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April 1918: The Bombardment

IN THE WAR-TORN VILLAGE of Noyon-le-Sainte in northern France an old man, clutching the hand of a little boy, mused on the war to end all wars. After three and a half years of bloody stalemate, it seemed less like a war to end war and far more like a war that would just never end. In spite of the endless cycle of artillery barrage, infantry advance, and entrenchment, inexplicably the cathedral, the town hall, the Renaissance library, and various medieval buildings remained standing, awaiting the next cycle of war. Still more importantly to the old man, his house, Grain Place, as it had been known for centuries, remained standing. And he had his music and his books.

That night, windows shrouded in black, he opened the volume he had been reading. A biography originally penned in 1577 by Jérôme-Hermès Bolsec, the old man's copy had been printed in 1875. Far more a vengeful diatribe than a proper biography, the old man had read enough not to think of it as real history; nevertheless, the scandalous rant against a man Bolsec must have intensely hated was entertaining. Perching his reading glasses

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on his nose, and leaning toward the lantern, he had only just recommenced reading when suddenly the house shuddered to its foundation stones.

“Grand-père!” cried the little boy at his feet. “Qu’est-ce que c’est?”

The old man knew what it was. Snatching the boy’s hand, he ran through the house into the back garden, hoping to get the little one to the bomb shelter in time. There was nothing an old man or a mere boy could do; the defense of the town and of the Oise valley was entirely up to the British Fifth Army.

Shifting troop strength to the Western Front in April of 1918, Kaiser Wilhelm II ordered his German army to redirect the gaping mouths of its massive artillery, capable of firing one-ton ordnance over nine miles, and to commence thundering destruction on the Allied defenders and on what remained of the town of Noyon-le-Sainte. The apocalyptic Hindenburg-Ludendorff Offensive had begun.

Holding the trembling boy in his arms, the old man listened to the earth-shaking staccato of German artillery raining death and devastation on the village above them. And then would come the infantry advance. With deadly accuracy, the British defenders who had survived the barrage valiantly went to work with their Enfield rifles, *pee-oohing* death into the waves of German infantry advancing on the town. The Germans responded with the heavy gut-lurching chattering of machine gun fire, cutting down all life in its path, valiant or otherwise. But the old man had seen enough of modern war. He knew that at the last it would be the coordinated artillery fire, the molten shrapnel, and the erupting debris that would carve out a path of death and devastation for the German advance through his village, his home, and his life.

When at last the echoing of heavy guns had lapsed into an eerie silence, the old man and the boy slowly emerged from the bomb shelter. What met their senses seemed like a microcosm of the death of civilization. Everywhere the air was thick with acrid smoke and the stench of death. The complete absence of laughter, of the cheery sounds of children at play, of chattering housewives, of yapping dogs, created a silence so palpable that it unhinged the mental faculties of some who had inexplicably survived.

Stooped and frail, the widow next door sat on a fragment of her front steps—all that remained of her home. Moaning softly, her head bowed and shrouded with a black shawl, she sat rocking, rocking as if thereby to find some comfort for herself. Heaped about her radiated mounds of rubble: the remains of her home, of a Gallo-Roman crypt, of the towers of the cathedral. An instant of thunderous chaos had reduced the village to heaps of debris; order, antiquity, and beauty devolving into crumbled heaps of stone, dust, and matchsticks.

The few buildings still standing looked as if a puff of wind would finish the job. Stones chiseled into columns and arches by master stonecutters of the Middle Ages now seemed to stagger and sway like drunken men. The tinkling of breaking glass broke the stillness; the old man shook his head in wonder: what glass could yet be unbroken after such a bombardment?

Enormous as the loss in buildings, the loss of human life far exceeded all other devastation. Though many had been instantaneously buried as their lives were crushed by hailing stones and molten shrapnel, yet were there many bodies undignified by such a burial. And as the April sun warmed the scene, grotesque corpses swelled in the heat. Others were so disfigured that they had ceased to affright, so inhuman had they become. Still others had

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instantly been obliterated, their parts so ground up and mingled with the mud, stone, and earth that they no longer existed, or so it seemed. Hundreds of townsfolk—men, women, and children—had simply vanished without a trace, no mangled body, no dental work to compare with records.

There was a new sound that made the old man frown. Faintly at first: the rumbling of horse-drawn artillery, the clattering of hooves, the mechanical throttling of trucks and the grinding of gears—and the advance of men. German infantry soldiers in spiky helmets would be pouring in to the streets across the town, shoulder-to-shoulder, right arms swinging stiffly, their rifles over their left shoulders, their boots echoing with every tread more fearfully than their artillery had done before them. The old man had seen and heard it all before.

Grain Place had been reduced to a chaotic mound of rubble. Dazed at first, the old man and the boy picked through the debris that had been their home. It had been home to many families over the centuries, the family names obliterated by the forgetfulness of time, as were now its beams and stones by the relentless unforgetfulness of war.

Strewn amid the chaos were tufts of stuffing from a pillow, and there a mangled arm of a chair, here a broken leg of a table, and the battered head and foot of a bed frame. Unlike other mounds of debris that had once been the houses that made up the village, there were no human arms, legs, heads, and feet in the homey mound of rubble that had been Grain Place.

Recognition flashed across the old man's face as he discovered the final remains of his favorite chair, and here and there a page from the Bolsec book he had only the night before hurriedly laid aside to retire to the relative safety of the bomb shelter in the back garden. With a cry, the boy snatched up the shredded remains

of his teddy bear, and a tear fell on the mangled creature's face as the boy clutched it, searching in the debris for an arm, a leg, an ear, the innards of its torso.

More familiar objects poked out of the rubbish: the old man's violin, never to be played again, and black and white keys from his piano, were scattered about the debris like the shrapnel of a melodic grenade.

Then, scowling, the old man let his eyes fall on an unfamiliar object. It puzzled him, because he could not remember having anything like it among his possessions, yet here it was in the rubble that had been his home and his things. Carefully picking his way to it, he bent low, with a hand clearing aside gravel and powder that had so late been solid stone. It was a battered metal chest, the same length and somewhat wider than an ammunition case for the .303 caliber rounds the British soldiers had used in their Enfield rifles.

Lifting it from the debris, the old man blew the remaining mortar dust away and studied the metalwork on the case more closely.

"Grand-père, qu'avez-vous trouvé?" called the boy.

"Je ne sais pas," he replied with a shrug.

He had no idea what it was, what it contained, but clearly it was very ancient. The rumbling, grinding, and trampling grew louder. The old man, tucking the chest under his arm, gripped the boy's hand in his own and scrambled through the wreckage back to the bomb shelter, now their only home.

Once underground, he took up a pry bar and worked at the lid of the chest. As he worked, so did his imagination. Perhaps inside there would be something of value, something of antiquity: bank notes from the sixteenth century would be nice, family

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gemstones or gold jewelry better still, the title to a vast estate best of all. Food ration coupons would do, he thought grimly. With a sudden crack, the lid gave way. The man's heart raced as he lifted it and gazed inside.

Disappointed, he lifted a large sheaf of paper, yellowed with age. He looked more closely within. Underneath the pages, nest-like, were the decaying remains of a piece of cloth, silk it felt like, at one time perhaps a shade of blue. The cloth was fragile with age, and as he turned it carefully in his hands, he decided it had long ago been a *chapeau* for the head.

Again he looked within. There was a small leather-bound book. Opening it tenderly, he saw that it was a French Bible, hundreds of years old it must have been, and perhaps of some value. Indifferently he closed the book, though cautiously so as not to devalue it. He turned his attention back to the sheaves of paper, clearly some kind of manuscript, written in a hasty, agitated scrawl, but legible for all that, and in French. The writer had used both sides of each sheet of paper, and had allowed no room for margins, as if he feared he might run out of paper, as if he had much to say and little time or space in which to say it.

Who had written these words? the old man mused, thumbing the yellow pages pensively. It was eerie to think that a man long dead had penned them. And the old man, whose emotions had been dulled by the numbing years of war, felt a flickering of excitement at it all. *Why had the ancient writer walled this manuscript up in this house?* There would be no better way to find out than to read the pages, perhaps aloud to the boy.

So he did.