

Extract:

MABEL QUILLER-COUCH REFLECTS ON WW1'S EARLY DAYS

A November morning in Fowey, and it is raining again. Pelting. The Haven's front door is open, and each step up to the road gleams as black as a stick of licorice under the slate-grey Cornish sky. Belted and strapped into his khaki uniform, Arthur, waiting for the groom to bring around his mount, peers out from the doorway. The uniform befits my brother. Ever the dapper one, whatever he dons by way of an outfit, I have to admit he's looking very trim.

I want to help, so I take an umbrella from the hall stand. Not the most practical thing to be handed when you're about to ride off, I do realize – but it's *teeming* down out there. Arthur sees and, of course, tutts disapproval, always hating a fuss – as well as always liking to make any initiative of mine appear *de trop*. Well, ha! Arthur, I know just how mortified any delay today will be for you. Arriving late at the recruits' training ground, the weather will have denied you the pleasure you take in punctuality, won't it?

Depositing his cap on the hall table, he goes into his study. When I follow, I find him at the bookcase behind his desk, taking his copy of his great work, *The Oxford Book of English Verse 1250-1900*, from its dedicated place. He does not look up.

'Oh, I'm glad, Arthur, you will have a moment during your day to read quietly.'

I know the vellum-covered book to be a heavy volume but Arthur seems quite at ease holding it with one hand. He passes a thumb over the title tooled on red leather against its spine's neutral cover. 'This? Oh no, dear sister – this I shall be reading to them.'

‘Them? Oh, to the *recruits*, the men you’ll have at drill practice today.’ At this idea I feel a giggle bubbling in my throat. I repress it as I say, ‘Oh, I see – goodness, first they’ll drill, after, they listen while you recite verse. I imagine that must be ...well, a welcome novelty, even?’ Arthur is silent, looking down at the papers scattered across his desk. I venture further, ‘Are you decided on which you’ll read first?’

Yes, which poem from his anthology, I’m wondering, would Arthur, esteemed Professor of Literature at the University of Cambridge, think ideal as his opening offering to a bunch of mostly unlettered men, raw recruits fresh from down the mines and off the farms? Mere boys most of them, who must assuredly have dread in their hearts as they confront the prospect of being sent to fight in this war. Indeed, *what* state of fear those lads must be in? As for all of us, it’s a cruel, cruel time. Why, not a day passes but that the news from France brings reports of casualties in the most shockingly dreadful numbers.

He hasn’t answered me, but I persist with, ‘One of your favourites, Arthur, I can only presume?’

‘Ah no, one of *Bevil’s* favourites to begin with – bravery the subject – can you guess which?’

‘Bravery, ah yes,’ that poem is one I know for sure. Bevil, my nephew, admires it. I admit I do, too – doesn’t everyone? I recite,

*‘If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don’t deal in lies.....’*

My voice trailing off, Arthur allows himself to laugh just a little – albeit in a wry way. Then, to my surprise, he shows himself as just a bit of a cynic.

‘Kipling,’ he says. ‘Might you not think, Mabel, that those sentiments of Rudyard’s would be quite worn out – repeated so very often as they have been in the last few years? Since the poem first appeared, I mean – it can’t be more than five since publication, can it? Can we even hazard a guess how many hundreds, thousands perchance, of British schoolboys have been obliged to commit his lines to memory since then? Boys all across the Empire, too. One has to sympathize with the lads, doesn’t one? Groaning their way through it, time and time again.’

‘No lasses?’ I ask.

He’d turned again to his bookcase, his mind having darted to something else, I suppose. He is running a slow forefinger along the edge of one shelf. But he had heard me – although his answer shows he hadn’t caught my teasing expression.

‘Mabel, *as you well know*, my dearest wish is for our young women today to enjoy the very best examples of poetry – and prose.’ Arthur appears to lift his chin and brace his shoulders back as he continues, ‘And well, I do believe I can certainly say that wish is being fulfilled by the lectures I’m giving at Cambridge.’

He takes in a deep breath at this point, and I think oh, here he goes. I’m about to receive instruction. Instead, Arthur interrogates my knowledge of his success as an educationalist, ‘I’ve mentioned, haven’t I, that these days, whenever I arrive at the University Lecture Theatre, I find there’s standing room only? And that the crowd is almost entirely of the feminine gender? Indeed, to spy a male undergraduate amongst the throng of so many young ladies is rare in the extreme nowadays.’

Although he mutters the rest into that florid moustache of his, I can hear his words, ‘Hmm, yes, and thus it will be, it seems. In this moment that is without historical precedence I and my sort of academic simply have to face the fact our days are numbered.’ He pauses and pulls on either end of that moustache. ‘Yes, I do foresee a future in which the hallowed torch of learning I care so inestimably about will be clasped in the hands of our young women.’ He sighs, ‘Yes, so it will be – since all we can grasp about the conduct of this war is that its likely outcome is we’ll not see their brothers and cousins and fiances return to hear what I have to teach them.’

Underneath these words of Arthur’s what I hear is fear for son Bevil, his beloved Boy. Bevil, who’d trained as a gunner and was one of the first to go, within three days crossing the Channel with his men and their horses in that troopship, deployed to the Western Front. It’s a fear that must be gnawing my brother’s innards raw.

My own voice I make as bright as I can, ‘Well, brother, at least from what I hear about sales of your volume, we can be confident all those sisters and cousins and fiancées are tucking a copy of your Oxford Book into the knapsack of pretty much each and every soldier leaving for France.’

Arthur has always been too modest himself to hark on the fact that his Oxford anthology, a style and scale of compilation that no one had ever before attempted, has sold astoundingly well – goodness yes, *half a million* copies of its first edition simply flying off the booksellers’ shelves.

My remark does, however, serve to raise one of my brother’s courteous little smiles. Heartened, I try to maintain the lighter tone, ‘So there you see, Arthur, it’s certain that once at the Front, these new recruits to whom you will introduce poetry today will have no shortage of familiar, comforting verse for reading or being read to.’

Arthur is now at his desk, pen in hand. Resigned, it seems, to waiting out the rainstorm before riding off, a familiar abstracted expression has taken over his face. Abstracted so often these days – I have to ask myself how many times during the last three and a half months he’s found himself with cause for regret while reflecting on the changes wreaked on our lives since war broke out at midnight on Monday August 3?

By the following morning, the King had signed a Declaration, and Prime Minister Asquith made an announcement to Parliament. Our Tuesday morning at The Haven had started routinely, nothing particularly pressing to concern ourselves with that day at the Quiller-Couch residence. Until Arthur came home and our composure was shattered once and for all.

It was at the Yacht Club, during his daily visit there, that the news had been broken. Undoubtedly, before being alerted that we were a nation at war the Members would have been, as per usual, puffing away at their pipes and quaffing their pre-prandial sherry. Someone had come panting up from the Post Office, bringing them the message. And that was it: everything altered for everyone – from that moment on.

Arthur, pushing through The Haven’s front door, had let it slam closed behind him in a completely uncharacteristic way. I heard his voice from the hall, harsh and urgent, calling out our names. We met in the drawing room, I the last to arrive. Louie was there with their daughter Foy, of course, but Bevil away out somewhere. Arthur stood at the mantelpiece to tell the three of us what he knew. His voice gruff. He coughed and almost spluttered more than once. Usually such an able and affable public speaker – I was sure it was distress constricting his throat.

The shock was brutal. The sense of helplessness that followed on almost overwhelmed me. I saw how Foy took a handkerchief from her pocket and put it

to her face. Louie was quite still, her back straight in her chair, watching her husband, who had gone over to the window. Arthur appeared to be transfixed by the ocean beyond the panes; it was an incoming tide steadily swelling a debris of foam and seaweed onto the shingly beach below if I recall it correctly.

I felt leaden and as though a void was opening up beneath my very feet. All I could think of was how crucial it was not to panic, not to be flustered. Not to end up collapsing, decried as a useless, wailing woman. Useless, *no, no* – my head was pounding with the fact a war's broken out, and with the question whether there's any role for us women except to sit and watch from the sideline? What *can* a woman do at a time like this? I kept asking myself, what, what....?