



Fiction text: *Birdsong* Part Four, France 1917 (pages 209-307):

The mines were driven far under the ground into a blue clay. At the heads of the deeper ones the men enlarged chambers where they could rest and sleep without needing to go back above the ground. They bore the stench of their packed, unwashed bodies for the sake of warmth and safety. Any minute was better that was not spent beneath the endless dripping sky; no night was unbearable that offered shelter from the freezing winds that stiffened their waterlogged tunics and trousers into icy boards. The smell was hard to breathe, but it was no better above ground where the chloride of lime seemed not to relieve but to compound the atmosphere of putrefying flesh, where the latrine saps had been buried or abandoned and men preferred to inhale the toxic smoke of braziers rather than the smell of faeces.

While the principal deep mines, which had been under construction for two years, were gradually enlarged and driven out towards the ridge, Weir's company were working on a shallow tunnel from which they could listen for enemy counter-mines. One morning they heard sounds of German activity above them. There appeared to be an underground ladder near by from which men were jumping. The noise of their boots could be heard stamping along the tunnel overhead. Weir ordered his tunnel to be evacuated, but two or three men had to be left in listening posts at all times to be sure that the Germans would not undermine the actual trench. There were no volunteers for this job, so he had to make a duty rota. They took candles with them so they could read books as they listened. Only twenty men had been down and back by the time the explosion they most dreaded shook the earth. With a large camouflet* the Germans blew their tunnel. The two listeners were buried under thousands of tons of Flanders soil.

Weir was in the trench when the explosion went off, drinking tea with Stephen and explaining his difficulties. He went white as the earth rocked under them. The hot liquid spilled unremarked over his shaking hand.

'I knew it,' he said. 'I knew they'd blow it. I've got to get down there. It was my idea to put them there. Oh God, I knew this would happen.'

He looked frantically to Stephen for sympathy, then brushed past him on his way to the tunnel ahead.

'Just a minute,' said Stephen. 'You may have lost three men down there, but if the enemy's got a tunnel under this trench I'm going to lose half my company. You'd better be bloody sure where their tunnel's going.'

'You come and see if you're so concerned. I have to think of my own men first,' said Weir.

'Take one of your men and get him to report back to me.'

Weir was so angry that he had stopped trembling. 'Don't you tell me what to do. If you're so worried about your men then you –'

'Of course I'm worried about them. If they think there's a mine under them they won't stay put for twenty-four hours. There'll be a mutiny.'

'Well come down and bloody well see for yourself then.'

'It's not my job to crawl around underground.'



Stephen was following Weir along the trench to where he kept the tunnelling supplies. He picked up a canary in a small wooden cage and turned to face Stephen.

'Are you frightened?' said Weir.

Stephen hesitated, glancing at the cage. 'Of course not. I merely –'

'Well come on then.'

Stephen, who had not often felt himself out-argued by Weir, saw that he had little choice.

'It'll only take an hour,' said Weir, more placatingly now that he could see Stephen weakening. There was a pause. 'You got wounded last time, didn't you? So now I suppose you're afraid to go down.'

'No,' said Stephen, 'I'm not frightened of going underground.'

Weir passed him a helmet with a lamp on it and a pick. 'It's very narrow there, and we'll need to clear some of the debris when we get to the explosion.'

Stephen nodded silently. He instructed the nearest man he could see to tell Ellis where he had gone, then followed Weir to the head of the tunnel.

A piece of tarpaulin was stretched over a wooden frame built back only a couple of feet from the front wall of the trench. The excavated clay was taken away in sandbags and dumped well to the rear so that enemy planes could have no idea where the digging was being done. The opening was not much more than a rabbit hole.

Weir turned to Stephen, his face set in anxiety. 'Follow me as fast as you can.'

Beneath the parapet of the trench was a vertical shaft into the darkness of the earth. The horizontal wooden rungs were several feet apart. Weir scrambled down with practised ease holding the handle of the canary's cage in his teeth, but Stephen had to feel ahead for each slat of wood with his feet.

Eventually he reached a wooden platform where Weir was waiting.

'Come on, for God's sake. This is it. It's only a shallow tunnel.'

Stephen, breathing hard, said, 'Shouldn't you have sent the stretcher-bearers?'

'Yes, they're ready, but they won't come unless an officer has told them where to go.'

Weir went forward at a crouch into the darkness, carrying the cage in his left hand. Stephen followed three or four paces behind. The bird was chirping, though whether from fear or happiness he could not say. Stephen shuddered at the sound. He thought of the surface of the earth above them: a pattern of round shell holes that made up no man's land, each one half-filled with water, in which the rats played and feasted on the unrescued corpses; then thirty feet or so of packed, resistant clay, down which the moisture could still permeate from the world above them.

Weir had gone on to his hands and knees as the height of the tunnel decreased to about three feet. The sides of it pressed in on them and Stephen found it hard to see the beam of Weir's lamp ahead of him. His own seemed to illuminate only the nails on the soles of Weir's boots and the occasional glimpse of cloth on his slowly advancing rear.

As they went further, Stephen felt the clay stick to his crawling hands. He wanted to put out



his arms to his sides and push back the flanks of the tunnel to give them space to breathe.

As long as Weir's body was between him and the cage, however, any fear he felt from the enclosing weight of the earth was tolerable. Anything was bearable provided he did not have to come too close to that bird.

Weir's breath was coming in fast, loud gasps as he pushed onwards, using one hand to pull himself and one to drag the cage. Stephen felt a piece of rock slit the skin of his left hand. There was nothing he could do. The earth above them was poisoned by the spores of gas gangrene, a horse disease implanted by the copious manure used by farmers; he hoped it had not sunk so deep below the surface. He pressed on, trying to put his weight on the outside of his hand. The tunnel was so narrow that they had to try and enlarge it with their picks. There was no room to bring sufficient leverage, however, so their progress was very slow.

Weir suddenly stopped, and Stephen heard him swearing.

'This is it,' he said. 'This is the end. There should be another thirty feet. They've blown the whole bloody thing. They'll both be dead.'

Stephen came up and saw the wall of earth in front of them. He felt a sudden panic. If the tunnel behind them should also now collapse . . . He moved his feet reflexively and began to manoeuvre to turn round: such an explosion must surely have weakened the whole structure with its flimsy supporting timbers.

From his haversack Weir took a round wooden disc which he pressed against the side of the tunnel. Then he took out a stethoscope and plugged in into a teat on the surface of the disc and listened. He raised his finger to his lips. Stephen had no intention of interrupting. He listened carefully himself. It was curiously quiet. There was something unsettling about the silence: there were no guns.

Weir tore the stethoscope from his ears. 'Nothing,' he said.

'Is that thing effective?'

'Yes, it's good. A scientist in Paris invented it. You can never be sure, of course.'

'Who was in there?'

'Shaw was one. The other was called Stanley, I think. He was new.'

'And how do we get them out?'

'We don't. If we try to dig out this stuff we'll just bring in the roof. We send some men to timber it, and if they can get through, so much the better. But I want to close this tunnel now.'

'And if they don't get to them?'

'We say a prayer. We're all buried in the end.'

'Do you want to say a prayer now?'

Weir's face was so close to his that Stephen could smell the stale alcohol on his breath. 'I don't know any prayers,' he said. 'Do you?'

'I could invent one.' The canary let out a small living sound.

Stephen ached with fear. Words came from his lips. 'Into your hand, oh God, we commend the souls of these two men. May they rest in peace. Let this not be in vain. In Jesus Christ's name. Amen.'



'Let's go,' said Weir. 'You'd better let me lead the way. I'll try and get past you. Move back a bit that way, that's it, push up against the wall.'

Stephen flattened himself to try to let Weir pass over him. As Weir's body pressed against him his trailing pick caught against the clay above. A lump of it fell on him. The space dislodged a much heavier fall which smashed down on to his right arm. He let out a cry. Stephen instinctively tried to pull back to where the tunnel was wider in case the whole thing collapsed. Weir was swearing and groaning.

'My arm's broken. Get me out, get me out. Quick or the whole thing's going to come down.'

Stephen went back to him and began to lift the fallen earth very carefully off his body. He pushed it back towards the face of the blocked tunnel. Weir was moaning in pain.

'Get it off, get it off. We've got to get out.'

Stephen, through grinding teeth, said, 'I'm doing my best. I've got to be gentle.' He was lying on top of Weir, his head towards Weir's feet, as he cleared the debris from his arm. He then had to wriggle back over Weir's body, forcing his face down into the earth with his weight. He finally got back so they were lying face to face, Weir's feet towards the wall, Stephen's towards the way out. Weir spluttered on the clay in his mouth.

'Can you make it?' said Stephen.

'I've broken my arm. Maybe a rib too. I'll have to crawl on one hand. You take the bird.'

Stephen reached back to the cage. Its flimsy wooden frame had been crushed in the fall of earth; it was empty.

'The bird's gone,' he said. 'Let's go.'

'Damnation,' said Weir. 'We can't leave it. We'll have to find it and take it back. Otherwise if the Boche find it they'll know we –'

'For Christ's sake, they know there's a tunnel anyway. That's why they blew it.'

Weir spat through his pain. 'You cannot under any circumstances leave a bird free. Ever. It's in the handbook. I'd be court martialled. Find the bird.'

Stephen crawled back over Weir's prostrate body. He felt himself close to tears as he searched the murk of the clay with the feeble light of his helmet. A little to the left of the hole made by the fall he saw a gleam of yellow. Gently, he reached out his hand towards it.

He could feel his heart pummelling the floor of the tunnel; his clothes were sodden with sweat. It ran down into his eyes. He held his hand steady, the fingers opening in the gloom as he moved towards the bird. Please God, he muttered, please, please . . . When his hand was no more than six inches from the canary he made a lunge for it. The bird took off and its wings brushed the back of his hand as it flew past him. Stephen screamed. His body convulsed and his legs kicked back into Weir's thighs.

'For Christ's sake! What's the matter? You're going to bring the tunnel down.'

Stephen lay face down, panting, with his eyes closed.

'Keep still,' said Weir. 'For God's sake keep still. It's up near me now.'

Stephen lay quietly saying nothing. Weir made no movement. Stephen heard him make little whistling noises. He was trying to soothe the startled bird, or trick it into his hand. Stephen was still facing the wrong way. Weir's body was blocking his exit back to the light.



He felt Weir make a sudden movement. 'I've got it,' he said. 'It's in my hand.'

'All right. Let's go. You start off and I'll follow.'

'I've only got one hand. I can't take the bird.'

'Well, kill it. It's only a canary. Come on. I want to turn round. I'm getting cramp. I want to get out of here.'

There was a silence. Weir made no movement. Eventually he said, 'I can't kill it. I can't do it.'

Stephen felt a strange weight in his stomach. 'You must kill it,' he said. His voice came softly through his dry mouth.

There was another silence. Then Weir said, 'I can't do it, Wraysford. I can't do it. It's just a tiny bird. It's done nothing wrong.'

Stephen, trying to keep control of himself, said, 'For God's sake kill it. Just squeeze it in your hand. Bite its head. Anything.'

'You do it.'

'No! It's too risky passing it back to me. It might escape.'

Weir rolled over on to his back and held his left fist towards Stephen. The bird's head appeared between the forefinger and thumb. 'There it is,' Weir said. 'I'll hold it still while you take your knife and cut its throat.'

Stephen felt Weir's eyes boring into him. He reached into his pocket and found his knife. He opened the blade and reached up over Weir's knees. Weir, straining up on his back was able to meet his gaze as Stephen's head appeared between his shins. The two men looked at each other over the tiny yellow head between them. Stephen thought of the lines of men he had seen walking into the guns; he thought of the world screaming in the twilight at Thiepval. Weir looked steadily at him. Stephen put the knife away in his pocket. He fought back the rising tears. Weir might let the bird go. It might touch him.

'I'll take it,' he said.

'You'll need both hands to dig and crawl,' said Weir.

'I know.'

With his handkerchief Stephen made a sling for the bird. He tied three corners together and left an opening.

'All right. Put it in there and I'll tie it up.'

With teeth clamped very tight together he held out both hands to Weir, who released the bird into the handkerchief. Stephen jumped as he felt the battering of wings against the palms of his hands. He managed with fumbling fingers to bring fourth the corner of the handkerchief into the other three and tie it. He put the knot between his teeth and crawled back over Weir's body.

They began their slow retreat, Stephen pushing back the loose earth and enlarging the tunnel where he could. Weir fought his way with his left hand.

In the narrow darkness Stephen felt the feathery weight beneath his face. Sometimes the bird beat its wings and struggled, sometimes it lay still in fear. He saw in his mind the stretched skeleton of the lower wing, the darting movement of the head, and the black,



relentless eyes. He tried to turn his mind away from it by thinking of other things, but no other thought would lodge in his mind. It was as though his brain had closed down, leaving only one picture: the fossil shape of a bird, a pterodactyl ribbed in limestone, the long cruel beak with its prehistoric hook and the bones fanned out, their exiguous width and enormous span, particularly the underside of the breakable wing, with its sinewy feathers plugged into the bird's blood at one end, then stretched over the delta that would flap and bang in his face as the frantic creature, in the storm of its true hostility, would bring its vast plucking beak into his eyes.

The small canary suspended from his mouth made feeble movements and its yellow feathers protruded from the handkerchief to brush softly against his face. He closed his eyes and pushed onwards. He longed for the mud and the stench, for the sound of shells.

Behind him, Weir crawled as best he could. He asked Stephen to stop as he tucked his arm into the front of his shirt for support. He shouted in pain as the two bones momentarily rubbed together.

They reached the ladder and were able to stand up. Stephen took the handkerchief from his mouth and handed it to Weir.

'I'll climb up and send a couple of your men down to help you. You hold on to this.'

Weir nodded. He was very pale, Stephen noticed. Then Weir gave the wide, empty-eyed grin that worried Ellis so much. He said, 'You're a brave man, Wraysford.'

Stephen raised his eyebrows. 'You just wait there.'

He climbed the shaft of the mine with growing pleasure. Up in the mud, in the yellow light, beneath the rain, he stretched his arms and breathed deeply on the chloride of lime as though it were the finest scent from the rue de Rivoli.

He found Ellis waiting nervously near the tunnel head.

'Ah, Ellis, get a couple of sewer rats down there will you? Captain Weir's broken his arm.'

'Where have you been, Sir?'

'Helping out the sappers, you know. You have to show willing. If you ask nicely they'll even build a dugout for you.'

'I was worried, Sir. Couldn't you have sent someone else?'

'That's enough Ellis. Just get two men down there. I'm going for a walk. Nice day, isn't it?'

Down the line he could hear CSM Price issuing orders for a fatigue party to begin their trench repair work. Stephen smiled. When the fields of Europe were no longer needed for human use and were allowed to sink back into the fires of creation, Price would still be making lists.

* Camouflet: an underground explosion of a bomb or mine that does not break the surface, but leaves an enclosed cavity of gas and smoke.