

asb

THE PARIS
PEACEMAKERS

FLORA JOHNSTON

BEFORE

The Last Rugby Match



The only tiny mercy is that none of them knew.

21st March 1914

Inverleith, Edinburgh

Corran pulled her scarf tightly around herself against the wind. The day had looked promising through her guesthouse windows earlier: how could she have forgotten the penetrating chill of a bright Edinburgh spring day? Now, as she hunched against the north wind that swept this bleak rugby field, she thought wistfully of the blossom-laden tree outside her college window in Cambridge.

What on earth am I doing here?

She looked to her left, where her youngest brother, Jack, sat beside her on the wooden bench. As usual he was sketching the scene before him.

‘I don’t know how you can even hold the pencil.’

He grinned at her, his eyes dancing below his untidy fringe. ‘You’ve gone soft in the south,’ he said. ‘This is nothing to home.’

That was true. Home was Thurso, the harbour town perched on the exposed northern edge of mainland Scotland, where the skies were vast and the elements unforgiving. Yet that was a different sort of cold altogether from this grainy wind that picked up the dust of the setts and funnelled between the sooty Edinburgh chimneys. She had grown up with a fresh, cleansing

cold, straight from the ever-moving sea. She could almost taste the salt in the air as she thought of that austere grey house where their sister, Stella, was chafing her way through her final months of school with only their mother, Alison, for company.

When the summer days stretched out at both ends, they would return, maybe even Alex too, and the house would come alive with laughter and warmth once more.

She turned her attention to the scene that Jack was sketching. Young pipers from Dr Guthrie's school entertained eager spectators who had squeezed into every space around the Inverleith playing field. The pipers came to a halt right in front of her. A pause, and a new tune: 'John Peel'. A roar rose around her from the enormous crowd, and men in white jerseys sprinted onto the pitch. They formed a line and jumped up and down, stretching and bending their legs. The tune changed again, 'Scotland the Brave' this time, and it was the turn of the men in navy blue. Corran leant forward to see between the heads in front of her, mouth suddenly dry. At first she couldn't spot him: they all looked remarkably similar, these men, tall and strong with their short haircuts. But then they formed a semi-circle and there he was. Rob.

Rugby football was his passion but she had never before seen him dressed in the navy shirt with its white thistle proudly sewn on by his own hand two years ago. *If I can stitch a wound, I can surely stitch a thistle*, he had written to her. Rob the surgeon she knew a little; Rob the student she had known well. But Rob the Scotland rugby player? She wasn't sure who he was at all, but this weekend she might find out. She watched him take up his position with his teammates, waiting for the whistle to blow. He had told her once that these men were his greatest friends, the brothers he had never known in a sparse and solitary Edinburgh childhood.

An English player punted the leather ball down the field, beginning the game. For Corran, with little interest in sport and a head full of drifting fragments of ancient poetry, the shocking physical onslaught brought thoughts of Achaeans and Trojans, of men setting their faces to battle.

‘They say this might be the biggest crowd ever at a Scotland ruggie match,’ said Jack, as he turned to a fresh page and began a rapid sketch of the match in progress. ‘Must be twenty or twenty-five thousand here. It’s quite something really, considering how poorly the Scots have been playing and the slating they’ve had in the papers. There are more English supporters here than I expected too.’

‘I think they were all on my train north,’ Corran said dryly, remembering her cramped journey up from Cambridge the day before, hemmed in by noisy English fans.

‘It was grand of Rob to invite us.’

Corran couldn’t quite share her little brother’s enthusiasm. She had never watched a whole rugby match before, but when she had written to tell Rob she was coming north for a job interview, he had offered to set aside tickets to the Calcutta Cup match. She had agreed a little uncertainly, knowing Jack would love to come. It was good to see her little brother here in the city, where he seemed to be finding his feet at university and even growing into a man. The need to travel south from Thurso to pursue their futures had created its own independence in each of the Rutherford family.

‘Oh, go on, go on!’ Jack was on his feet, as was much of the crowd. But then an enormous groan resonated through the stand, and the energy slid into disappointment.

‘What’s happening?’

‘George Will was nearly over there, but he had a foot in touch. And Pender knocked it on just before. They’re doing so *well* but

they have to take their chances. England won't give them this amount of field position for long.'

Corran didn't really understand a word he said, but she could see Rob running back up the pitch. Jack had told her that Rob was a forward and his main role seemed to involve crouching down in the muddy ground and pushing with Herculean effort alongside his teammates while the English tried to push in the other direction. Gaining territory inch by inch. She found she was watching Rob rather than watching the action, and so she was startled when Jack leapt to his feet once more, this time shouting and waving his sketchpad in delight.

'Did we score?'

'Didn't you see? It was Will again, an absolute peach of a pass from Turner. Now Turner will kick for points. What a player he is, I tell you, he's going to be around for many years to come.' He let out a long sigh. 'Ach, he's missed it. Never mind, this is good, this is so much better than I expected. England don't know what's hit them!'

There was certainly a lot of hitting going on. Not fighting exactly, but as man after man was slammed into the ground, Corran wondered how this could be anyone's idea of pleasure. Meanwhile the pitch, already soggy after yesterday's rain, was rapidly losing any semblance of green, and it was becoming harder to tell Scotsman from Englishman, so covered in mud were they all. Rob was one of the worst. Where now was the smart young man who had come down to visit her a few times in Cambridge?

It was easy for her mind to drift away from the match and settle on Rob's last visit. They had shared an unsatisfactory lunch in a stuffy hotel, hampered as always by the strict Cambridge University rules, which prevented Corran as a female student from even walking between classes with a man, never mind

entertaining him in the college. Everything had been much more relaxed when they both lived here in Edinburgh, Rob studying medicine and Corran studying classics. But after graduating top of her class, she had won a scholarship to Cambridge to continue her studies. Her three years there were nearly complete, and she really wasn't sure how she felt about that at all.

There would be no repeat of her Edinburgh graduation, no matter how well she performed: women were not awarded qualifications at Cambridge, and were not allowed to graduate. The unfairness disturbed her, but right now the question of what she was going to do next disturbed her more. Dusty volumes containing the stories of mythical heroes, the beauty and logic and resonance of ancient languages – these had been her world for almost as long as she could remember. At the age of twelve she had told her headmaster she wanted to learn Latin and Greek. *Of course not. You are a girl, my dear, and the female brain was not designed for the classics.* Encouraged by her parents, she proved them all wrong and loved every minute of it, but now long years of studying were coming to an end. What lay ahead for a woman who had been educated in a subject that her mother's friends were quick to point out was of no use to man nor beast? The only possible answer was teaching, and so she found herself in Edinburgh, preparing to be interviewed for a lecturer's post that she wasn't sure she wanted, and wondering if this man sliding through the mud might offer a simpler future.

The battle had paused.

'Half time,' said Jack. The players huddled together in two groups, some bent double to catch their breath. 'It's a shame England scored that one before the break. We've had the best of the play, but we had the wind behind us. It will be hard going in the second half.'

An older man on Jack's other side leant in towards them. 'Aye, lad, we're missing Wattie Suddie,' he said. 'Huggan's no bad for a first cap, but these muckle English bastards widnae match Suddie's speed.'

'Why is he not playing?' Corran asked, laughing at her little brother's consternation.

'Injured, hen. Hurt his ankle agin Wales. Typical Scots luck, to lose oor best wing three quarter. I'm a Hawick man, ye ken. Watched the laddie grow up. Watched him win every sprint championship. The sooner he's back wi his brothers in airms, the better.'

'Here we go,' Jack said as the men jogged back to their positions. 'Come on, Scotland. Can we pull off another shock like two years ago?'

'What happened two years ago?'

'The English came up sure they would win easily, but our captain, John MacCallum, led from the front. It was a famous victory. That was your Rob's first cap, wasn't it? MacCallum was magnificent. He's not playing any more, but with the likes of Turner coming through we have every chance. Let's go!'

Your Rob?

She shrugged it aside and they turned back to the action. To Corran, the match seemed interminable. To Jack it was clearly a delight. He was in danger of crushing his sketch between his fingers with excitement, so handed the sketchpad to Corran for safekeeping. As England took control, a sense of resigned despair began to run through the Scottish crowd.

'Poulton is just too good,' Jack groaned. He had taken to addressing many of his remarks to the Hawick man, receiving a better response there than from his older sister, although he still provided her with a brief summary of events. But then, just when

all seemed lost, the Scots rallied. First one man kicked for the posts – ‘drop goal from Bowie’ – and then another ran the length of the field. ‘Will again. Terrific!’ And then, not far from where they were sitting, an alarming shriek of pain rose above the general noise. Corran, Jack and those around them all leant forward. The casualty lay face down, his leg at an ugly angle. Amid the mud and the men who surrounded him, Corran couldn’t see who it was. Not Rob? No, that shirt had once been white, and here was Rob now, sprinting at full speed across the field and dropping to his knees beside the injured man. The others made way for him.

It all took a terribly long time.

‘Pillman. English hooker. Looks like a broken leg,’ was the word being passed around the crowd. Eventually the wounded warrior was carried from the field to a round of applause. Rob accompanied him to the edge of the touchline and then jogged back.

Jack pulled out his watch. ‘There can’t be long to go. I just hope the referee adds on time for the injury. Come on, Scotland, one point in it. You can do this!’

There was a tension around the ground now and even Corran, who had longed for the end to come, felt herself drawn in. Her eyes were on Rob when the match ended. He was sprinting back, but as the final whistle sounded he pulled up, and she watched the hope and purpose leak from his battered, filthy body. For just a moment she could see his bleak despair and was unsettled to realise just how much this mattered to him. He bent double, hands on his knees, his face hidden from view. When he straightened up his shoulders went back, and he walked towards the nearest Englishman, hand outstretched and a congratulatory smile on his face.

The rugby was over.

* * *

Corran followed Jack down to the pitch and they waited at the edge as people milled around. Seeing them, Rob finished his conversation with another player and sauntered over. He might have been bathing in mud.

‘Sorry we couldn’t pull off a win for you.’

‘It was close!’ said Jack. ‘You were terrific, Rob, and we nearly had them. We’ll do it next year at Twickenham.’

‘Aye.’ Rob looked directly at Corran. ‘Enjoy it?’

She had the uneasy sense of speaking to a stranger, plastered in the claggy ground as he was.

‘It was . . . more exciting than I imagined,’ she said. ‘Thank you for getting the tickets. Jack, you must show Rob your sketch.’

Jack held it out along with his pencil. ‘I wondered if you would sign it, actually,’ he asked, suddenly bashful.

Rob rather pointlessly wiped his hands on his filthy shorts and took the pad, holding it by the edges. The sketch was a panorama of the pitch, posts at either end and action taking place.

‘Jack, this is top-hole!’ he said, scrawling his name across the bottom. ‘I had no idea you were such a good artist. Here, I can get you some more. Gus – Gus! Charlie!’

He beckoned over two Scottish players who were standing nearby, one much taller than the other, arms around each other’s shoulders.

‘That’s bloody good,’ the smaller man said to Jack. ‘Get yourself a job with the papers, son,’ and he too added his name.

Then Jack’s sketchpad was somehow being passed around the field, as men from both teams admired his work and added their signatures. By the time Rob brought it back it was grubby and crumpled, and he looked a bit rueful.

‘Sorry, we’ve rather ruined it.’

But Jack’s eyes were shining. He took the pad and closed the

cover over, holding it tightly against his chest as if it were his passport to the future.

‘Anyway,’ Rob said. ‘Must go. There are no baths here at Inverleith, would you believe, so we have to go back to the hotel in this state. I’ll get cleaned up for dinner, and I might head round to the hospital and see how poor Cherry Pillman’s doing. But we’ll meet for our walk on Arthur’s Seat tomorrow afternoon, Corran, as we said?’ There was a slight hesitation in his eyes as he looked at her, and relief coursed through her. *There* he was, beneath the filthy layers of male strength and forcefulness: there was the intelligent and sensitive man who just might be part of her future.

‘I’m looking forward to it,’ she said.

The low winter sun was disappearing behind the blackened houses as they left the rugby field in March 1914, those young men from two nations, arms slung around each other, laughing, jostling and joking all the way. Splattered with mud and nursing their wounds, eager for hot baths, a slap-up dinner and a beer.

The only tiny mercy is that none of them knew.