

The Last Post

A play in one act

Written by Jill Sumner

Spotlight Publications

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The Last Post

CAST (in order of appearance)

Jill
Reader
Molly
Alick
David

This is a personalised account of the author's grandfather's brother Alexander Merrick and his wife Molly. The characters of Jill and David could be omitted, combined with the Reader (narrator), or converted into a Prologue and Epilogue.

Setting: England and France. The composite set comprises: Molly's room, Alick's study, and a dugout

Time: 1913-16

Two acting areas, defined by lighting. The first a desk and chair, depicting Molly's room. The second a leather chair and side-table, perhaps some books, depicting Alick's study. A third area at the back to be used later, suggesting ill-lit dugouts, trenches etc. Presently concealed by a curtain

Jill enters

Jill In 1972 our third child was born. We called him "James" after my mother's father, but couldn't decide on a second name. I do remember - quite out of the blue - that the name "Alexander" suddenly came to me - not a family name so far as I knew; but one that seemed to fit very comfortably with James. Then my mother told me that Alexander was her father's brother's name, and that she could just remember him - a quiet, rather reserved man - coming to see her a few times before he was sent over to France and killed at Leuze Wood on the Somme when she was three. Over the years I've often wondered if the name "Alexander" coming to me like that was his voice from the past. Certainly, for the past twenty years, I've been gradually researching his story, bits and pieces coming to light like the shells, grenades and bones ploughed up in Picardy every autumn. I've had invaluable help from my mother, whose attic has been an Aladdin's cave of family memorabilia, particularly letters and photographs. I'm also immeasurably grateful to the Western Front Association, the author Martin Middlebrook, and his friend and colleague, Brian Huggett, who visited the Public Records Office at Kew and made copies of the relevant War Diaries for me.

Unfortunately there just wasn't enough material to make a whole play from my family's experiences. I've used some of my grandfather's letters, and the one letter from Alexander that has survived, but fleshed these out with historical facts and writings of the time, and my own dramatic imaginings. However, the play is dedicated to my Great-Uncle Alick, who eighty years ago, on 10th September 1916 - led his patrol towards the enemy trenches and was killed under heavy cross fire. He became one of the seventy three thousand Missing of the Somme, a statistic in a battle where numbers eventually became meaningless. Our play tonight is a tribute to him, and all the other casualties.

Lights fade

Music: ethereal, hint of "The Last Post"

Jill exits

Reader When it was over, everyone remembered the bird-song. Doves cooing beneath the eaves of a shell-wracked barn; the faint chirrup of a lark, that still, astonishingly, wheeled in the clear sky, far beyond the reach of shot or shrapnel; the song of a nightingale when the guns fell briefly silent and, in the beginning, the endless cawing of rooks in the high trees along the springtime roads of Picardy as the soldiers marched along them in an endless khaki tide. It was as if all their lives up till then had been a preparation for this - young, idealistic men, drawn by their sense of Duty, proud of the chance to prove themselves for King and Country. History had singled them out to be a lost generation, the end of an era. But in April 1913, two young people met and fell in love, innocent of the turbulence ahead.

Lights up at back

Alick met Molly at a Church Social. She was making the sandwiches and he'd been delegated to hand round cups of tea.

Molly and Alick enter. Molly moves to desk

Reader Afterwards Molly wrote in her journal...

Molly Something in the way his teacup wobbled drew me towards him. There was a little worried frown between his tidy eyebrows. I felt at any moment he might bolt. I'd felt him looking at me for some time, but when our eyes met, his turned quickly away. And then I received a letter!

"3 April, 1913. To Miss Marian Johnston. Dear Miss Johnston, I trust you will forgive me, taking this great liberty of sending you my photo. Albert and Minnie informed me that you would like one, so I am obeying their commands. I don't admire my photo a great deal, but I hope you won't laugh at it. They

all tell me I look as if I had been frightened, but I don't think that I was. Of course I shan't expect an immediate answer to this letter, but if I may I should like to write again, after you have had a chance to consider my approaches.

Hope you won't be offended. I remain, yours very sincerely, Alexander Merrick."

I was quite flattered. I am now composing a suitable reply.

Alick 9 April, 1913. My dear Molly, (may I call you that?) I have just got your letter by the twelve post, so I am going to answer it before I do anything else. I am pleased that you don't think it was unmanly for me to write as I did. I was actually rather afraid to open your letter for a minute or two as it felt rather thin. I thought it was a short, sharp answer to my letter, but (thank God) it was the reverse. I am now going to ask you, could you possibly think of me as one that is nearer than a friend? I am awfully sorry that I didn't let you see that I more than liked you when we first met. I can tell you - now that I have brighter hopes - that it doesn't rest with liking. I am helplessly and hopelessly in love with your sweet self. May I consider my dearest that I may be your protector? Could you trust your heart with me? As for *my* heart that is already yours, if you can only say "yes". Anxiously waiting your reply. Yours in hope, Alick.

Reader Alick and Molly became sweethearts. Both were avid letter writers, and both kept journals, recording in sentimental terms the progress of their courtship. On 16th October, Molly's birthday, Alick proposed. Six months later they were married.

Music: "Crimond"

Molly Saturday, 2nd May 1914. My wedding day! Up early, feeling headachey and sick. Couldn't eat a thing - my teeth were chattering so! Miss Frances arrived to do my hair, and needed so many pins Mother had to send out for more! I felt most uncomfortable, and heartily glad I don't get married every day. Father walked too quickly down the aisle; I ended up almost running, and my dress caught in my heel. Alick gazed at me as though he thought I might break, or vanish! But his voice never wobbled at all as he promised "I Do"; and I ... I couldn't tell you what *I* said - it all passed in a blur ... and everyone smiling and my face aching from grinning so much. And the two of us leaving together. No more having to say "good night" and Alick leaving to go home on his own. Now we're together...always together.

More music: reflective, romantic ... "Salut d'Amour"

Twenty-ninth of June, 1914. Yesterday afternoon the heir to the Hapsburgs was assassinated by a Bosnian Serb conspirator in Sarajevo. Harold and his "young lady" came to tea at four o'clock. I used the rose china - first time of using; and the silver sugar tongs. Alick said "Good heavens, what are these?"... and tried to pick up his muffin with them. Harold winked at me, but Miss Fleming (Maisie her name is), looked a bit askance - so Harold, who knows what a tease his brother is, told him to stop larking about.

One other piece of news. Alick has bought us both bicycles. He is teaching me to ride! Mother is horrified, as I am wearing bloomers. I am stiff and sore from so much falling off. Alick is a strict teacher...but afterwards he kisses my skinned knees and elbows. When I can ride a mile without wobbling, we are going up to Edith's Wood. Then we'll leave the bicycles in a ditch and run into the fields. We'll take a picnic.

Alick That day we lay in the corn field by Edith's Wood will live in my memory for the rest of my life. You unpinning your hair, strand upon strand of gold to match the ripening corn. Never mind that I spent a whole thirty minutes afterwards picking out loose stalks and chaff, it was worth every moment! Then the rustling...and the hare appearing in front of us, still and unfrightened. You said it was a beautiful young witch, jealous of our love making. You said she'd put a spell on us - that we were too close, too loving for such joy to last. Ha! old lassie, my darling cherry. *My* love will last, for I love you very much, upon my soul I do. Never think I forget that, though sometimes I might tease you a little.

Molly Well, well! Mother took me to see Doctor Brown this morning, and sure enough I am expecting! As soon as the magic words were spoken, Mother whisked me home to lie in a darkened room with lavender water for my brow and cushions for my head. You'd think I'd suddenly turned to glass or heirloom china, and must be wrapped in cotton wool and put away in a box for the next six months.

Alick I'm an expectant father! Molly says it's not decorous to go around boasting about it ... But what's a fellow to do when his mouth won't stop grinning, and the lads at work go nodding and winking, and

“nudge nudge” it out of him? We went to the “Three Feathers” for a celebratory drink.

Molly And came home smelling of sour grapes. In a sour mood, too.

Alick (*standing*) Well, to hell with it! I wanted to enjoy myself, not listen to scaremongers talking about war. (*Imitating*) “Austria’s going to sort out the Serbs.” What an idiotic idea *that* is! Russia won’t let her little ally be threatened. She’ll be down on the Austrians before they can cock their rifles. And if Russia trots out her armies, she’ll be looking to Britain to trot hers out, too.

Molly For goodness sake! You’re supposed to be celebrating, not getting on your soap box. I’m in a delicate condition. Please stop shouting and waving your arms about.

The Last Post

A World War I drama written by Jill Sumner and first directed by her in the 1998 production at the Swallow Theatre, Whithorn.

Plot Summary

The narrative describes the love affair and marriage of Alick and Molly Merrick, a young couple caught up in the events of the Great War. At first Alick tries not to get involved, but in the end decides that he has to take part. In a series of scenes taken from personal diaries and War Office accounts, and using authentic sounds and music of the time, the playwright gives a moving and vivid portrayal of the young couple's lives and of the events leading up to Alick's fateful dawn patrol on 10 September 1916, at Leuze Wood, on the Somme.

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