

A Measure of Love

A World War 2 Story

Peter Holdroyd

A Measure of Love

My father died before I was born. His photograph stood on the mantelpiece during my early years, but when I reached my teens, mother married, and the now-faded picture disappeared. The next time I saw it was after her death, when I found it in a drawer, enclosed in an envelope which contained a touching account of her early life, during the war.

*

Corporal Charlie Rogers stared up at the stars, sparkling and shimmering like diamonds scattered on black velvet. One of the good things about the war, he thought, was the blackout, because it made the night sky as clearly visible to the modern eye as it must have been to our ancestors. Blackout had its downside as well – people were always tripping over things and hurting themselves – but on the whole, living in the Suffolk countryside as he did, where there was little street lighting even in peacetime, it was no hardship.

He threw the last of his Woodbine to the ground and conscientiously crushed its glowing tip with his boot, then went back into the maintenance hangar and the Bristol Mercury engine that was giving him so much trouble. Considering it had a German shell sticking into it, the difficulty was hardly surprising. He rubbed his hands down the side seams of his fatigues, and wriggled stubby, powerful fingers – ‘magic fingers’ his fellow techies called them – into the casing. This time, he managed to grip the shell lightly between the tips of two fingers, and carefully extract it. Seeing it in the light, he realised it was still live, and put it carefully down on the workbench.

An LAC standing nearby came for a closer look.

‘Want me to stick it in the bin, corp.?’

‘Okay. Then get the armourer.’

‘Right, corp. You okay?’

‘Nothing a cup of tea won’t cure.’

The LAC picked up the shell with deceptive nonchalance, and deposited it into a sand-filled bucket supposed to minimise damage if it went off. Charlie wandered over to the door. He had dealt with three difficult cases, beyond the ability of others to resolve, and it was time for a cuppa.

He crossed the darkened concrete to the Corporals’ Mess. A few other men were taking a break and they waved to him. He stood at the counter, waiting for his usual mug of hot strong tea, and only when it didn’t appear did he pay attention to the person serving him. The middle-aged woman who usually did so would have had his tea ready, but this evening, a new one who didn’t know the drill was waiting patiently for his order. She was in her early twenties and pretty.

He leant on the counter and grinned. ‘Hello, love, my name’s Charlie; what’s yours?’

‘Julie,’ she said. ‘And what would you like?’

‘A mug of your finest Indian blend, my dear, with the top of the milk and two spoons of sugar.’

She filled a mug and pushed it across to him. ‘That’ll cost you tuppence. Help yourself to sugar.’

Charlie found the money in his pocket and handed it to her. ‘In aid of the war effort,’ he said. She grinned as he turned away and went to sit among his mates. Fifteen minutes later, he was on his way back to the hangar.

That had been in July, 1941.

On the morning of August 10th, dawn was early, even for double summertime,. Charlie came out of the hangar and looked up at the paling sky. He walked tiredly the short route to the mess, and found Julie standing outside, a coat thrown over her work clothes, staring into the light.

‘It’s a beautiful sight, the dawn,’ said Charlie.

She turned towards him and grinned. ‘Yes it is. Really I’m looking for my husband’s aircraft. I think he was flying last night.’

‘What does he fly?’ Charlie asked, interested.

‘He’s based up in Norfolk, flying a Hurricane. I suppose that’s as much as I can tell you.’

‘That’s alright, love. I’m used to not knowing things I don’t need to know. Been married long?’

‘We were married in ’39, just before he was called up. Actually, he jumped before he was pushed, if you know what I mean, so he could be sure of getting in the RAF. He’s been a Pilot Officer for six months, and got the DFC for helping a blinded mate land his aeroplane, when his own ’plane had been shot up too. They both survived,’ she said with a hint of pride. Charlie was touched.

‘There are some really brave and talented blokes driving those Hurries,’ he said. For a while they both peered into the brightening dawn.

‘There! Look!’ cried Julie, pointing. Charlie followed her finger and saw three specks slowly approaching from the east. They watched as the specks grew larger and passed overhead, turning north-west towards home.

Julie smiled at Charlie. ‘I’d better go.’

‘I’ll walk you to the gate: I’m going that way.’

During the following two days, Charlie spent much time in the mess, drinking more tea than ever, and talking to Julie. Their behaviour was quite proper, but there was a spark each lit in the other which hinted at how things might have been had she been free. On the third day, Charlie and Julie were chatting again when the telephone rang. She made a face, and went over to the wall-mounted instrument.

‘NAAFI,’ she said, then listened. ‘Yes, that’s me...’

Charlie watched as her face fell, and her eyes filled with tears. She replaced the receiver with difficulty, and Charlie caught her as she fell in a dead faint. She revived after a few moments, and said she was fit enough to go back to work.

‘What’s happened, Julie?’ he asked, full of concern.

‘It’s Paul – my husband. They think he was shot down over the North Sea. No parachute. Aircraft in flames. Oh, God! What shall I do?’

‘Come on, I’ll take you home, and we’ll talk about it, and how you’ll cope. You *will* cope, you know.’

Whilst she got her coat, he found a handful of money in his pocket and bought a half-bottle of scotch at the bar – an extravagance to which he gave no thought.

She let him lead her gently off the base to the small house not far away, which she had rented. She sat beside the fireplace, whilst Charlie found kindling and coal, and lit a fire. In the scullery he found two tumblers, into which he poured generous measures of whisky. They stared at the licking flames in the small hearth. Not much heat was being generated. Julie began to weep again, and Charlie put his arm round her. After a few moments, she clung to him more closely, and Charlie gently kissed the top of her bowed head.

She looked up at him, and smiled through her tears. Then, taking his head between her needy hands, she kissed him on the lips. Charlie was not at all sure that he should stay, but one look at her convinced him that he couldn’t go and leave her. When she

took one hand and pressed it gently to her breast, he gave in and ensured that they both found some comfort that night.

About five o'clock in the morning, they were wakened by a faltering aircraft engine. It was heading towards the coast. The German pilot, fighting to keep the aircraft aloft, reached across the body of his bomb-aimer, and released the last bombs in order to lighten the aircraft. On the ground, Julie's house suddenly exploded.

Charlie came round, blood pumping from his nose, and tried to see Julie in the darkness. The fire had been blown out, but it still smoked, and he reached up to find that the ceiling was only a few inches above his head. He felt Julie beside him. To his relief she seemed to be alright.

'Don't worry, love,' he said, 'somebody'll get here any time at all and pull us out.'

'There's something trapping my leg. It's cold and very heavy.'

Charlie gingerly felt his way until his hand touched something metallic. He carefully felt round it, and realised with horror that Julie was trapped under an unexploded bomb. At least, it explained why they were still alive, after what must have been a direct hit on the house.

They heard voices outside, calling their names.

Charlie shouted back. 'There's a UXB down here – be careful!'

'Funny how they expected to find us both here: I thought we were very discreet,' she said in an effort to make a joke.

'Aye, well, we'll have to do better next time. Don't tell a soul – you know what NAAFI girls are like for discovering all the biggest military secrets.'

'It's the Mata Hari methods we employ.'

They laughed at the irony.

Suddenly, daylight appeared a few yards away, and a paramedic shone his torch into the gap. 'Can you crawl out?' he asked.

'Julie's leg's caught under the bomb. Pass down a rope and I'll tie it round her shoulders, then I'll try and lift it while you pull her out.'

'No, you can't do that!' she said, 'if you touch it you might set it off.'

'I'll be alright.' He wriggled his fingers in front of her frightened face. 'I've got magic hands. No problem.'

A rope came through the hole, and Charlie tied it firmly around her.

As he prepared to manhandle the bomb, she impulsively grabbed him and kissed him one more time.

'Love you, Charlie,' she said softly.

'I shall remember you said that,' he said.

Then he moved out of her sight, and she felt the weight come off her.

'Right,' called Charlie's strained voice, 'now: pull!'

Like a cork from a champagne bottle, Julie popped out of the hole, and was immediately carried bodily away from the ruin.

The paramedic returned to the hole and called down. 'Now you, Charlie. Do you want the rope as well?'

Charlie Rogers' voice came muffled to his ears. 'Oh, shit, the bloody thing's ticking.'

A second later, the paramedic was blown a hundred yards through the air and the remains of the house crumbled and buried the few bits of Charlie Rogers remaining.

*

Very little of him was ever found, but a small legacy remained. A new life was begun in my mother's womb. My father was a quiet hero.