

SHACKLETON'S SHED



**by
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The day spilled out onto the cabbage patch, teasing the little copper puddles, drawing the butterflies out into the open. The clouds were high and there was a smell of charcoal in the air. Shackleton woke up with a start and flung his arms out, knocking over an empty watering can. The light swam in through the cracks in the wall of the shed. Stroking the tuft of hair on his chin, he cast his eye over the onions hanging over his head, the broken flower pots scattered around and the old spade leaning against the door. His rheumy eyes rested on the spade. "I should go," he thought, "It's time to bury the dead!"

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Christina Peacock and her friend and constant companion, Edith, were out early that morning, it being Sunday. Edith wore an ill-fitting yellow cardigan and squinted all the time through a pair of thick-rimmed spectacles. Waddling along beside her, Christina dwarfed her friend completely. She was almost grotesquely plump and her cheeks were so full they seemed to hang from her face. As the two women ambled through the allotments, the new army recruits marched up behind them, chins held high, arms swinging like pendulums. Each man's brow was set in silent determination, confident that any bloodshed would be justified in the eyes of the world. Past the supermarket, through the brightly-lit arcade and into the housing estate beyond the roundabout, they marched in time, primed to give their lives in an act of supreme self-sacrifice.

"There goes my Lenny," remarked Edith, beaming with pride. "Don't you think he looks taller in that uniform? Don't you?"

Edith's son, Lenny, was actually listed as missing in action, presumed dead. They stopped by the pig sty. "I had a bad dream last night," said Edith.

"You're always having bad dreams!"

"I dreamed the soldiers came during the night and took everything out of my house. First they carried out the telly. Just threw it in the back of the lorry. And I just stood there. Well, what could I do? They cut the telephone wire, took the phone away and came back for the kitchen table, the bed, all my books and my Hoover. Then they rolled up the carpets and took them away. All my crockery went – even the kettle. Even my holiday snaps from Hayling Island last year. They took everything, Christina." She sighed, looking quite distressed.

"Did they?" mumbled her friend, trying to feign some interest.

“Nothing left,” said Edith. “Absolutely nothing.”

“What did you do?”

“I couldn’t do anything, Christina. What *could* I do?” She paused. “And they took everything, you know. Everything.”

“Oh dear.” Christina was peering into the empty pig sty. “What’s happened to the pigs, I wonder.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I woke up, you see. But they *were* pigs, weren’t they!”

“I expect they’re still asleep.”

“Asleep!” Edith exclaimed. “Well, I hope they sleep badly! That’s all I can say.” She snorted.

“I wish they were here.”

“Yes, I’d soon give them a piece of my mind!” said Edith, thoroughly disgruntled.

“I like watching them eat.”

“Eat?” Edith looked a trifle baffled. The sky over the allotments was turning a purple beetroot colour as the two women wandered off down the path.

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All was quiet. Shackleton propped himself up on his elbows and gazed outside. Daylight was fading. Beyond the turnips and the rows of cabbages, a white peony-like flower suddenly appeared, followed by another and then another. Like miniature inverted umbrellas, they began to pop up all around the shed. Eventually, the entire vegetable plot was sprinkled with them. Shackleton was quite taken aback and sat there with his mouth open, staring in bewilderment. In no time, night had fallen and all that could be seen in the dark were the white luminous flowers, angels’ parachutes. Shackleton gave way to an urge to venture outside, but as he pushed and pushed with his elbows, it was as if the darkness was a mass of black putty pinning him to the floor. He waited, pushed again, but to no avail. He could not so much as raise his head, such was the uncanny

power of the atmosphere around him. A wave of claustrophobia enveloped him and he screamed: “Let me go! Let me go!” An onion rolled off the shelf and fell on his head.

Breaking out of his trance, Shackleton let out an involuntary shriek. Knocking a shelf clean off its brackets, sending potatoes cascading down on to the floor, he sprang to his feet and ran outside. Everything was glowing in the moonlight. Panic-stricken, he let loose all his pent-up energy on the little white flowers, tearing them out of the ground, flinging them over his shoulder. Eventually, he flopped down, exhausted, perusing the scattering of white flowers drinking up the moonlight, seemingly taunting him. “I wish I’d never run away,” he thought. “I wish I was back in my safe little room. Little Billy told me it wasn’t safe outside. Should have listened to him. And now... now, it’s time to bury the dead.”

As he scrambled back into his dilapidated refuge, five or six shadowy figures emerged, carrying something over their shoulders. Crouching behind the door, Shackleton watched as the men stooped to pick the white flowers. With military precision, they deposited the crop in sacks and disappeared, whistling a march.

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The following day, Edith and Christina arrived at the allotments and sat on the grass behind the old air-raid shelter. Edith spread a cloth on the ground and they took out their sandwiches. “I dreamt my Lenny won a medal for himself last night,” said Edith, pecking away at the cheese and tomato. “Won a medal for bravery, he did.”

“Oh, yes?” Christina murmured. “You’re always dreaming.”

“He was on patrol in enemy territory. Dark it was. Very dark.”

Christina was busy flapping away at the flies that were swooping around the food, settling on the cloth, even on their arms and legs, on the sandwiches, everywhere. Edith continued, oblivious to her friend’s discomfort. “All of a sudden, they came across the enemy – swarming through the valley, they were. Hundreds of them.”

“I hate these flies!” Christina protested, flicking at her legs, sweeping her hands over the food.

“They were like flies. Yes, just like flies, they were. Like insects. Hundreds of them. Luckily Lenny’s patrol had not been spotted, but they couldn’t turn back, so they crouched down in the grass and waited. Then my Lenny had an idea...”

“Goodness me!” shrieked Christina, quite dismayed. “There’s one on the jam tart!”

“He crawled on his belly, he did. Crawled on his belly, past the sentries, past an enemy company that was dug in, drinking tea.”

Christina poured some tea out of the flask and passed the cup to Edith who proceeded to slurp noisily as she drank. Keeping watch on a fly crawling hesitantly towards her foot, Christina shook a menacing finger at it and hissed: “Don’t you dare get any closer!”

Edith went on. “He didn’t dare get any closer. The ammunition hut was surrounded by sentries...”

“Go away!” Christina screamed. “Go away, will you! Or I’ll throw something at you!”

“He knew the time was right. He ran towards an unattended gun post and threw a grenade towards the hut...”

“I can see you, you damned fly!” yelled Christina. “Get away!”

“They spotted him!” said Edith, the pitch of her voice revealing her excitement. “They saw him and fired at him! He was hit in the shoulder as he ran, but he looked around and saw the ammunition hut exploding in flames.”

A few drops of rain pattered on the cloth. “It’s starting to rain,” said Christina. “At least it’ll get rid of these horrible little flies!”

Edith was on her feet, inspired. “It exploded and exploded and exploded again! The whole sky was blazing!”

The rain washed down as Christina gathered up the picnic and bundled it unceremoniously into her bag. She took Edith by the arm and the pair ran for shelter. As they left, teams of ants appeared in relays and efficiently removed the fallen crumbs.

Dripping wet and bitterly cursing the weather, the two women blundered into Shackleton’s shed, prompting him to stagger backwards in alarm. They stared at him. He stared back, almost jibbering with fright. Recovering a little of his composure, he hugged at his goatee and said “Ladies?”

“Sorry,” said Christina. “Hope you don’t mind if we shelter in here for a moment. Do you?”

Shackleton’s eyes shifted uneasily. “Er, no,” he said.

It was a very heavy shower. The rain pummelled the roof of the shed. It was as if the clouds had sucked up the entire Atlantic and could carry it no further. Water was seeping in under the door, under the walls, and it dripped insistently from the roof. Already, pieces of straw and an old newspaper were afloat. Christina was shifting her weight from one leg to the other. “Who are you, Sir?” she asked.

“I’m... My... I can’t remember,” Shackleton stammered, looking guilty and embarrassed. The two women exchanged glances as he attempted to explain. “I... I’ve had a knock on the head. In the war, you know.”

Before long, the three of them were standing in several inches of water. A clap of thunder broke the silence. Shackleton shivered. He fished out a wooden crate and stood up on it out of the water. Christina and Edith exchanged a look of affront. In spite of herself, Christina endeavoured to stay polite. “Why are you here, Sir?” she asked.

“I’m hiding.” The words were out before he could reel them back in. “I mean... Well, I live here.”

“You *live* here?” exclaimed the two women, astonished.

“You’re a keen gardener then?” suggested Christina after a bewildered pause.

“There was a greenhouse at the sanatorium,” Shackleton said. “I liked it there.”

All of a sudden, a plank in the roof gave way and the rain plunged through. A flash of lightning illuminated the shed. The two women backed away in fright. Shackleton accidentally dislodged a garden fork and it fell with a splash near Edith, who gripped her friend with both hands as a clap of thunder made the shed tremble. Shackleton became upset. “Are you frightened?” he asked. “Nobody was frightened of me at the sanatorium. I worked in the greenhouse. People would come along and look at the plants. Nobody was scared of me. Why should they be? Little Billy told me I should stay there. It’s dangerous out there, he said. I should’ve listened to him.”

“I dreamt I was a gardener once,” ventured Edith. “I grew white flowers. A whole garden of beautiful white flowers.”

Shackleton’s interest was piqued. “White flowers?” he said.

“Oh yes. Lovely white flowers. Hundreds of them, all over the garden.”

Another plank in the roof was sagging ominously. Christina hitched up her dress out of the water and for a while they all fell silent. Flashes of lightning lit up their faces in the gloom. Edith was entranced once more, preoccupied with the memory of her dream. Shackleton studied the rising water level. A few lettuce leaves floated limply, occasionally drifting under holes in the roof, whereupon they were ruthlessly bombarded.

“They took everything, you know,” said Edith. “Everything!”

“What happened to the flowers?” Shackleton inquired. “The white flowers.”

“They left me with nothing, you know. Nothing.”

“The white flowers?” Shackleton asked. “Did they take the white flowers?”

“They took everything,” said Edith. “Everything.”

The roof was now offering no shelter whatsoever. A number of planks had fallen and were floating around at waist level. The remainder were sagging or hanging precariously from the odd nail. The door had gone. Shackleton turned to Edith. “It was a dream, was it?”

“Oh, she’s always dreaming,” said Christina. Sighing to herself, Edith took off her glasses and wiped them on her cardigan. Slotting them once more on the bridge of her nose, she suddenly started to cry. “Won’t somebody save us?” she whimpered.

A sudden gust of wind snatched at the wreckage of the shed and wrenched it clean away. Shackleton ducked as lengths of wood shot past him. Christina was knocked backwards into the water. She floundered about gracelessly, her dress billowing uncontrollably around her. Edith stood with her face buried in her hands, sobbing fitfully. The wind whistled on and the lightning exploded around them. No one spoke.

Eventually, the rain relented and the sound of thunder receded. Two pinpoints of light appeared in the distance. Shackleton and the two women became alert once more. They heard the sound of an engine. Shackleton looked alarmed. He took to his heels and half swam, half ran away into the darkness, crying out: "Bury the dead! We must bury the dead!"

An ambulance drew up in front of the women. Edith was ecstatic. Her eyes filled with tears. "It's my Lenny come to rescue us!" she announced. "Lenny!" The paramedics pulled the two women out of the water. Christina slumped into a seat and sobbed hysterically, while Edith wrung out her dress as best she could and smiled at the paramedic who stood over her attentively. Through her tears she could only make out an indistinct, otherworldly figure, but she was convinced it was her son, Lenny.

Although she was mistaken about the identity of the paramedic, Edith had actually been in the presence of her son without realising it. Right now, no one was paying the least attention to the real Lenny. The brain damaged war veteran, Lenny Shackleton, was flailing through the water away from the ambulance. No one heard his faint, despairing cry: "We must bury the dead! We must bury the dead!"