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Nourishment

Written by Gerard Woodward

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GERARD WOODWARD

NOURISHMENT

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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Shortly after the outbreak of war, Emily Head, known by everyone, including her late husband Arthur and her daughter Tory, simply as Mrs Head, returned to London after a brief sojourn in the marshland village of Waseminster (Anglo-Saxon for *the church in the mud*, according to Tory's husband Donald), possessed of an unshakeable belief that her daughter, and London generally, needed her.

Tory did her best to conceal her dismay at her mother's return, and to hide the shock she felt to see Mrs Head looking so windswept and craggy as she stepped shakily down from a horse-drawn hackney (the last such vehicle to survive in London, so the cab driver claimed), clinging to her hat of bedraggled turkey plumage, parrying forth a tatty parasol, and bringing Tory's short reign as matriarch of the little house in Peter Street to an end.

In truth, Mrs Head was hardly needed. Donald had already been called up, and was receiving his basic training somewhere near Durdle Door; the children had been evacuated to a very pretty part of the Cotswolds, Lower Slaughter (or was it Upper? Mrs Head could never remember), and Tory might have joined them, had not her mother made her intentions known of returning to help with the battle on the home front. She'd said she would do all the cooking and shopping, all the cleaning and other domestic chores, while Tory got on with her war work in a gelatine factory

(no one denied the importance of gelatine production in the war effort, though no one quite understood it either). Tory had written tactfully dissuasive letters, pointing out that with the prospect of air raids and gas attacks, she would be much safer staying put. Her mother had replied that she had no intention of biding her time on the Thames Marshes while London burned and, using a logic that would soon seem absurd, regarded the city as a sanctuary, imagining that the bombers, when they came, would pick off all the little villages one by one as they approached the capital. She would be much safer as one among the many millions. Furthermore, she seemed to regard the muddy shores of Waseminster Parish as an ideal landing spot for an invasion. *'Every time there's a knock at the door I wonder if it's Adolf,'* she wrote.

Mrs Head had been a resident of Waseminster for little more than a year and was, she confessed, beginning to think that the move had been a great mistake. Despite the fervour with which she had described country pursuits in her letters – *'to see the pheasants falling as heavily as Christmas puddings is such a glorious affirmation of the superiority of man over nature'* – she was not a proper countrywoman, and although she had connections to the area (it had been the birthplace of her late husband, Tory's father) she was not made to feel welcome. Few of Arthur's bloodline remained in the village, and her attempts at ingratiation were met with little warmth. No one really understood why a woman who'd lived in the city all her life should suddenly want to live in the countryside; her friends thought it faintly treacherous, while her new neighbours regarded her with suspicion.

'It is a lovely little house,' Mrs Head remarked gratefully as she walked up the path with her hand on Tory's arm (who was carrying her bag), as though she'd been debating this aspect of 17 Peter Street all the way up on the train from Kent.

And so mother and daughter now lived alone in the house that

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had once been so busy and crowded, and each seemed more shocked by this fact than by the bombs that, some time after Mrs Head's return, began to rain down upon the city.

*

Mrs Head stuck to her word, shopping and cooking with heroic, redoubtable zeal. With the children gone, she had no other role, despite the fact that neither she nor her daughter had a great appetite, and Tory could obtain free meals in the factory canteen. This was just as well, because there wasn't much in the shops for Mrs Head to buy. Good meat was soon scarce. But Mrs Head was a tenacious and dogged shopper, queuing for however long it took, remonstrating with shopkeepers (most of whom she believed were corrupt) and waving her ration book as a token of righteousness and entitlement.

She had a particularly troubled relationship with Icarus Dando, the butcher who had supplied her with meat for more years than she cared to remember. He was an outwardly jolly sort, with yellow mutton chops and watery, laughter-filled eyes, but she had never liked him. His talk could get too risqué, even for a butcher, so much so that she had been reluctant to take her children into the shop when they were little, in case they caught one of Dando's gristly innuendoes. He tried to soften these with displays of salty charm. He would claim to be in love with Mrs Head, would even serenade her, cleaver in one hand and steel in the other, handprints of blood all over his apron, as though he had been tickled by Lady Macbeth. But now that there was a war on, she realized she was many rungs down on his ladder of preference. There were younger mothers now, women of Tory's generation, whom he could woo and serenade anew, and who responded with far more favour than she would have thought seemly.

She had several times been told that he had no steak, and then

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later that evening had caught the pungent tang of a piece of rump frying in Mrs Richards' kitchen. Mrs Richards was a favourite of Mr Dando.

In fact, things had become so fraught between Mrs Head and Mr Dando that she couldn't help feeling rather pleased when his shop was bombed out of existence one Tuesday night.

*

It had been a particularly heavy raid, coming at a time when the residents of that corner of south-east London were beginning to wonder if the Germans were showing mercy for their humble, Thames-side district. It was hardly likely since their suburb included a barracks and a munitions factory, both wonderfully disguised as leafy forests, so it seemed to be only by chance that so few bombs had troubled their sturdy terraced streets and parades in the months since the raids had begun. Mrs Head and her daughter had even taken to sleeping in their own beds, and not bothering with the public shelter (their house was too small and crooked to have shelters of its own), since most of the raids went north of the river, towards the Royal Docks and the factory land surrounding them. It hardly seemed to make sense to Mrs Head. 'How can you bomb a dock? If you're on target, you'll merely be making a big splash. If you're off target, you'll only be making the dock bigger.' She was herself defiantly indifferent to aerial attack. She had once, from the top of Shooters Hill, watched an air raid over London. The bombs seemed to her no more than little scratches of flame. The might of the German Air Force appeared like someone throwing lighted cigarette ends at a huge black bull. The immense body of the city hardly seemed to notice them.

Well, it didn't seem like that now, with the bombing of Old Parade, where Mr Dando's shop had been. She'd heard it fall at four o'clock in the morning. It had woken her out of the deep sleep she enjoyed every night, and she had opened her eyes, thinking

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she was back in her cottage in Waseminster, and that Major Brandish, her closest Waseminster neighbour, had fallen down the stairs. She was delirious enough to run to the stairs with the intention of picking him up, when she realized what the sound had actually been. A bomb. Close enough to rattle the windows and doors, and make every floorboard in the house wheeze. Then the horrible moment when she waited to see if it had any companions, as bombs so often did, falling in twos, threes and fours, sometimes fives, a street or two apart. But this bomb seemed to be alone. A stray, loosed by chance, or merely jettisoned by a plane that had only one bomb left and had let it go without a thought so that the crew could get home to the peat bogs of Saxony in time for breakfast. Mother and daughter had stood on the landing in the dark, having emerged from their neighbouring bedrooms, neither quite sure whether they should make for somewhere safer (wherever that might be), and looking in a slightly abashed way at the ceiling, as though they might see if there were any more bombs to come, before feeling, once more, safe. Their local bomb seemed to be the last of the night.

‘I hope no one I know has copped it,’ Mrs Head muttered, before they went back to bed.

*

It was a neighbour, Mrs Long, who had called to tell her, breathlessly but with a peculiar hint of relish, that the shops at Old Parade, suppliers of food and other wares for all the households in the area, had been destroyed. Tory had already left for work so Mrs Head went alone to see the devastation, wearing her thick woollen coat and taking, out of habit, her shopping basket, an act which seemed unwittingly to mock the sight that greeted her. It was heartbreaking to see all those lovely little shops in ruins. And Dando’s seemed to have taken the full impact, as though he had been specifically targeted (perhaps by a vegetarian Luftwaffe pilot,

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Mrs Head chuckled sadly to herself), and his shop could hardly have been more neatly dispatched. It had simply disappeared, as though removed, like a book from a shelf.

The shops either side of the butcher's were so badly damaged they would surely have to be pulled down. The baker's was only half there, the rest of it a scree of bricks and joists. The little tobacconist's on the other side was in a similar condition. It had burnt the longer, someone joked, because of all the uncut shag. Other shops were hardly recognizable: signs had been blown off completely or were hanging at an angle, windows were open, as though flung to greet the day, their shredded curtains and blinds overspilling.

By this vision of things hanging and crooked or otherwise out of place, it seemed to Mrs Head that the main purpose of bombs was not destruction, so much as the creation of disorder and untidiness. It was only the little area beneath the bomb itself that was ever destroyed, but it spread about it a great ring of cluttered mess that would take a huge effort of will to put right. To her surprise the process had already begun. Bricks filled the road in tidy heaps, as though they were bargain items. Mrs Head learnt later that this was because they had already been sorted by the rescue teams who had spent all morning lifting them, one by one, searching for survivors. She approached as closely as she could, right up to the rope that had been set up, and where a small gaggle of her shopping acquaintances had gathered.

There was Mrs Richards, in the same turban and pearls that had, only yesterday, charmed Mr Dando into passing her some fillet steak. When Mrs Head, who had glimpsed the exchange when passing the window, challenged him about this he had claimed it was liver. 'You are a tricky little spiv, Mr Dando,' she had called through the shop doorway, then done her best to slam the door, not waiting for Mr Dando's retort, 'It was liver, love! LIVER, my lovely!' Well, she had a right to be angry. He had sold her nothing but ox tails, trotters, cow heels and tripe for weeks.

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The mothers, roped off, exclaimed in surprise when one spotted what looked like victims of the explosion. At the distant end of the parade, only partly visible, bodies were arranged on the ground, on their backs, in fashionable but tattered clothes, stiffly raising arms to the heavens that had rained death upon them. It was a moment before anyone realized the dead were in fact shop mannequins, rescued from Mr Carter's dress emporium. He emerged with some more while they were watching, a woman under each arm. Mrs Head and the other gathered housewives couldn't help smiling at the spectacle: the little bald-headed chap looked like the Sheikh of Araby carting off his harem.

'Do you think anyone really was – hurt?' said Mrs Lippiatt, a sad and rather turtle-like woman, who always had trouble with her neck.

'I wouldn't have thought so,' said Mrs Sparrow, wiping her nose aggressively. 'I don't think anyone lived over those shops . . .'

'What about Mr Dando?' said Mrs Richards, in her sandpapery voice.

No one seemed quite to know where the butcher lived, or what his habits were. It was odd that he wasn't on the scene to inspect the damage. Perhaps he'd been already and was busy making his arrangements, whatever they might be. There was clearly nothing that could be salvaged from his shop, so there was probably little point in staying around.

There were lots of suitcases in the road, scattered, splayed, empty. Handbags as well, little brown leather ones, also empty. It was as if the residents of Old Parade had seen what was coming and had boldly made to escape, but just a minute too late. In fact the bags came from the luggage shop, Bon Voyage, whose merchandise had all been blown out through its windows. A sign was propped on the rubble, in dripping red: 'Looters Will Be V. Severly Delt With.'

'I think Mr Larkin must have written that,' said Mrs Taylor. Mr

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Larkin was, at that moment, gathering up the apples and oranges that had fallen from his greengrocer's.

'I don't know where we're going to do our shopping now,' said Mrs Pinner, who also had her shopping bag, making Mrs Head feel less foolish. 'There isn't a decent butcher's within a mile of here.'

'And if we do find one, will we be able to register?'

'We'll have to. They can't let us starve.'

'Why not? In Silvertown they were fighting each other over bags of flour . . .'

'The high street must be the nearest. There's several there. Shouldn't be any trouble, as long as the trams are running. Otherwise it's a two-mile walk.'

'Perhaps they can deliver . . .'

Mrs Head began making plans in her mind almost immediately. All the housewives of Peter Street, and Mark Street, and John Street, and all the tough little terraces around here, they would all be making for the high street, elbowing each other out of the way to get to the best butcher. The jostling for position would begin all over again. She would need to plan her campaign, practise her charm (her one serious failing) and, above all, strengthen her legs. A two-mile walk every day was more than she'd bargained for on returning from Waseminster.

*

The conversation petered out and the housewives began to drift away, empty-handed, to their homes. Mrs Head would have been among the first to make her way back and prepare for the expedition to the high street, but she was transfixed by the details of the devastation. She had already noted the mannequins, the suitcases and handbags, the apples and oranges, now she began to notice the upper storeys of the bombed shops. The tall interior walls disclosed apparently lived-in spaces, marked by the stained zigzags of fallen staircases, and the macaroni ends of wrenched piping (some

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trickling pathetically) standing feebly out from tiled corners. Faded wallpaper, exposed to the glare of daylight for the first time, had pictures hanging on it. A wardrobe was lying half shattered and aslant on a heap of rubble. Thirty feet in the air, a little black fireplace was stranded in a wall, its mantelpiece (surely not) had what looked like an ornament still in position.

At ground level groups of men in dusty clothes were hastily trying to assemble scaffolding poles and salvaged timber to shore up the teetering walls. Mrs Head moved away, across the wide, strewn expanse of Old Parade itself to the opposite pavement, noting the damage on this side, the gaping windows, and the deeply pocked brickwork, which had taken the full impact of shrapnel. Further along, firemen were still hosing water into a smouldering shopfront.

Directly opposite where Dando's had been was Timothy's, a large bakery, confectioner and chocolatier, which had done rather well since opening a few years back but had suffered since the shortages had taken hold and had seemed, recently, to be on the point of going out of business – as much for the scarcity of its wares, Mrs Head sometimes suspected, as for its suspiciously continental leanings. It liked to sell what it called Austrian Apple Cake and Bavarian Gateau, as well as Swiss Pralines (slightly more acceptable).

As she looked closely at the shopfront of Timothy's now she could see, among the many scars and mini-craters of a building that had been exposed to a bomb blast, other matter. Yes, she was sure of it. There was actually a rasher of bacon stuck to the wall over the main window, perfectly flat against the brickwork, as though it had been cemented there. And then she saw another, and then another, fanned out across the façade, an array of streaky bacon. Then other materials that must have been flung with terrific force from the exploding butcher's across the street – that thing up there, over the door, that was surely a sausage. It was flattened and burst, but it

was definitely one of Mr Dando's notoriously gristly bangers. (It was said that sawdust was a prime ingredient.)

There was much else. Dollops of mince, pieces of liver, kidneys, other offal, all stuck fast. And, Mrs Head felt like raising a fist in self-vindicating triumph, there was steak. The tricky little victualler who had denied his shop contained an ounce of beef now had his lies stuck fast over Timothy's for the world to see. His shop had been veritably overflowing with beefsteak. There must have been so much steak in Dando's shop he probably couldn't close his refrigerator doors for it. She turned to the busy crowds of rescuers and onlookers, ready to cry out, 'I told you so! You want proof, here it is, the sins of the butcher written on the walls of the confectioner's . . .' She didn't shout it. There wasn't anyone nearby anyway. No one was even looking in her direction. And Mrs Head turned back to her tableau of exposed meat, and briefly wished that the bomb hadn't thrown it so high.

She turned her attention to ground level and saw, for the first time, what seemed to her an almost perfect leg of pork, just sitting there on the pavement. Or, rather, it was resting, tucked slightly behind a piece of timber (probably part of a window frame), and was off the ground and quite hidden. Furthermore, it was covered with the same layer of dust as everything else in the area and so was well camouflaged.

After a moment's thought, Mrs Head bent down, picked up the joint and put it in her shopping bag, feeling grateful that she had decided to bring that piece of equipment after all.

*

Had anyone called Mrs Head a looter she would have expressed great indignation, even outrage, though the thought did cross her mind, as she hurried home, as to whether, if spotted, she would have been 'v. severely delt with' in the manner of that crudely written sign. Apart from the fact that Mr Dando was always lying about

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how much meat he had in stock, which in itself was justification for taking it when it had become available, such goods were perishable and would only spoil if they weren't used. It could hardly be compared to stealing tins of food or dresses or wireless sets.

When home she gave the meat a long, investigative sniff. She looked closely for any signs that it might have been nibbled by rats. She ran her fingers over its surface, feeling for any splinters of broken glass. There were none. She brushed off the little pieces of grit and ash, ran it under the kitchen tap for a full five minutes, dabbed it with a kitchen towel, then wondered what she should do with it.

Cleaned up, the meat looked excellent. A lovely deep, almost purply pink, with a nice hairless skin covering a layer of snowy-white fat. It seemed to cry out, 'Roast me, roast me.' Mrs Head thought of the wonderful crackling such a joint would give, and she wouldn't have hesitated, except that it was a Wednesday. A stew would have been more appropriate for a Wednesday. On the other hand, the meat might not keep until Sunday. She didn't like the thought of it lying around in her house uncooked for four days. And the look of excitement she would see on Tory's face when she got home from work, to smell a joint of pork roasting in the oven, would be worth it in itself. They hadn't had a joint for many months. Apart from that, she had some apples and could make a good sauce to go with it. And the cold pork would keep them in sandwiches for days.

So, that afternoon, instead of going to stake her claim on the butchers of the distant high street, Mrs Head prepared the roast dinner of her life, using the joint of pork she had found near the site of a bombed butcher's shop.

And still no one seemed to know what had become of Mr Dando.