billycan was passed around, the tea inside reeked of tannin, had been sweetened with Carnation milk, and was the colour of liquid cattle manure. Dryden took a gulp, casually, knowing he was being watched.

Broderick sat on the turret, spreading out a map

for the men. ‘Right. Listen up. Today’s exercise is live firing. This range was requisitioned in 1907. That’s a century. So far the number of soldiers who have left Whittlesea Mere in a body bag is four. There is absolutely no law of nature which says one of you can’t make it five, so listen.’

Dryden imagined the crumpled body bag, his own hand peeping from the folds of black plastic, blood under the fingernails. ‘War games,’ he thought, realizing what an obscene juxtaposition of words it was.

The major’s briefing was brutally short. The Royal Artillery would bomb the two targets – twice – then the company would move in, conduct house-to-house searches, flush out insurgents, secure the target and replace the red target flags with blue. All shells would be live, all personal ammunition blank. Blue helmets denoted Blue Force – those attacking. Red Force, the enemy, was in position. Its soldiers, wooden cutout targets with concentric rings running out from the heart, wore red hats; a helpful designation Dryden could not help feeling undermined the integrity of the exercise. His own yellow armband proclaimed him a non-combatant.

‘And this is our target,’ said Broderick, stabbing a finger at the heart of the Fen wasteland shown on the map. ‘The lost village of Jude’s Ferry.’

When the first shell ripped overhead Dryden threw himself into the peaty soil, unable to stop his fingers digging down. He knew now why so many corpses in pictures of the carnage that was the trenches of the First World War seemed to be trying to bury themselves, clawing a way down, seeking the only route of escape. Dryden had no illusions about his reserves of courage. He was running on an empty tank and always had been. He was scared of loud noises, scared of pain, scared of dogs to the point of petrification, scared of heights, scared of small spaces and, crucially, scared of looking scared – a final twist which had ironically secured him a reputation for courage.

Sweating silently into his unfamiliar kit he could smell the fear, a pungent aroma normally associated with a loose drain cover. As each volley of shells wailed overhead he hugged the earth, drinking in the smell of warm grass and cow parsley.

The first salvo complete, Broderick got his men to their feet and they moved forward a mile over rough country, taking cover along a dyke dotted with Flanders poppies.

The second maroon sounded and Dryden counted

the minutes, lying on his back, watching swallows overhead. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and smelt the salt. Broderick made a makeshift pillow with his hands behind his head.

Dryden broke the tension with a question. 'How can you be sure there's no one in the village?'

Broderick brought his hands round and held them up against the sky. 'Well, strictly speaking, we can't. There's a perimeter fence, and the MoD's spent a lot of money in the last few days catching up on repairs, but animals get through, so I guess people could too. There are regular warning boards on the fence, and the old roads are all gated with signs. Quite a bit of the perimeter is bordered with open water – there's the Sixteen Foot Drain, Whittlesea Drain and Popham's Eau. Red flags fly at various points on the fence and there are several over today's targets in the village. Frankly, you'd have to wilfully ignore all that to get into danger.'

The shells began again and Dryden flipped over onto his stomach, his eyes closed, counting, until finally there was silence, and for the first time the distant hiss of a wind over Whittlesea Mere. When he opened his eyes he found Broderick still beside him, making some wild heather into a small bouquet using silver cigarette paper, and trying to fasten it to his tunic with a pin. Dryden could imagine the major chasing butterflies along the trenches of the Great War.

For the first time Dryden looked ahead, south, towards a low hill crowned by a medieval church. Beyond it a

cluster of rooftops and the pencil-thin chimney of a long-abandoned sugar beet factory marked the site of the old village. And to the east another low hill, this one dominated by a Victorian water tower in brick with a black metal tank crowned by a whitewood dovecote. The village of Jude's Ferry: a community of not much more than a hundred souls, abandoned seventeen years earlier to accommodate the army and its allies, keen to train for foreign wars.

Artillery had rained down on the targets ahead and smoke rose from a point west of the village itself, while occasional fire flickered amongst the ruins of a house about a hundred yards east of the church, which Dryden took to be the old vicarage. Somewhere automatic gunfire crackled like a party-popper.

'OK?' said Broderick.

Dryden nodded, lifting himself up on his elbows. 'I'm always surprised there's so much left,' he said. 'I guess . . .,' he shrugged. 'I don't know. You'd think after ten years it would be like Baghdad. Looks more like Camberwick Green.'

'Yup. That's what we need. It's about skills for urban warfare,' said Broderick, and Dryden sensed that this was a subject that failed to make the major's heart sing as sweetly as the wild heather.

'You might as well have one of these,' said the soldier, handing him a map.

It was a large-scale plan of Jude's Ferry, each building etched in, complete with ground-floor windows, doors, yards and gates.

‘Only you and I have one of these today. The red dots show the exact positions of the defending targets – the cutout soldiers. That way, hopefully, you can see if these guys can do their job. The dotted lines mark cellars, and they’ll need to flush out targets during house-to-house searches. Clearing, entering and making safe, that kind of thing – all vital skills.’

He scanned the horizon ahead with binoculars. ‘So you can see that the last thing we want is to flatten the place. Artillery targets today are the old vicarage and the factory: not for the first time. Ordnance is light, even if they hit they won’t wipe anything out. Plus the engineers go in every few months and replace basic structures – nothing fancy, just so the cover is there. And there’s a network of water pipes which were fed from that water tower, so we’ve always been able to fight fires.’ He licked his upper lip. ‘We’ve got a new pump now, by the river, so the water tower’s redundant – which is a good job coz the water stank. The rats up there are the size of dogs.’

He scanned the village with the glasses again. ‘When you get up close you’ll see that the years have taken their toll all right. It ain’t Merrie England, believe me.’ He turned aside, adding quietly. ‘Never was.’

A radio operator ran up, bent double. A request had been made for permission for another bombardment. Broderick surveyed the line of men along the dyke and the village ahead before giving his OK and sending a command along the ditch to sit tight until

the signal to advance was given by word. Then he knelt down in the grass and gave Dryden his field glasses.

‘Try looking – the shells can spook people out, but watching helps.’

Dryden smiled, accepting, studying the outline of the village church, the distant rooftops beyond down by the river. Above them the maroon thudded a third time. Broderick rolled over and lay on his back, checking his watch, a pair of swifts engaged in a dogfight high above them.

‘So,’ he said, finally. ‘This is big news, is it?’

‘Jude’s Ferry?’ said Dryden. ‘Sure. It’s been a big story since the start. When the villagers were shifted out in 1990 they were told they might be back in a year – not just for the annual church service on St Swithun’s Day, but back for good. They moved out in the July and the Gulf War started in August – so that was the end of that optimistic scenario. It was never going to happen. They tried everything they could to get back. Now the legal action in the High Court’s been thrown out it’s finally over. Frankly, I’m amazed the courts stopped the shelling while the case was still live . . . how long’s it been?’

Broderick twiddled a fen violet: ‘Must be eighteen months since we’ve been on the range – perhaps more.’

Dryden nodded. ‘You know the rest. The MoD’s announced there’ll be no return to Jude’s Ferry – not even for the annual service. But they rang us, wanted

to know if we'd like to interview the top brass – why the village was a vital resource for training in the modern army – the familiar pitch. Charm offensive. Least they could do was let us go in one last time. So here I am.'

Broderick laughed. 'We've been using a range up near Lincoln, so the lads are pleased to be back – most of 'em are local and this way they get home for tea.'

'Yeah,' said Dryden, failing to smile.

'You think it was rough justice?' asked Broderick.

'At the time, a lot of people didn't see why the army couldn't go back to using the range half a dozen times a year like they had done since – what did you say? – 1907. The village was never a target. They'd always made sure the damage to agricultural land was minimal – most of the big exercises were timed for after the harvest. They'd close the road in for a day, clear livestock, but otherwise it didn't make much odds to the village.'

Broderick sighed. 'I'll think you'll find that no definite promises were made, you know, when we moved them out...'

'I was there,' said Dryden, cutting in.

The major's eyes, watery brown, failed to hold Dryden's. He bit his lip and, flipping over on to his stomach, checked his watch again. 'Thirty seconds,' he said.

'I was there the day of the evacuation,' Dryden repeated. 'My first paper was over at Bedford, it was

a big story so I went in to do a colour piece. There were promises made all right, otherwise they wouldn't have got some of them out. Nothing in writing, of course. White lies. Khaki lies.'

The major stayed silent, outranked by an eye-witness.

'Anyway, that's history now,' continued Dryden. 'Nine/eleven, Madrid, London, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, who knows where next . . . ? They need the village. And the Americans want to join the party too. So game, set and match. Like you said, urban warfare. Jude's Ferry's too valuable to give back.'

Before the major could reply another gout of flame erupted briefly at the edge of the churchyard, and then they heard the scream of the shell overhead.

'Shite,' said Broderick, waving up the company radio operator. 'Tell 'em they're fifty yards off the vicarage to the west. Tell 'em quick.'

Dryden used the digital camera and a telephoto to get some snaps. He had the church in centre focus when the final volley came in, and he saw clearly the moment when a shell punched a hole through the roof before exploding in the nave; a window of multicoloured glass bursting out into the churchyard, a flame glimpsed within.

Broderick was standing: 'Last sodding shell. Typical.' He glanced at the reporter and Dryden guessed he was weighing up the possibility of sending him back. But Dryden, they both knew, had seen enough.

'Right. Radio Red Centre, tell 'em the urban phase

is off. We'll assess the damage, report back.' He stood, produced an umpire's whistle and blew it. Along the line of the dyke the men stood, stretching, and a few removed their tin hats. Dryden half expected them to start playing football in no-man's-land. Broderick jogged down the dyke bank and vaulted the drain below, leading the way across a field pitted with old shell holes and thorn bushes.

It took them twenty minutes to reach the church. As the village unfolded itself to Dryden he kept expecting to see movement: washing perhaps, flapping on a line, a stooped figure hoeing in a garden, a trundling tractor encircled by seagulls. But except for the rooks over the water tower and the limp target flags the village was lifeless, the shadows untroubled.

At the graveyard wall the major split the company, sending half on to make sure that at least the second target – the old sugar beet factory – had been hit according to plan. The rest were told to check out the graveyard and the exterior of the church and then assemble at the church doors to gauge the damage inside.

Dryden retrieved the digital camera from the webbing inside his tunic and moved amongst the headstones. The stray shell which had punched out the window had sent glass and stone fragments spraying out. He noticed graffiti on some of the reverse faces of the stones, including two sets of 'TROOPS OUT' and one reading 'GIVE OUR VILLAGE BACK'. A snake of grey smoke rose from the roof of

St Swithun's. Oak doors in the porch stood at an angle, their locks ruptured by the blast, and Dryden squeezed through.

Outside he could hear the soldiers moving through the long grass around the building. But in the nave he was alone, and for the first time he felt the presence of the ghosts of the past, crowding into the pews which had long gone. It was cool in here, surrounded by stone, shielded from the sun, and he felt the sudden iciness of the sweat on his neck. He moved down one of the side aisles to a Gothic door which he tried, but found it locked. Turning towards the main body of the church he watched as a shaft of sunlight fell to the bare stone floor of the nave. The shell had pitted the stone like the impact of a meteor on the moon. The only fire was in the roof beams, which spluttered blue flames. The sound of falling glass filled the ringing silence. As he walked forward he felt exposed, the subject of watchful eyes, and it made his skin creep.

He stood in the jagged pool of light and looked up into the blue sky above, then down at his boots. A finger, porcelain white, lay on the flagged stone floor. For a moment his stomach turned, he was unable to be sure it was what it must be, a shattered fragment of statuary. But the tomb stood close by, a reclining crusader in stone on the top, the hands once held in prayer reduced to two stumps of chipped marble by the explosion.

The oak doors behind him crashed open and Broderick pushed his way into the church, followed

by a dozen more of his men. They fanned out, silent now they could see the damage to the roof, sharing some of the gunner's guilt.

Dryden touched the cool stone tomb. Shrapnel had damaged the top of the funeral chest on which the knight lay – the corner of the stone lid had broken away and lay shattered on the floor. He edged closer to the hole, trying not to block any light which might show the contents within, but he could only glimpse cold stone, just on the margin of vision. Closer, he sniffed the fetid air, laced now with the acrid edge of scorched stone.

He walked behind the chest, recognizing the crusader's tomb from a picture *The Crow* had run the previous week when he'd written a feature hooked on the decision by campaigners to abandon their legal fight, and previewing the return of live firing to the range.

The centuries had worn the name on the side of the tomb but it was still legible: PEYTON.

As he rounded the stone box Dryden glimpsed a spade leaning against the nave's outer wall, and black peaty earth scattered over the cool grey stones of the floor. He froze, suddenly feeling that despite the voices of the soldiers near by he was still alone in the church. He could see that one of the large gravestones set into the floor had been lifted to reveal a hole, most of the earth from which lay in a neat pyramid hidden from wider view by the funeral casket of the Peytons. The grave was just three feet deep and empty, a few

damp pebbles reflecting the light from the rich coffee-black soil.

The gravestone removed stood on end, leaning by the spade, and showed a heraldic device like a sunflower with the clear etched letters spelling the name again: PEYTON.

The crackle of a radio startled him and he saw Broderick directly below the hole in the roof with his radio operator.

‘Mr Dryden . . . We’re moving on into the village. There’s nothing we can do here now. I need you close to hand. My men have to run a hose in here – they don’t want you in the way.’

Dryden looked around the church and noted signs of earlier damage. One window was boarded up, and parts of the triple-tiered wooden pulpit were charred by a fire long cold. But why the opened grave?

‘You should see this . . .’ he said. ‘St Swithun’s has had visitors.’

Broderick shrugged. ‘First things first, if you please. I presume they’re not here now. We need to check the second target, another wayward shell, I’m afraid.’

Dryden knelt by the pile of soil and ran some of it through his hands. Despite the heavy heat of the summer’s day it still felt cool so he plunged his hand in, pulled it back, and examined the moisture visible on his skin.

‘Recent visitors,’ he said, knowing there was no one to hear.

But he felt the hairs on his arm prickle and,

standing, fought against the irrational conviction that he was being watched. Then he ran a finger in the dust along the edge of the tomb and along the ten-inch-high letters etched in its side, wondering why the name was familiar, pushing aside the creeping anxiety that he should know the answer.

From the church porch Dryden looked down on Jude's Ferry. St Swithun's stood on a hill thirty feet high, a peak in the billiard-table landscape of the Fens, the highest point on a low island of clay which had been inhabited for more than 1,000 years. He realized with a shock that he had stood on this precise point seventeen years earlier, the day of the evacuation, looking down on a village bustling with removal vans, army trucks, cars, livestock, the press, radio and TV cameras and a small but vocal band of children. Flags had flown from the army tents set up on the old recreation ground, and along the old Whittlesea Road the last of the sheep were herded, their bleating insistent and alarmed.

It had been an unforgettable assignment. Initially the army's PR men had tried to keep all contact between the villagers and media to a mid-morning press conference in the Methodist Hall. The print media had agreed to stay away on the Sunday, the feast of St Swithun, to let the villagers enjoy the last saint's day in privacy. But that Monday morning a bus had taken the press and TV crews from Ely in through the firing-range gates and straight to the Methodist Hall – packed with most of the surviving

villagers. It had been a stilted affair dominated by one old soldier who'd clearly been encouraged to stand up and announce that he was proud the village was going to play its part in fighting for freedom. He'd got his medals on for the occasion so the TV boys had fêted him, happy they'd secured their picture story in time for the lunchtime news bulletins. A couple of women, both widows, said they would always remember what the village had done in two world wars – a statement which prompted another photocall at the war memorial at the top of The Dring, the little high street which ran beside an open ditch clogged with tall reeds.

Dryden had gone along to watch, and had noticed a man he presumed was the landlord of the New Ferry Inn, sitting on his doorstep drinking tea, watching with tired eyes, rimmed red. A young man with thick brown hair in a lopsided agricultural cut, shoulders slumped in defeat. Beside him sat a woman, legs bare and folded under her, hair brushed back from a pale face, T-shirt crumpled. She rubbed the heel of her hand into an eye socket, trying to drive away the tiredness, or a memory. He caught her eye and smiled but she fled, the open pub door revealing packing crates on the quarry-tiled floor of the bar.

The man let her go, spilling his tea out in the dust.

The rest of the villagers, sullen and wary, watched the half-hearted little theatre put on for the media: the old soldier arranged before the memorial like a living

prop, flanked by the widows. Opposite the inn was a terrace of four stone almshouses, little Victorian castles complete with stone windows and Gothic ironwork. The residents, four elderly men and a woman, sat on a bench outside, stoic in the face of an unseemly invasion of their village. Then a shout went up, from down The Dring, where two soldiers were trying to get an old woman through her cottage door, failing to disguise the fact she didn't want to leave.

The woman was crying, unsteady on her feet. 'Please,' she kept saying, 'Please, no.' Her features had dissolved into a mask of anxiety, like a child's.

The crowd, milling, began to boo and someone lobbed a brick towards one of the army Land Rovers, where it landed on the bonnet. Pebbles and dirt began to fly in the air and the TV camera lights thudded into full action. The elderly woman had fainted and had to be half carried to a waiting ambulance, but behind her the front door of her home was already being boarded up. Further along The Dring an army detail was moving past the old cottages, padlocking doors and closing windows. Glass shattered, prompting more boos from the crowd.

'You might have the decency to fucking wait,' shouted a man, his face red and damp with alcohol.

'Come on, boys,' said another voice, and the crowd visibly shrank back. 'Beer's free – don't waste it.' It was the young man from the doorstep of the pub,

his tea mug still in hand. 'It's too late for trouble – it's over.'

Dryden tried to judge his age – mid-twenties perhaps, but with a kind of world-weary authority which made him seem older. He led them away, down by the inn where the army had provided lunch in boxes on trestle tables and a last barrel stood out in the shade on blocks. There was a bit more shouting but it was clear now that they didn't have the heart for a real fight. It was their pride which was at stake, not their homes. They were gone.

The soldiers, sensing the mood, regrouped and slipped away to the tents, neat rows of bleached white, like a Boy Scout camp. Dryden tried to gather some quotes from the men by the inn but most shook their heads, ashamed of their impotence now that the end had come.

Lunch for the press was laid out in the orchard below the church, in the shadow of a foursquare Georgian mansion surrounded by a gravel drive. The words 'Orchard House' were carved into the stone pillars which guarded the gates. The window tax had robbed the building of some of its grandeur but it was still a cut above, the upper floor looking out over trimmed hedges at the village beyond. Lawns ran down to the river, across which a deep ditch ran parallel with the towpath, the remnants of an old moat. Dryden had spread himself out on the grass checking his notes, passing time before the bus was due to take them back to Ely, trying to imagine what

the village had been like in its heyday in the 1800s, when the wharf had been busy with sugar beet, the factory belching acrid smoke from the pencil-thin chimney.

The rest of the press were clustered near where the army was serving drinks so he'd been the only one to hear the creak of the shutter, and looking up had seen a young man at an upstairs window of the mansion, surveying the orchard below. A hand on the windowsill, the other shading the light from his eyes, he had the languid movements of the rich. Then he'd retreated into the shadows and Dryden wondered what final act of farewell had taken place within. He heard voices then, a light had come on, and another man had hurriedly closed the shutters. He'd been shocked to recognize the landlord again, talking over his shoulder to those unseen within.

Then they'd heard the clanking gears of the council bus, and the press corps had stood silently to watch the last villagers leave, many of them turning their heads away from the windows as it drove past on Church Street, an amber dustcloud marking its progress out onto Whittlesea Mere. A few minutes later three army trucks rolled into the village from the west carrying the troops who would search the houses, survey the infrastructure and prepare the targets for the first live firing.

Dryden looked down on the scene as it was today, the old allotments engulfed in late-summer raspberries, the ruined sheds just breaking the surface like

flotsam on a green sea. Across the village the only sounds were inhuman: rooks called from a line of poplars by the river and somewhere the warm breeze rattled a garden gate on rusted hinges. The hum of bees was like the bass note of a soundtrack.

He looked across into the orchard in which they'd had lunch that day. The fruit trees, unpruned for nearly two decades, were heavy with buds, the old moat a waterlogged ditch. The old shuttered mansion was still standing, but the roof had holes and was sagging in the middle, a chimney stack leaning perilously. At one of the windows the wood of the shutter had rotted and Dryden's heart contracted as he saw something move on the sill, something black which caught the light. But as he watched a rook struggled out through the gap, shaking its feathers. It flew low over the garden wall and down to the river.

He ran ahead to join Major Broderick and his platoon as they moved into the village, the road patched in tarmac by army sappers who'd filled shell holes over the years. A row of Victorian cottages had been propped up with brutal concrete frames. Several buildings here had been completely replaced with breeze-block boxes, punched through with crude holes for windows and doors. Dryden reflected that the villagers' annual return to St Swithun's must have been a sad experience, presenting ample evidence that as the years passed there was increasingly less for them to return to. As he walked forward Dryden tried to stop himself scanning the black, empty holes

where the windows had once been, sensing that somewhere in the village he'd glimpse a face, waiting just for him.

They moved north, over a hump-backed bridge, to a T-junction where they turned west into what had been the main street. Dominating the turning was an ugly 1950s two-storey building, its windows boarded, but a painted fascia proclaimed 'Palmer's Store'. The red logo of the post office was still visible, and on the second floor a derelict neon sign hung which read 'Mere Taxis' and was dotted with bullet holes. Somewhere inside the building a door creaked rhythmically in the breeze.

Ahead they could see the slight rise of the main bridge over the Sixteen Foot, a drain which carried water off the reclaimed mere and sent it seawards – all that was left of the original 'river' over which Jude's Ferry had crossed. Beyond, on the far bank, the old sugar beet factory burned. But in the foreground another column of smoke rose, tinged with acrid black, with flashes of livid red running through it like lightning.

Broderick stopped to take a radio message from the men he'd sent ahead to recce the village. 'Right,' he said, thrusting the receiver back at the radio operator: 'Not a good day for the Royal Artillery. They've hit some outbuildings down by the New Ferry Inn. A fire too.'

The company moved forward in neat formation, a young soldier no more than eighteen in pole position.

Dryden glimpsed from side to side the wooden cutout targets of Red Force in the shadows of derelict houses and shops. In one, behind a perspex window, a soldier in a combat hat stood transfixed beside a marble table, all that was left of the village butcher's. Dryden caught his own reflection, the austere symmetrical face as immobile as that of the knight on the tomb in the church.

A line of rats dashed across the sunlight in single file, swallowed by the shadows of a well-worn doorstep.

The Dring had buildings on its north side, but along the south side a deep ditch ran, water sluggish at the bottom and overgrown with reeds. This brook acted as a culvert, taking water away from the high ground by the church and the water tower. As they walked the street the silky 'plop' of vermin retreating into the stream accompanied them. On the far side a tumbledown line of medieval cottages sagged, a way across the ditch provided by a series of makeshift bridges made of railway sleepers or corrugated iron. Dryden noted that one of the cottages still had its original front door, oak dotted with flaking red paint, a knocker in the shape of a leaping fox. The row was broken by a large gap, an open farmyard in which a rusted plough stood with the burnt-out frame of a tractor. On the side of the barn Dryden recognized the slogan he'd seen on that last day, sprayed by a vandal in letters three feet high: SQUADDIES FUCK OFF. Now the sentiment was almost illegible, the paint faded, but a line of dead crows hung on

a wire looked like a more recent warning, a further sign that when the army wasn't firing on Jude's Ferry the village still had its own secret life.

'Poachers,' said Broderick at his shoulder. 'We know they get in, but we patch up the holes, send in the occasional patrol at night, keep them guessing.'

Above them the sunlight died and, looking up, Dryden watched as a dark bank of cloud, fringed with grey falling rain, slid over Jude's Ferry like a coffin lid. The first drops, as fat as grapes, made the dust jump at their feet. They were just thirty feet from the bridge now and they could see where the stray shell had gone. Past the simple façade of the New Ferry Inn was a yard surrounded by outbuildings. One, more substantial than the rest, had taken a direct hit, a hole punched through the low roof, the jagged edges still smoking. Outside in the street three soldiers worked at a manhole cover, from which they had already run a hosepipe across into the ruins of the building. Inside a soldier stood amongst the shadowy rubble, a lit torch turned down to his boots.

He signalled to Broderick. As they picked their way over the strewn bricks and splintered wood the rain began to fall, hissing amongst the smouldering debris. The explosion had blown away the doors and destroyed the ground-floor flight of a wooden staircase which had led up to a loft, revealing a letter-box black hole and a set of steps leading down into a cellar. Dryden could see torches beneath, sweeping the darkness.

At a shout, water gushed into the flames, cascading back down the steps.

Broderick nodded. 'OK. Good stuff. Where's our problem then?' The major looked nervous, suddenly less assured when faced with the unexpected.

One of the soldiers directed a torch beam down the steps.

'You might want to go down alone, sir,' suggested the squaddie.

Broderick thought about it for a second, then a few more.

The major took off his combat helmet, a strange gesture, and led the way. 'Who's been down?' he asked.

'Corporal's down sir; half of A-platoon.'

Broderick looked at Dryden. 'No point being coy now – come on.'

They dropped down the cellar steps and Dryden felt the temperature fall as they left behind the humidity of the day. His eyes switched to night vision and the scene was revealed: the floor already an unbroken glass-like sheet of water just a few centimetres deep. The cellar was large, an underground store in brick, and around the walls stood five of Broderick's men, torches trained to the centre of the room, each immobile, stilled.

Before them, illuminated, a body twisted slowly on a rope. The sudden rainstorm had disturbed the stale air and so the shrouded shape turned, the rope and beam creaking. The face, or what had been the face,

swung towards Dryden and he saw the gleam of the lipless mouth, dull teeth and a bone-white skull. Across one cheekbone he glimpsed the mummified remains of a tendon. Clothes, perished beyond shape or colour, floated out like cobwebs.

Outside the rain intensified and turned to hail, falling like gravel, and the wind it brought turned the hanging bones one last time in a graceful arc before the rust-weakened hook finally gave up its prisoner and the body fell to the floor.