

## SHADES OF LIGHT

by

*Jay T. Kay.*

"Bale out chaps! We're going down".

The Skipper's voice was amazingly calm. Seconds later, I heard his screams as flames engulfed the forward cockpit of our 3-man Fairey Battle bomber. I managed to scramble out of the rear cockpit and floated to earth somewhere over France, taking in the sheer beauty of the landscape. It was surreal. One minute before, our aircraft had fallen prey to a gaggle of Messerschmitt BF 109s and all I could do was admire the scenery! Below was our welcoming committee. The beginning and the end of the war for Aircraftsman Alfred Hobson, R. A. F.

Out of two sorties that day, 10th May 1940 a total of sixteen Fairey Battle bombers were shot down and only a handful of aircrew survived. My skipper and sergeant were burned alive. Most of the other crews died of injuries on landing, or were beaten to death by our 'hosts'. After interrogation by the S.S's finest, we were taken to hospital to recover from the 'de briefing', subsequently transferred to a P.O.W. camp in Austria, and put to work on a farm. It wasn't so bad really, if you discount starvation, dehydration and tapeworms. Nobody complained much, although I for one have never been anxious to go back to Austria.

I regularly wrote to my folk back home and occasionally received replies. I also wrote to Nancy. I was anxious for her to know I was okay, because she had been so upset the night before I left, and had seemed to take my imminent departure more badly than I had expected. She never replied to any of my letters.

When I returned more than five years later, Dad was in hospital busy dying. The war had taken its toll. I learned Nancy had married soon after I was reported missing. By the time she knew I was safe, Davy was 'well on the way'. Although more than fifteen years older than Nancy, Ted Roberts had been in the right place at the right time.

With Dad gone, I was left to pay the bills and look after Mother. In that first year after the war, I was resentful of the fact that my painting had had to go on the 'back burner', so to speak. The girl I loved was married to the landlord of the pub and to make matters worse, I saw her every two weeks when I made the delivery. I also had to drive that blasted barge every working day. Then in 1951, Mother died.

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'Alfred Hobson, what the hell are you doing?' I ask myself. Well obviously I'm delivering two dozen kegs of Watney's draught Red Barrel to the Nag's Head, just beyond the next river bend. But what am I DOING? Good question.

When I was demobbed eight years ago. It was all planned. I was going back to France where my war started. All I ever wanted to do was to paint landscapes. The war had put the 'tin hat' on that, as you might say. Now it's 1954 and I'm still here.

When the balloon went up. I was going on twenty, and two years into Art College. My mum and dad. God bless 'em, had scrimped and scraped just to get me there. Dad worked the waterway like I do now. and never wanted anything else: But not me! I had talent and enthusiasm. You weren't going to catch me on a barge again after the war!

As the pub comes into view, I catch a glimpse of the gardens all around where crocuses and daffodils are in full bloom. Ted, the landlord is on the riverbank to receive his consignment and I signal to Wilf on the barge behind that I'm ready to manoeuvre into position and draw alongside the pub. Wilf begins to slacken off the tow rope. A few more minutes, and I'm lowering the gantry, to roll the kegs off gently into Ted's cellar. The scent of wild garlic on the bank merges with the musty smell of the damp vault below.

It's lunchtime and with the cargo unloaded. Wilf and I sit at a table in the garden whilst Ted serves us a pint of his best Red Barrel. As we settle down to our respective newspapers, Davy, Ted's eldest, arrives with a plate of crusty ham sandwiches, home-made chutney, some Cheddar and a jar of pickled onions. He's just fourteen and full of life. Like I was at his age. His blond, curly hair looks almost white in the flat light of the midday sun.

"Morning, Mr. Percival. Mr.Hobson."

Wilf grunts from his paper.

I answer: "Morning Davy. No school today?"

"Easter holidays," he beams. "We don't go back till two weeks Tuesday."

"So you don't like school then."

"Hate it! Most of it. anyway."

"How are you going to pass away the holidays?"

"Oh, there's plenty to do without going to school. I help out around here mornings and lunchtimes."

"And the rest of the time?"

His face lights up as he says, "I paint."

Surprised, I ask, "What do you paint?"

"Depends on the weather. If it's bad, I go up in the attic and sketch the Thames from the window, or practise portraits from photos. If it's fine I walk down to the mill. I keep most of my gear down there so I can paint the village and countryside."

"Can I have a look?."

A few minutes later, he reappears with a cardboard box and a sketch pad which he hands to me. As I leaf through, I'm excited by the sheer quality of the drawings. This one of his mother is startlingly accurate. She's in a slightly low necked sweater which fades away to the bottom of the page. Her hair is bobbed in a 'bubble cut' and her curls are highlighted by rays pouring in from the window behind.

"Are these copied from photographs?"

"Not that one. The ones of dad and my sisters are 'cos they won't sit still long enough. Toby is a natural poser so if he has a bone to chew on, he's okay. Mother has more patience so I draw her and the dog from life."

He pulls a few paintings out of the box. Many of them are from the same viewpoint but painted at various times, and the difference is staggering. The mill with rolling fields and the church behind, spring flowers, and swallows flying overhead, is in contrast to the same scene painted on a summer's evening. Here, a rich golden cast infinitely changes it; a rim-lit jersey cow is chewing grass below the church clock that tells you the time is almost eight twenty.

"You're a very talented boy Davy, you should think carefully about how to spend the rest of your life."

"Mum says you know about art."

Taken aback at this, I mumble, "I recognise talent, and you are talented, Davy"

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I've always known deep down, that Davy belongs to me. Oh, sure, on the few occasions I have talked to Nancy alone, she's always denied it and why not? There she was the night before I left to fight the Hun, distraught but not wanting to worry me by telling me about the baby, or spoil our time together. A couple of days later, I was shot down over France, with Ted happy to step into the breach, as it were. What was she to do?

Looking back it's obvious why she was upset that night. Yet things haven't turned out so

badly for her. To give him his due, I think Ted knew the score and has always, as far as I can tell, treated her and all the kids well. They seem happy enough.

I would have taken her back though. Still would. But she didn't want to know and I refused to rock the boat, or should that be barge? Only now, I'm not so sure. That kid's got a real gift. MY gift. I don't want to see it wasted this time.

Ted mentioned the other day that the Nag's Head are playing the Drunken Badger at darts over in Henley on Tuesday night. Tomorrow. He's in charge of the team and Henley is fifteen miles away; he'll be out till late. The pub should be quiet, as most of the regulars travel with the darts team. With any luck I should be able to talk to Nancy.

Driving to the Nag's head I'm beginning to wish I hadn't splashed out on my shiny-new Austin A30. True, she's a real beauty and Dad's 1934 Ford eight was well past it's best, but I may need that cash later. Still, I've got a bit put by, then there's the house. I park the Austin and walk into the bar. It's six forty-five, and The Archers' are just starting on the radio.

A young couple are talking intently in the corner. He's got a pint of mild in front of him and she sips demurely from what looks like a grapefruit juice. An old timer sits by the window reading his paper, smoking a pipe and now and then taking a gulp of his Watneys. Nancy is perched on a stool behind the bar listening to Mrs.Perkins croaking on to Walter Gabriel about her 'Cherry'. I think she's referring to the pony that pulls her cart around Ambridge.

"Evening, Nancy."

"Hullo, Alf. We don't often see you here of an evening. Can I get you a pint?," she asks, turning off the radio.

Is she pleased to see me, or am I just a customer to her? She's wearing the same jumper as in Davy's picture, and a picture she looks tonight.

"Watneys please. Don't let me interrupt the 'Archers' though.

" I'd rather talk to a customer and I can catch up with the omnibus edition later, anyway," she smiles.

" Have one yourself?"

"Thanks, but I've a 'cuppa' under the bar!"

"You've changed, Nan. More outgoing, more confident in a way."... And even more beautiful, I'm thinking.

"Older and wiser, too"

Changing the subject I say, "Davy showed me some of his pictures, t'other day. He's gifted, Nan".

She looks serious. "Yes."

"Does Ted know?" "Know what? that Davy can draw? Of course he does."

"Nan, you know what I'm getting at."

"I know we've had this discussion before, Alf Hobson! I'm with Ted now. He's happy, we all are."

"Does he KNOW, Nan!"

"Shh. Keep your voice down will you. We'd better talk. Meet me at the Mill tomorrow about seven, It's my night off."

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The church clock is striking seven as I arrive at the Mill. I have a hard time battling against the nostalgia of it all. Nan and I had great plans to renovate this place and settle down. Davey was conceived here and this is where we said our tearful goodbyes. That's nearly fifteen years since, but it has hardly changed. I walk around to look at what is left of the water wheel and stop abruptly.

"Evening, Mr. Hobson."

"Davy! I wasn't expecting to see you."

"Just catching what's left of the light. What do you think?"

I look over his shoulder. "You've got the texture of the stonework spot on, perfect. Keep an eye on the perspective though. You by yourself?"

The question is answered as Nancy appears. "Good Evening, Alf. I've been picking bluebells. Will you help me get them into the carrier bag? I don't want to crush them, and the carrier is about to tear."

We go around the mill and into a clearing. Our hands touch as I hold open the paper carrier bag and she lingers for the briefest of moments. She spreads a plastic mac. on a tree stump and sits. I prop myself against the fence. Where do we start?

"I asked the other night how much Ted knows, Nan. It's important.

"Yes. He knew I was pregnant and offered to marry me. I was desperate, Alf."

"I know. I still cared, but I realised it was for the best. Until now, that is."

"What do you mean?"

"Does Ted know Davy is mine?"

"It didn't take a lot of working out but he's never mentioned it. What do you mean 'until now'?"

"Nancy, the boy's got a future. He can't waste it around here. I've got some money put by and I want to spend it on his education. It's the least I can do."

"Sounds fine. There is only one problem."

"Which is...?"

"Ted's a good man, Alf. and proud too. He wouldn't take kindly to you pitching in now, no matter how well intended."

"Davy need never know. As far as he's concerned it would be Ted's idea funded by Ted. Nobody will hear anything to the contrary from me."

"Are you saying that even if Ted agreed, you'd be happy with that?"

"Happy? of course not! The thing that would make me happy, would to be with you and Davy as a family and we both know that's not likely to happen. Therefore, I'm willing to keep things as they are, not tell Davy or anyone else that he's my son but pay for his future. Unless you've changed your mind about us. You must know I still love you."

"That's quite enough of that kind of talk!" She turns visibly pink and looks away.

"I'm sorry Nan. I don't want to rock the boat, and I would never hurt you in any way, you know that. I have to say what's on my mind, though. If I thought for a moment you had a spark of feeling left for me.."

"Stop it! Are you saying that you would split my family up for your own sake?"

"Would you?"

"This isn't fair." she's sobbing now. "There's not just Davy to consider, what about the girls? and your timing is cruel."

"What do you mean," I ask as gently as I can.

"I'm taking Davy home now. Just leave us alone!"

Nancy stands up, collects her Pacamac and brushes me aside as I try to comfort her. She goes to the boy and I pick up the carrier of bluebells, give them to Davy and say good night. As I drive myself home, I'm bewildered and frustrated. I've made an absolute mess of everything. I

don't know what to do about it, but I'm determined Davy's future will come first.

It's chilly in the kitchen, so I light the fire and settle down to read the latest Dick Tracy novel. It's no good, I can't concentrate on anything. Why did Nancy get so upset? Experience tells me there has to be something important bothering her, but what? What did she mean about my timing being cruel?

I lay the book down. Maybe I'll go to bed and have an early night. Not that I sleep well at the best of times anyway. Since my P.O.W. days, I have averaged about four hours a night, and that's interspersed by bad dreams and even occasional nightmares, although they're not as bad as they were.

I fill the kettle and light the gas stove just as car headlights appear through the kitchen window. It's unusual for traffic to be around here at this time of night- it's nearly nine p.m. The car stops and I recognise Ted's old Wolseley, but it's Nancy who gets out. The front door is open before she can knock. Nancy falls in, clinging to me. She is weeping quietly.

I lower her gently onto the sofa. "Let's have a 'cuppa".

"I'm so sorry, Alf. You don't deserve any of this," she sobs. "I was so selfish when you went away. I jumped at the first opportunity to save my reputation without a thought for you. Even though I loved you more than anything, I thought I couldn't afford to wait. You know how cruel people are about illegitimate children, especially in the country. But it was no excuse. I was proud to carry your baby and I should have had the courage of my convictions."

"Easier said than done."

"Ted was really kind, has been ever since. I owed it to him to make him happy and he says I have but.."

"But what about you? have you been happy? I mean really happy?"

"What the hell *is* Happy Alf? I thought I was at first, then after the twins arrived, you came back, and I felt trapped."

"So it's my fault," I try to force a smile.

"I asked for that."

"No you didn't! I was joking."

"I was so relieved when I knew you were safe. I had been grieving for you because I was convinced you had been killed. But by then I was married. I have lived with the guilt ever since. It's because of that guilt that I've treated you so badly, and I cannot express my remorse sufficiently

to you and I never will be able to."

"Nan, it is not necessary. I knew the score, but I thought you were happy and I went along with it. Had I known your true feelings I should have brought it up long before now. It was suddenly being aware of Davy's wonderful talent that made me resent., yes resent losing you both; realising what I had lost. But we can resolve this, you know."

"No we can't!" she screams.

"What! You've as good as said you love me. That you want us to be together." I scream back.

"I did. I do! But it can't happen."

"Of course it can happen. There's something you are not telling me Nan, otherwise what has all this been for?"

"Davy heard us talking this evening. I don't know how much he knows, but he went very quiet on the way home. It worried me because he's normally such an extrovert and. ." "Did he ask questions?" "Yes."

"Well, what?"

"Strange, really. He asked did I know about Dad. When I inquired what he meant, he 'clammed up'. I suspect I know what he's talking about, but I'm not sure." "Then tell me."

"I can't Alf. It wouldn't be fair, and I still don't know all the facts." She turns away.

"Where does this leave me Nancy?" "I'm sorry, Alf. I just wanted to try and explain."

"But you haven't. I've less hope now than ever." I feel my voice quavering. "If you are worried about the twins, I would care for them as I care for you and Davy."

"No Alf, we can't. I can't." She kisses me gently on the cheek. "Maybe one day, maybe not, but for now please go on respecting me the way you always have." In an instant she's out of the front door and driving away.

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Less than three months after that night, Ted Roberts died on the operating table. He had apparently been diagnosed with a malignant brain tumour a little before those events in 1954. Nancy had heard a cryptic phone call between Ted and his doctor but when she questioned him, he refused to talk about it. But he became sick and was admitted to hospital. He urged the surgeon to operate knowing the chances of survival were slight. One might have thought that Ted's death was the solution to our problems, but life is not like that.

Nancy of course was racked with guilt, and I admit to feeling a certain regret myself. But after what most people would consider a respectful time lapse, she still would not commit herself to a relationship with me. Davy was of course filled with grief at Ted's passing. Nancy and I later told him that I am his real father, and he didn't seem at all surprised. It was difficult to read his emotions. If anything, he seemed slightly embarrassed; As though he felt he was invading our personal space. To this day, he still addresses me as 'Dear Mr.Hobson' in his letters.

The Nag's Head was sold and with the proceeds, plus Ted's estate, Nancy was left very comfortably off. She later moved her family to Vancouver, where she opened an exclusive florist's business. The twins as yet unmarried, are now running it for her. After university, Davy became an aircraft designer, but still paints his portraits and landscapes, and has several exhibitions to his credit. He lives in Virginia with his wife and two boys, Adam and Nathan. We all communicate regularly.

Nancy and I have both recently retired, purely by chance on the same day, 30th November, 1985. Nancy is visiting me for Christmas. It's two years since I stayed with the family in Vancouver, and I can't wait to see her again.

After they moved to Canada I bought the Mill. Over the years, I have renovated it to what I'm told is a very high standard. A labour of love. I'm moving in next week. I hope Nancy likes it.