

## **Come Dawn**

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By  
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Characters.

-Private Smith, a soldier newly arrived at a front-line infantry unit.

-Corporal Williams, a soldier with experience in the trenches. He has just returned from a hospital stay, recuperating from a wound received in combat.

-Sergeant Major Wallace, the senior non-commissioned officer in the men's battalion.

-Private Harry Farr. A soldier convicted of cowardice; to be executed at dawn.

-Chaplain Murray. The battalion priest.

-Voice off.

Setting.

The Somme, France, 1916. A dugout in a British infantry battalion's rear area - half a mile from the frontline trenches.

Run-Time.

Ten minutes.

## COME DAWN

A TRENCH DUGOUT: A SMALL FIELD DESK, AND THREE CHAIRS. ONE CHAIR IS BEHIND THE DESK; SMITH AND WILLIAMS SIT, WAITING, ON THE OTHER TWO CHAIRS. THERE IS A CRATE OR BOX THAT WILL BE ALSO USED AS A SEAT.

*ENTER: WALLACE*

*SMITH jumps to attention.  
WILLIAMS stands much more slowly.*

WALLACE

What's this?

SMITH

*(barks...)* Private Smith reporting, Sergeant Major.

WALLACE

Newly arrived from the depot are you?

SMITH

*(barks...)* Yes, Sergeant Major. Just arrived this afternoon.

WALLACE

*(To WILLIAMS)* And you, Williams is it? Back from your holiday so soon.

WILLIAMS

Aye, the hospital put me out at first light. Took all day to get here from the rear.

WALLACE

Fine. I'll send you down to your units tomorrow. We've got a prisoner coming down from division, and you two are a ready-made prisoner escort. You'll guard him through the night.

WALLACE

Right, he's outside with the detail from division. Go on, then. Bring him in.

*WILLIAMS and SMITH EXIT briefly  
and ENTER with FARR, whose hands  
are bound.*

FARR

Private Harry Farr reporting, Sergeant Major.

*WILLIAMS hands WALLACE a piece of  
paper – it is the execution order.*

WALLACE

Stand easy, Farr.

*WALLACE reads the order.*

You know why you're here?

FARR

I do.

WALLACE

You'll stay here under Corporal Williams's guard until the sentence is carried out. All right, Williams?

WILLIAMS

Aye, Sergeant Major.

WALLACE

Right, then. Carry on, Corporal.

*EXIT: WALLACE*

WILLIAMS

What have you been sentenced for?

FARR

Misbehaving in front of the enemy in such a manner as to show cowardice.

SMITH

Cowardice? That's a/

WILLIAMS

/Shut your pie-hole, Smith. (*Beat*) (*To Farr*) You can sit down on that crate.

*FARR does so.*

You were in 1st battalion?

FARR

I was.

WILLIAMS

Thought I recognized you.

FARR

We went over together at Houpline (*mis-pronounced as hoop-line*). You were wounded that morning, I think.

WILLIAMS

That's right. Thought I had a Blighty, but these days you've got to lose both legs and an eye to get sent home. They fixed me up. I'm just back this morning from hospital.

FARR

Tough luck. Drawing this detail your first day back.

WILLIAMS

Tougher on you, I'd say.

*FARR registers his agreement*

WILLIAMS (CON'T)

You've had your trial, then?

FARR

Lasted 20 minutes. No medical evidence taken. No lawyer or prisoner's friend; I had to defend myself.

WILLIAMS

Don't seem right, does it?

FARR

Not to me, anyway.

WILLIAMS

The generals all signed off on it?

FARR

Sergeant Major at service battalion told me this morning the corps commander had signed off on the order. So they sent me back here for you lot to do the dirty work. Say, I've been trundled about for hours now and I have to piss.

WILLIAMS

All right. Smith, take him.

SMITH

I'll have nothing to do with him.

WILLIAMS

You'll do as you're bloody told, Private. Take him out to piss.

SMITH

He's a deserter.

WILLIAMS

He's still got to piss. Take him out and let him piss.

SMITH

All right. On your feet. Let's go.

*They cross.*

Go on, be quick about it.

FARR

I can't do it with my hands bound like this. You'll have to take it out for me.

SMITH

I bloody well will not.

FARR

Then you'll have to untie my hands. Come on. I've got to go.

SMITH

If you try to run, I'll shoot you down as sure as sunrise.

*SMITH unties FARR's hands.*

*FARR undoes his trousers and goes about his business.*

FARR

Sunrise'll come soon enough. Besides, where'm I going with my willie hanging out like this?

*Completes and buttons his trousers; turns to SMITH and presents his hands to be re-bound.*

*SMITH's hands shake as he re-ties the binding.*

Look at your hands shaking. You afraid the cowardice will rub off on you?

SMITH

I'm not afraid of bloody anything.

FARR

Oh, but I reckon you're plenty scared, lad. You're afraid you'll piss your pants when the Screamin' Mimis start falling on your head. You're afraid you'll freeze when the lieutenant blows his whistle to send you over/

SMITH

/I'm not scared... Go on, then.

*They return to the dugout and sit.*

(To FARR) I volunteered; I didn't wait for the draft to get me.

WILLIAMS

Give it a rest, Smith.

SMITH

He says I'm scared.

WILLIAMS

He's right. You are scared. We're all scared out here. Every day. Every night. Every man Jack one of us. We're all just trying to get by as best we can. Come dawn, you dip a cup into the well and drink up all the courage you can just to get through the day.

SMITH

What about him, then? He's a coward.

WILLIAMS

Wells runs dry. A man's courage runs out and he just can't take no more. Happen to all of us sooner or later. You can keep your gas and your Whizz-Bangs, all right. Running out of courage is the thing that scares you the most.

*ENTER: CHAPLAIN MURRAY*

CHAPLAIN MURRAY

Is Private Farr here?

*Sees FARR. FARR and the others stand for the officer.*

Ah, so you are. I've come to see about you. You are Church, aren't you?

FARR

I am, Sir.

CHAPLAIN MURRAY

Good. Good. If you were Catholic, I'd have to send up to division to find a padre. Now, I hope you are quite prepared. Is there anyone you'd like to write a letter to?

FARR

Not much point in that, I figure.

CHAPLAIN MURRAY

You're not married?

FARR

I have a wife, and a daughter. Last time she heard from me I was in hospital. My hands shook so bad I couldn't hold a pencil. Had to get a nurse to write for me.

CHAPLAIN MURRAY

Surely, you'd like to send some word before you die?

FARR

She'll get a post from the Army telling her all she'll need to know. Anything I wrote... well, she'll have been shamed enough.

CHAPLAIN MURRAY

Nothing to your mother or father, then, or siblings? I know they would like to have some last word from you.

FARR

Thank you, Father. But I've nothing to say that they'd like to hear.

CHAPLAIN MURRAY

I see. Well, I have a bible here for you...

*Presents a small, pocket-sized book to FARR.*

...and I'll pray with you if you'd like. Corporal, will you unbind the prisoner's hands so he may properly pray for his saviour's mercy and forgiveness?

WILLIAMS

Untie him.

*Smith does so.*

*MURRAY and FARR kneel and begin to mumble prayers.*

*ENTER: WALLACE*

WALLACE

All right you lot...

*Notices the priest.*

Oh, forgive me, Father. (Quietly, to WILLIAMS and SMITH). We have less than an hour before the detail will come. The adjutant dragooned a lieutenant newly arrived at the depot, and I gave him a dozen men - mostly the sick, lame, and lazy, mind you - but they can all fire a rifle.

*He pulls from a small bag (or reaches behind his desk to produce) a bottle of rum.*

The MO is in surgery right now, and can't give him a draught. This will have to do.

CHAPLAIN MURRAY

I'll be back before they come for you, my son. Do pray for God's blessing. And may the Lord have mercy on your soul.

WILLIAMS

*(Maybe not as quietly as he'd hoped...)* It's the bloody generals who need to show some mercy.



CHAPLAIN

What's that, Corporal? I didn't quite catch you. The generals...?

WALLACE

Here now, that'll be enough, Corporal Williams.

CHAPLAIN MURRAY

Let the man speak, Sergeant Major. Go on, Corporal.

WILLIAMS

Beg pardon, Sir, but Farr here has committed no sin. He's been condemned to death by the generals, not by God. Those men have taken the power of God – the power to take a man's life – into their own hands just so they can justify laws they themselves made.

CHAPLAIN MURRAY

My son, our God is a god of laws. He gave the law to Adam and Eve. He gave to Moses the Ten Commandments. If we are to believe in an almighty God, one whose omnipotence created and guides not only our very lives but the entire universe, then we must accept that He has surely empowered these men and countenanced the laws that govern our war against the un-holy Hun. (*Beat*) And you would be well to pray alongside Private Farr for God's blessing.

*EXIT: CHAPLAIN MURRAY*

WALLACE

(*Quietly, to WILLIAMS*) Bloody hell. What's wrong with you? Half an hour until they come for him and you're having a theological debate with the padre?

*WALLACE pours rum into a tin cup, hands it to FARR.*

WALLACE

Here, have a drink.

*FARR takes the cup, drinks.  
WALLACE refills his cup.*

Drink up.

*This continues...*

SMITH

(*To WILLIAMS*) I'd like a tot of that myself.

WILLIAMS

Bugger off. What have you done to deserve a rum ration?

SMITH

I'm not a bloody coward like he is.

WILLIAMS

How do you know? You ever been in a bombardment? You ever go over the top?

SMITH

No. I just don't understand why we're being so kind to a coward.

WILLIAMS

It's not about him, you stupid little shit. Sun comes up, we're going to bind that man to a post, pin a target on his chest, and then twelve men are going to have to shoot him dead. It'll be hard enough for those men without having him crying for his mum, pissing his pants, and begging them not to kill him. So, we give him rum to help keep him quiet.

SMITH

They'll be carrying out the orders of a court-martial. They should be proud to be a part of it.

WILLIAMS

You'll be standing on that line when the lieutenant gives the order to shoot a British soldier. So, spare me the "they should be proud" bollocks.

SMITH

I'll be proud.

WILLIAMS

Proud of yourself, aye? You come out here looking for glory in defence of king and country, and your first sunrise on the line you're killing Tommy bloody Atkins. Go on then and write home to your mum: Darling mum, this morning I got to kill a British soldier. Aren't you just so bloody proud of me.

SMITH

He a coward and a deserter. He deserves/

FARR

/I'm not a coward, you. I've been a soldier since eight years now. I've seen my fair share of fightin'. I fought those Hun bastards... killed my share, too/

WALLACE

/All right, now. You've said your piece/

FARR

/I told them I couldn't go back to the line. But they sent me anyway; dragged me there fighting 'em all the way. The sorry bastards.

*ENTER: CHAPLAIN MURRAY*

CHAPLAIN MURRAY

It is time, Sergeant Major.

WALLACE

Aye, sir. We'll bring him now. (To WILLIAMS) Go on.

*WILLIAMS and SMITH carry/stumble drag FARR to CENTER and tie his hands behind his back (to a post, as it were). They take a position to the side.*

*CHAPLAIN MURRAY mumbles prayers beside FARR.*

WILLIAMS

(To SMITH) You stand right there, and don't you even blink your eyes. Watch and never forget how the British Army metes out the Crown's justice.

*WALLACE pins a white paper heart to FARR's chest.*

WALLACE

(To FARR, and holding a blindfold) When you're ready.

FARR

I'm ready, but I'll wear no blindfold. Make the bastards look me in the eye when they kill me.

*WALLACE and CHAPLAIN MURRAY withdraw.*

VOICE OFF

Detachment: Make ready. (Beat) Aim.

CHAPLAIN MURRAY

May God have mercy on your soul, Harry Farr.

VOICE OFF

Fire.

*Bright flash of light.*

WALLACE

Private Harry Farr was executed by firing squad in Carnoy, France on 18th October, 1916, one of 306 soldiers executed by the Crown for cowardice or other capital crimes during the Great War.

Harry had been hospitalized previously for five months suffering from Shell Shock, what we now know as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

#### WILLIAMS

Following his release from hospital, he was ordered back to the line. Harry sought medical care, and was refused. He was ordered to accompany a ration party to the front lines, fell out again, and had to be physically dragged to the frontline trenches. Late that night returned to the rear area, again seeking medical intervention. The next morning, Private Harry Farr was arrested and charged with desertion.

#### MURRAY

At his trial, no medical officer gave testimony about Farr's medical condition, nor did he have representation by counsel or a "prisoner's friend," an officer who could speak to the soldier's character and performance. The court moved quickly, convicting and sentencing him to death in just twenty minutes.

#### SMITH

The location of Harry Farr's grave is unknown. His name appears among the more than seventy-two thousand Commonwealth soldiers' names carved on the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme. Farr's wife Gertrude was notified of his sentence and execution by a two-sentence telegram. She hid the telegram and its contents from their daughter for 30 years. The loss of Harry's income, and the absence of any military pension rendered them homeless. Harry's father never spoke his son's name again.

#### FARR

In 2006, ninety years after his execution, and following a long legal battle led by Harry's granddaughter, Farr and the 305 others executed during the war received posthumous pardons. Today, a sculpture of a young man, blindfolded with his hands bound behind his back, stands at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire surrounded by 306 wooden stakes, each marked with the name of a man shot at dawn.

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