

My big day out in London is over, but now everything's worse than ever.

This morning the sun shone as I waited on the platform. Ten minutes to wait: they seemed more like ten hours. When the train was signalled I looked to where the rails seemed to meet in a point, where it's blue with distance and bridges over the line look smaller one by one like the layers of an onion. I saw the tiniest dot where the rails met and watched it grow larger and larger and sprout a little white plume of steam.

However hard I willed it faster it was an age before the engine clanked and panted past me and the train stopped. Its brown boiler, painted a sort of yellowy-brown colour, which Pa told me was called for some reason Stroudley's Improved Engine Green, shone in the sunlight. I opened a door and stepped in. I'd never been on a journey this long and now I was on my way doubts poured in. Would we recognise each other? Was I only imagining how much I'd liked him? I couldn't picture his face. Was this a big mistake? When we came to the great, echoing London terminus he was there waiting. I knew him at once and he knew me. He looked very smart in his uniform and shiny boots. He helped me off the train and said, "Here we are then, Ellen and won't it be a wonderful day?" Then I knew that it really would be.

First he took me to a café where he ordered sausage and mash and a pot of tea. I'd never been in such a place where I had food bought for me. Then we got on a bus and climbed up the steps to the open top. The bus took us down Victoria Street, and we saw the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben. Archie said "Buckingham Palace is near here, shall we get off and look for it?" I said, "Yes please, Archie. We might see King George." But

when we got there we only saw the sentry in his bearskin helmet and King George wasn't there at all.

"Ever been to a picture show?" Archie asked and I told him I never had, though I'd heard about them. Soon we were in a picture palace watching the screen with people moving on it as if they were really there. I'd never seen such marvels. There was a film with Charlie Chaplin in it and I never laughed so much in my life. When we came out again the sunlight made me blink, but then we went on an underground railway and I was in the dark again. We got off at Charing Cross, went to Trafalgar Square and then walked up the Strand. I'd never seen such traffic, all the buses and cars and horses and carts, the noise nearly deafened me. Then we went to a tea shop and had another pot of tea and some cakes. I asked him when he was going back to France and he answered, "As soon as I've put thee on t'train home." "I see," I answered.

"Did you enjoy your leave?" I asked.

"Aye, I did that. I went to church wi' me Mam and down t'pub wi' me Da and laikin' football wi' me brother and his mates and then I went to Oakwell and watched t'lads wallop the Wednesday. It were a reight good leave, Ellen." He looked so happy and I was about to ask him what walloping the Wednesday meant when he said, "There'll be a big fight soon," he said. "We've trained so hard that we know what to do, down to t'very second. It can't go wrong. We'll win t'war next month and then we can all come home."

"Oh, that's wonderful," I replied. "Yes, it is," he said. "Drink that tea up, Ellen and we'll go to t'theatre while there are still tickets."

We went to the Shaftesbury Theatre to see a show called *Three Cheers*. The theatre was even better than the picture palace, much bigger

with red plush seats and lots of gold paint. Somewhere below me I could hear the band tuning up and when I asked Archie where the noise was coming from he replied, “They call it t’orchestra pit, just in front of t’stage.” The lights went down, the band struck up and the show started. There was a man who juggled with flaming torches, another walking a tightrope and a woman who tied herself up in all sorts of knots with her legs behind her head and her whole body twisted round in a circle so that I felt quite ill just looking at her. The programme said she was a contortionist. Then two men called a double act told a lot of jokes, including the very one Arthur Dunhill told about the man who’s wife was coughing and his friend thought he meant her coffin and now I knew where Arthur had got it from. Then on came a lady dressed as Britannia, with a helmet, spear and shield painted with the Union Jack, who sang songs about our soldiers and sailors. Lots of people joined in, but Archie didn’t, until she sang “It’s a long way to Tipperary” and then he sang as loudly as the rest. That ended the first part.

But the one everyone had come to see was in the second part. Harry Lauder, with his kilt and his curly walking stick, singing:

*“Roamin’ in the gloamin’ by the bonnie banks o’ Clyde,
Roamin in the gloamin’ with ma lassie by ma side,”*

Archie took my hand and held it then, and I felt my heart beating very fast. Harry Lauder told lots of jokes and I laughed even more than I did at the Charlie Chaplin film.

The show finished with a big surprise. Harry Lauder sang his last song for the night, *The laddies who fought and won*, and suddenly there was a skirl of bagpipes and on marched a bagpiper in his plaid kilt and sporrán. Marching after him came a troop of soldiers in red tunics, black trousers and huge black bearskin helmets on their heads. “Scots Guards,” Archie

whispered to me. They marched and countermarched across the stage to the tune of the pipes and everybody stood up and cheered and cheered and cheered. Archie, though, didn't cheer. We rose from our seats with everyone else. He kept hold of my hand as he stood ramrod straight to attention, biting his lip slightly. Then it was all over, the lights came up and we made for the exit. "Did you like it, Ellen?" Archie asked and I answered, "Oh Archie, it was wonderful," because that's what it was.

Outside, the street lamps shone, the traffic was noisy and the pavements wet because it rained while we were inside. Archie asked if I'd like to go to a public house but I said no because I'd heard that women got drunk on gin in London pubs. We went into a cafe instead and had a cup of tea. Then we got on a bus, though we went inside this time.

Soon we were at Victoria station for me to catch the last train home. Archie found an empty compartment, opened the door for me, came in as well and sat beside me until it was time for the train to leave. He was still holding my hand.

"There'll big things happening when I get back," he said. I didn't say anything. "But I might not come back," he continued.

I couldn't make out his face very well in the carriage's weak gaslight and anyway tears were misting my eyes. I'd never liked anyone who wasn't in my family as much as I liked Archie. So I said something I really meant. "But you must come back, Archie. I want to be with you all the time."

"I want to be with you," he said.

The guard blew his whistle and Archie said, "I've got to go." Just like at Hartcross Park he gave me a little kiss, then another one, so long that I couldn't breathe. The train started, he opened the door and jumped out. I leaned through the window and waved and he waved back and shouted,

“Wish me luck, Ellen,” and I answered, “Good luck, dear Archie. Goodbye.” Then we were steaming out of the station and Archie was gone.

The train was nearly empty and nobody got into my compartment even though we stopped at station after station, so for two whole hours I could cry to my heart’s content. Every time the train stopped I looked out of the window and seemed to see Archie striding away up the platform towards places I couldn’t imagine. A sad end to the happiest day of my life.

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It was past one o’clock when I let myself in through the front door. Everything was deathly quiet. The gaslight in the front room was so low as to be almost out. The fire’s last embers glowed in the fireplace. Then I heard breathing and a voice said, “Is that you, Ellen?” Ma was sitting in a chair by the fire. “Ah, you’re home,” she said in a dead voice. She didn’t ask what my day had been like.

I turned the gas up and said, “Ma,” I said. “Is something wrong?”

“No more than it ever is,” she replied. I knelt down beside her and took her hand. “Ma, it’s all right. I’m home now.”

“I know you are,” she said. “I don’t begrudge you your day out.”

“You managed all right, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” she said. “I managed.” We were silent for a moment. Then she said, “Ellen, I know you’ll go away and leave us one day. It’s just...”

“What, Ma?”

“You were so happy this morning and I should have been happy for you. But I thought of Jack and then of that young man you were seeing and wondered if he might come back like Jack or perhaps not at all.”

“So have I, Ma,” I answered, because all the way home I’d thought of nothing else. “But whatever happens he’s had a lovely day to look back on and so have I. I’m very fond of him, Ma, but that doesn’t mean I’m looking any further forward than today.”

“Ellen,” said Ma. “That’s very grown-up of you.”

“I know what the war means now,” I replied.

She nodded and said, “Jack’s not been well today.” She wouldn’t say any more. As I climbed up the stairs I heard regular breathing from the girls, Pa’s deafening snores and those same odd gobbling noises Jack had made on that dreadful night. Still, at least he was asleep now.

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