

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

Number 45

I have been wanting to write this story for a long time. It is fiction....but based on a series of unrelated real events. It is my personal salute to the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War on 8th May, when by sheer accident I am sending out Tale number 45.

It is a day set aside to remember the courage and the sacrifice of so many like my father who fought in Burma or my Uncle Bill who was captured at Monte Cassino, and my mother who had to look after two little children and run the family corner shop.....and countless others of that extraordinary generation.

But it is also a day to celebrate the end of strife and antagonism and the dawn of new friendships and alliances. It is more a celebration of peace than of victory, because no-one really wins in a war (except the profiteers). Within ten years former enemies were fighting on the same side. A triumph for all - a mark of what mankind can achieve that is positive and life-enhancing. In 1957 I was participating in army exercises in Germany alongside the new German army, the Bundeswehr, and with men who had been fighting against the regiment that I was serving in, which itself had many officers and men who had been fighting in Northern Europe twelve years previously.

And on a personal level the end of the war led to the arrival at my school in 1953 of a young German student, the school's first Language Assistant after the war. He stayed with my family for 'just a few days' while finding digs. He had been conscripted into the German army in the last months of the war as a teenager, and spent his time trying to bring down Allied bombers in an anti-aircraft unit; meanwhile my father, although having fought for three years in Burma against the Japanese, had also been maintaining the British bombers that were being fired at over Germany. Yet these two, British and German servicemen, got on like a house on fire. His few days stay turned out to last for the full year! This led to a close friendship and love between my family and his, which has lasted to this day – me in my eighties and he in his nineties.

It explains why I am a committed internationalist.... why I believe that if the world is to survive the effects of pandemics, global warmings, poverty, deprivations, natural disasters, better than now, then countries have to come together in a meaningful way – whether that takes ten, a hundred or a thousand years. I appreciate that there are alternative approaches....but that is my Weltanschauung – my outlook on life. The Tale reflects this. It is told by a character you have met before - Charlie Short.

The Good Men

My uncle Sid was a North Staffordshire man., born and bred, a 'burgess' of Newcastle under Lyme, as his family had been for nearly 800 years..... a regular church-goer, believing with a simple faith in a God, whoever he might be and wherever he might reside. He had never read any more inspiring stories than the ones in the Bible, and never expected to.

He was known in his family, in his work, and in the community for his acts of kindness, slipping little bits of extra pocket-money to his children and nephews and nieces, quietly mending pews and song books for St Paul's Church, cutting an elderly neighbour's hedge, volunteering for Rotarian activities. 'I'll do it,' he would say before anyone could move. He did all these without fuss, without any thought for recompense. Just because he wanted to, and because he thoroughly enjoyed doing acts of kindness. Not to beat about the bush, he was 'a dear'. His wife, my Aunty Molly, adored him. Everyone did.

But he was a trained killer. That was the other side. Well, he had to be. He had been after all a paratrooper in the War, skilled in the use of the sten gun at close quarters, and devastating in unarmed combat, knowing how to disable or kill a man by a stranglehold from behind, a chop to the throat or a well-aimed knee to the groin. These arts had served him well through the bocage of northern France, the marshes around Nijmegen in Holland and the Ardennes on the German/Belgian border. His luck ran out during Operation Varsity, the crossing of the Rhine, where he, Sergeant Sidney Short, had jumped with his regiment onto the eastern side of the Rhine.

He found himself, shortly after landing, at a bend in a small country lane alongside an anti-tank gun, which had also dropped from the air. Two badly wounded comrades lay beside it.

An enemy Tiger tank was rattling down the narrow road behind the hedge. He loaded an anti-tank shell and waited. The tank slowed down and came cautiously round the hedge. The long barrel of the gun appeared as the tank turned on one track around the sharp bend.

As soon as Sidney saw the barrel dipping towards him he fired his shell - straight at the turret, he hoped. By happy chance or his innate skill, the aim was perfect, a direct hit where the swivelling turret sits on the tank body. The tank disintegrated just 20 yards in front of him. The turret rose in the air and crashed down on the remainder of the tank. Bits of metal slammed down all around the paratroopers. Only small shards showered down on Sid and his wounded men; and these, although painful, were not deadly. When Sid lifted his head he could see that what was left of the tank was now completely blocking the road. Very satisfying so far, he thought.

To save himself he should have taken off as fast as he could down the lane at that moment. But he had two desperate comrades lying behind the gun. Both of them were conscious but lying prone, unable to move. Not for one second did he consider abandoning them. Without hesitating, even as bits of the tank were still floating down, he dragged the soldiers into the ditch and lay on top of them as much as he could, waiting for the inevitable mortar bombs to come raining down on their position. They did. And soon their anti-tank gun on the road above them was itself a mass of twisted metal.

The road was now pockmarked with holes. But the ditch was deep and the bank screened all three of them from most of the heavy shrapnel.

No tanks could get past the burnt-out Tiger, but after the mortar barrage would come a short lull, Sidney knew. And then the infantry would come storming down the lane and be upon them. It was inevitable.

There was only one thing he could do, he thought. If he was to avoid certain capture and quite probably summary execution by over-excited and frightened enemy soldiers then subterfuge might do the trick. Making the Germans think that a large body of men was about to rise up and overpower them – that was the plan. It was crazy, but the only thing he could think of.

'Right, mates. Can either of you hear me?'

One conscious paratrooper underneath him nodded, pressing his shoulder at the same time.

'When I say 'go', fire your sten in the air in short bursts without stopping. Can you do that?'

'Yes, got it, Sarge.' Was the whispered reply.

He waited no longer.

'Go!' he yelled. He knew that he might be sealing his own fate but the decision had been made. He shivered involuntarily. And then a surge of blood galvanised him. He did not know if it was anger or terror, nor did it matter. He had no alternative. He rose from the ditch like the mythical Grendel the Destroyer and strode down the road - into the mist and smoke towards the smouldering tank at the bend. He did not murmur a prayer, or cry out to God. He Sidney Short had no right to second-guess God nor claim any special favours. His duty was clear. All he had to do was fulfil that duty.

'Come on 12 Platoon,' he cried out. 'Let's go get 'em, 12 platoon!' There was no 12 Platoon.... only Sid firing bursts of his own gun, while his wounded soldier was doing the same, and trying to add his weak shouts to the general sound and fury.

The German army just before the end of the war had lost many of its elite soldiers and the frontline was manned in part by old and very young men, some of them young teenagers, all inexperienced and largely terrified. Thus it was that Sidney's ploy worked. The untried German troops took one look at the apparition racing down the road, blinked, and then raced away from their hiding places behind the tank, crying 'Schnell! Tommies kommen'. The sight of a black-faced, camouflaged delirious demon screaming and firing at them was just too much. Sidney's conquest was almost complete when two Hurricanes roared just over his head, spitting destruction on the road in front of him. Some splinters from the road caught Sidney in full flight. He was flung forward, blood pouring from his head and shoulders where the shrapnel had pierced him. He crashed into the side of the smouldering tank and rolled along the side, still holding his sten gun. In the mist of his bloodied eyesight he caught a glimpse of a German soldier lying beside the tank, himself covered in blood.

Sid watched the German lift his long-barrelled Gewehr rifle, and lifted his own rapid-fire sten gun. Just as the soldier fired, Sidney swiped the rifle from his hands with all the force he could muster. The soldier screamed and grasped his torn fingers. The bullet passed through Sid's hair, grazing the top of his head. He thought for a moment that his head had split in two, and clapped a hand on top of his head. It was still in one piece. Lots of blood, but no hole. That had to be a positive.

He was still standing, well, half-standing and half bent. He was losing control of his limbs, he thought, as the nervous tension gripped him. His knees finally buckled and he slumped down the side of the tank.

'Bloody hell! A bit close, that one, Fritz,' he said. Then he found himself laughing hysterically, 'What a daft thing to say. Pull yourself together, Short,' he admonished himself.

That seemed to clear his head. He touched the scratch. Just a bit more blood. There was enough of it around. Dead and dying Germans up the road. And perhaps one next to him.

The two soldiers lay staring at each other unable to say a word, two red-faced, bloodied Gorgons. Sid was breathing heavily. His eyes were closed but he was gently caressing his creased forehead. The German was grasping his torn hand and uttering small moans. His eyes were closed. But suddenly he opened them, blinking, and looked steadily at Sid,

'You going kill me, Tommy?' the German whispered, not in fear but genuine enquiry. He seemed resigned to his fate.

Sidney did not reply for a while. He was lost in a world of unreal sounds and images. A fire fight was going on all around them in the ditches and hedgerows as the paratroopers moved forward. Bullets pinged off the sides of the tank hulk. Occasional shell bursts covered them

in clods of earth. There were yells and screams on all sides. And soon British tanks could be heard rumbling along the lane in the distance.

But round his enemy and himself all seemed eerily silent to Sid. We are in a different place, he thought, nothing to do with tanks and guns any more. An Anglo-German cocoon, inhabited by two bloody heroes waiting for the arrival of the Valkyries, the ones Mrs Slaney had told them about in Form 4 at his elementary school. They would decide whether to transport them to Valhalla, hall of the slain. That seemed apt.

It was an experience of otherness shared by many soldiers on the battlefield. He looked down at his gun, and then at the German soldier. For the first time he realised that the man was just a boy. Could only be a young teenager, scarcely sixteen. He also saw a pool of blood forming underneath the boy's left thigh. He felt a surge of rage and pity.

'For God's sake, what is all this about!' He yelled inwardly, and then rolled over to the youngster's side.

'No, Kamerad, I'm not going to kill you. We will have to do something about that blood, won't we, or you will die anyway, and that would never do. What would your mother say, eh? Let's see if I can find any string or cloth.' He was now speaking out loudly in his growing delirium.

'Here. This might do the trick.'

He pulled his paratrooper's yellow scarf from round his neck and wrapped it round the man's thigh in a tourniquet as tight as he could. The blood stopped trickling. The boy's eyes opened and then shut.

'There you are. That should keep you going for a while.' He did not expect the German to understand what he was saying but he was in reality talking to himself.

The German's eyes opened again.

'Danke. Thank you, Tommy,' he heard the soldier mutter. 'You good.'

'Where did you learn to speak English, Fritz?'

'At school, Tommy.'

'You're lucky, mate. We never got the chance to learn any languages at my school.' He smiled to himself. 'We did learn North Staffycher dialect, though. *'Cos't kick a bow agin a wow....'* Bet you can't translate that...' He smiled again at the thought.

'Got a few German and French words in the army as well,' he added. 'We all know *'Hande hoch'*, and *'nicht scheissen'*.'

The German smiled awkwardly. 'Nein, not 'scheissen', Tommy. That's 'don't shit'. You mean 'nicht schießen'. That is 'don't shoot'.'

'Well, you live and learn. I must remember that.' Sid tried to smile again but his mouth had had enough of smiling; no more would come. He sensed that they were both becoming a little delirious now.

'What's your name, Fritz? Name?' he shouted - unconsciously aping the foreigner's joke that the English believed that a foreign language was simply English spoken loudly.

'Klaus, Klaus Kissel - from Mainz... You?'

'Sidney Short from ..., well near Stoke-on-Trent.' He laughed softly. How bizarre is a quiet social conversation in this carnage. Mad ...mad...mad.

'Cups, Sidney, eh?'

'Yeah, Stoke, cups. You know that then.'

'Ja. I learn at school.' The soldier then groaned and fell back, his eyes closed.

Sidney bent over him. 'You've not left me, have you?' he asked anxiously. 'Don't do that.'

The German opened one eye slowly.

'No, Sidney sir. But I have pain. I kalt, auch. Cold.'

Sid considered this and then rolled over and instinctively put his arm around the German soldier and hugged him. 'Come on, Klaus lad. Hang on.'

When men of 12 Platoon caught up with them they were lying huddled together. Both were near death, but as his mates carried the German soldier away, Sid fancied he saw a short wave of a hand by way of salute. Then he blacked out.

He vaguely remembered a medic in the Casualty Clearing Station yelling, 'Get this one down the line quick. He's not a gonner.' Then the bustle of the rear hospital and the pain of the removal of tiny shards of shrapnel; the rolling of the hospital ship back to England and the comforting whiteness of Chester Military Hospital, with its skilful doctors and cheerful nurses, where eventually his mother and father and siblings found him sitting up in bed in his hospital blue uniform. Finally, his arrival home via Stoke station, Newcastle-under-Lyme station, and via Mr. Boot's taxi. His closure, he felt, was complete.

Sid's war was over, and then the war in Europe was over, and even the celebrations too, when Sergeant Short went to Buckingham Palace to receive his Military Medal. The citation noted the bravery beyond the call of duty, the single-handed halting of the German counter-attack, and the saving of two fellow paratroopers. He took his mother and father to the ceremony. They had never been to London before let alone been close to the King. But Sid swore them to silence. He wanted no fuss and no jingoistic gloating. He simply did not want anyone else to know about the gallantry medal. He had lost too many dear comrades, and his brother Harry was still fighting in Burma – for his country and his life. There was no need for Harry to be told, nor was there anything to celebrate except a safe return for both sons. And why, said Sidney, should anyone else care. Personally he was only interested in doing what he saw was right at the time. If this meant killing or being killed, or saving a life or losing his own, Sidney's duty was clear. And he was glad it was over. He had no lust for blood; no desire to fight ever again. What he craved more than anything else was civilian life, a job, a wife and family.

His job as a car mechanic, something he had craved since a small boy, had been secured - and he knew whom he wanted as a wife.

The medal announcement appeared briefly in the *Staffordshire Evening Sentinel*, of course, but was barely noticed in the welter of news and views about the end of the war. He did not mention it to his wife-to-be, Molly, nor to his children and nor their children later. Sergeant Short had not asked for a medal, did not see the point of a medal, did not need a medal. Eventually his family learned of his exploits and marvelled at them, but as time went on it lost all relevance. And that suited Sid fine.

And he did live the good, Christian life, as far as anyone does. Occasional flare-ups when he discerned ill-disciplined behaviour in his family would be followed by an arm round the shoulders and a heart-felt kiss.

What changed quickly was his sense of vocation. He went back to his garage job, but tinkering with old engines no longer satisfied him. He knew there was more he could offer.

And then he learned about the two-year emergency training for new teachers, specially aimed at returning servicemen. Molly had shown him the advertisement even before their wedding, but once his restlessness had increased after their marriage, he got up one day....and 'did something about it'. He signed up and entered the strange world of teacher training.

He took to teaching immediately. His warm personality, gentleness and resolute approach, along with his skill as a designer and engineer made him a priceless acquisition for any school....But he would not advance himself by applying for senior jobs outside North Staffordshire.

'This is my home,' he explained to Molly....who was his prime motivator....'I'll go anywhere.... so long as it is in North Staffordshire!'

Not earthquakes, not money, not better prospects....and not even Molly...could shift him. Molly gave in.

But his nearest and dearest need not have worried. Sid's ability and reputation took him to the top in no time. Within ten years he was offered the headship of a primary school in his home town. He was excited....they were excited. The future was bright....and so it proved. For the next twenty five years he built the school's reputation, too.

Art exhibitions, gymnastic displays, all-conquering school teams, followed. There was even a school band - with an astonishing array of different instruments, some recognisable and some unique, fashioned by Sid and some of his colleagues out of all sorts of metal and wood bits and pieces. Successes at the 11plus examinations cemented his and the school's renown.

Colleagues in the school knew exactly what the standards expected of them were, and what the consequences would be if they did not measure up to them. You knew where you stood with Sidney Short. 'And that,' said Sidney, 'is how it should be.'

All was proceeding serenely as Sidney was approaching retirement. He had decided many years ago that he and Molly would retire before 65 come what may. Between them they had no financial worries, and the kids were doing well. They owed it to themselves to have many years of 'doing things' together, although Molly could not for the life of her think what they might be.

Finally she had to face up to the challenge of retirement. Sid was active in the church and the Rotary Club, and nipped off to fish at Trentham lake as often as possible. He was church warden and Past President of the local Headteachers Association. And Molly? She attended Inner Wheel meetings and immersed herself in her work as the secretary of the local Embroidery Guild.

'So, what on earth can we actually do together?' she chuckled to son Simon and daughter Emma. 'I suppose I could embroider a picture of him fishing in the canal. That would get us out together, but do I want to sit for hours watching him fish? No!'

But Molly knew that they would in fact do things together. She ticked them off - National Trust venues; Rotary activities; meeting relations for lunch and supporting grandchildren in their music and sports. 'There's just a few, she told Emma. And, of course, there's going-on-holidays together. That would be really nice. 'If truth be known, Emma,' she said finally, 'I am really looking forward to it.'

'And so you should,' said her daughter.

This anticipated joyous world fell apart one November Monday night, just a year before the planned retirement.

Sidney was walking home from the Borough Arms in Kings Street to Cross Heath from a Rotary meeting. He never took his car. He enjoyed the walk, The quiet serenity of the Station Walks alongside the deep cutting where his train had brought him home from the war some forty years ago and which following the wholesale closure of rail lines was now an empty and derelict void.

He had just taken a few steps into the Walks when a figure stepped out of the shadows of a beech tree onto the path in front of him. He moved to one side to pass, but the figure moved with him. He caught sight of a knife in his right hand.

'Gis your wallet, old man. And dunner try anything, or I'll slice yer.'

Sidney could not believe this was happening in his beloved Newcastle in the 1980s. He just stared at the figure swaying about in front of him.

'You're drunk, mate.' He said quite quietly and deliberately, 'Get out of the way..... now!'

The figure staggered a little and snarled, 'Gi' me your money now or you'll get this knife in yer. D'yer hear?'

He smelled of alcohol. The words were slurred, almost incoherent, but his intention was clear. Sidney felt a cold sweat in his palms, and then a hot anger rise through his veins. He had not felt like this since THAT day in Germany. He stared fixedly at his assailant, and realised that he was actually no more than a teenager. He was swaying and wafting his knife around in circles.

'Oh, Christ,' thought Sidney, 'He doesn't know what he is doing.' He instinctively took a step towards the swaying figure, but instead of backing way as Sidney had hoped, his attacker lunged forward, eyes staring, knife held high. Sidney had no choice but to grasp the man's wrist with his left-hand in a vice-like grip, and then with his right hand wrench the knife out of his hand. The attacker stopped in his tracks; his hand felt on fire; he screamed and flung himself forward towards Sid, revealing another knife in his left hand, which was moving upwards towards Sid's stomach.

Sid did not flinch. He simply thrust a lightning fierce straight jab at the attacker's chin. He heard as well as felt the impact. The boy stood poised for an instant, his eyes going round, and then his legs buckled and he fell forward, poleaxed, crashing to the ground face down.

A small crowd had gathered by the time of the denouement. A couple were obviously pals of the attacker; the remainder were passers-by and colleagues from the Rotary committee meeting. The police arrived shortly afterwards from the Newcastle police station barely half a mile away. There was much movement, much chatter and many expressions of horror and disgust. But through it all Sid stood without moving, looking down at the prone figure. He could see quite clearly the last occasion when he had faced a man alone in hand-to-hand combat - beside a burning tank so many years ago. Once again he felt in a cocoon. Sounds

and movement went on all around him but he was lost in his thoughts. He did not even remember being taken down to the police station, nor what he said there.

The first that Molly got to know about it was around midnight when Sid had been allowed to phone home. He arrived himself, courtesy of a police car, around dawn.

The incident and aftermath dominated their lives for the next twelve months - discussions about 'the incident' and then 'the case'. Ordinary work became difficult for both of them.

It wasn't meant to be like that. The police had locked the teenager away, taken statements, praised Sidney for his prompt action, told him to stand-by as a witness, and wished him well. The Chief Education Officer came specially to the school to support him. His Chairman of the Governing Body pumped his hand and declared that it was Sid's assailant's misfortune to pick the wrong victim.

The family admired what he had done; his courage and steadfastness, but just what they expected from him. His son and daughter and grandchildren came frequently to hug their granddad having basked in his fame. His brother, Harry and his wife, Elizabeth, brought fruit and chocolate and good cheer from their corner shop, because they could think of nothing better to do to help the days pass. Letters, messages, phone calls poured in to the family home. The *Evening Sentinel*, found an opportunity to recall his war service and medal for courage. He was hailed as a local hero. 'As you should be,' said his son Simon.

Everyone, including the local Superintendent and Chief Constable, expected the matter to end with a prosecution of the attacker.

Everything changed a few weeks later.

A police car drew up at their Sunny Hollow house and the Newcastle Superintendent himself, Tony Woodman, fellow Rotarian, along with his detective inspector charged Sidney, sitting at his own kitchen table, with assault.

The super explained, 'Normally, Sid, we would do this down at the station, but we'll do all the paper-work later. I wanted to tell you personally Sid, and Molly, that I and all the coppers who know you are deeply sorry about this. We think it's outrageous, but we have no choice. The Director of Public Prosecutions says it must be and so it must be. We cannot shift him.'

'Thanks, Tony. I can't say I understand what is happening, but I appreciate your courtesy.' Sid put his hand over his wife's hand, conscious that she was about to explode.

Molly was not to be thwarted. 'What the hell is going on, Tony? Sid prevented a horrible crime being committed and brought a criminal to justice. He's a local hero, never mind his war service.'

'Molly, I understand your anger, believe me. All I can say is that the Chief and I argued with the DPP long and hard.'

Over the previous month the police and DPP had been at odds.

At their final meeting the Chief took over from his Superintendent.

'Tony has briefed me on the DPP's position, James,' he told the public prosecutor. 'To be brief and direct.... it stinks. I gather the DPP is worried that if you don't charge Sidney Short there are people out there who will accuse the powers-that-be, ... that is, you and us, of favouring middle-class Rotarians against poor hard-done-to louts from the back streets, eh?'

'That's the situation exactly, sir.'

The Chief leaned over his desk and stared hard at his colleague. 'What on earth are you playing at, James? This is going to incense people in Newcastle if not the whole country, and you can't blame them. Frankly it infuriates me, too.'

'Sir, we have known each other long enough. You know we would not be doing this without good reason. You are right, there are groups out there just waiting to weigh in with accusations that the poor are treated shabbily by the police. Richard Smith was convicted for assault, they will say, when he never even touched Mr Short. Mr Short has not even been charged with wounding Richard Smith, when he had suffered a broken wrist and a broken nose. There will be an uproar for sure. The do-good brigade will weigh in from all sides. And we are under a lot of political pressure after those cases where freemasons appeared to be treated more leniently than others. It's a sign of the times, Chief.'

The Chief Constable thought for a while. 'James, James. That's about the lamest excuse I've heard for many a year. I won't press you; but I have a shrewd suspicion that is not your personal view.'

James just shrugged his shoulders. 'No comment.'

'Well, I want you to convey my disquiet and opposition to your boss. Understood?'

A nod.

'I think your office is being disgracefully pusillanimous. However....' He put up a restraining hand as James was about to protest. 'However, I do understand the reasoning, and I do recognise the pressures on you. But you are not going to charge him with grievous bodily harm, are you? Surely a lesser charge is enough?'

'Yes, sir. I am only the mouthpiece of my masters, as you have noted.... I can say, however, that my boss goes along with that. He will be charged with assault and battery, just that. We simply want to make sure there is minimum opportunity for the police-watchers to have a go.'

'Hm,' the Chief Constable grunted, still not appeased. 'I assume you will prosecute the case without... shall we say.. much vigour?'

'Chief, you know very well that if we decide to prosecute we have to deal with it as vigorously as possible. There can be no easy route. We shall throw the book at Mr Short. Justice will be seen to have been done. We have no alternative to that, either.'

The Chief looked quizzically at James Pearson and slowly shook his head. 'What is the world coming to, James? I hope Sid Short gets himself the very best lawyer.... who makes mince-meat of you.'

'To tell you the truth, Chief, so do I. But we can't send our barrister to the wolves without our supporting army, so there will be a proper fight. That's official.'

'And that,' said Superintendent Tony Woodman to Sid in Sunny Hollow kitchen, 'is the long and short of it.'

It was some months later that Sidney dropped his own bombshell. It was at a family Sunday lunch that was one of a number the family enjoyed during the year. Normally it was held at a country pub but Sid and Molly had specifically invited them all to Cross Heath. After lunch and when the grandchildren had made themselves scarce in the garden, they had gathered sons, daughters-in-laws, Harry and Elizabeth in the lounge. Then there was me, Charles, his nephew, and my wife - we were also there - me a city businessman and my wife, Hattie, a lawyer, who had insisted on tapping her connections with London solicitors and barristers,

We were both offering to contribute greatly to the cost. There was nothing we would not do for Uncle Sid.

Sid and Molly sat on a settee. They were holding hands when he began.

'Look, before any of you blow up listen to everything I have got to say.'

The family looked at each other. What's all this?

'I am sorry, of course, that you have all been touched by this crazy situation. I have been as bewildered as any of you by the turn of events. You all know why we are where we are. Any of you want me to amplify it?'

Head shakes all round.

'You all expect me to be represented by a solicitor and barrister, but I have to tell you that I will not.'

He paused; the family looked at each other, and looked for guidance from Hattie. But before she or anyone else could cry out in protest, Sidney put up his hand.

'I know, I know..... I am stupid; I can't do it... I am throwing away my chances.... Well, mum and I have been through all that. We have talked long and hard, through many a night, but we are now agreed.... Or at least, if not agreed, Mum here is reconciled to my decision and appreciates why I think it is for the best.'

'Hold on, dad. How could it be for the best?' cried his son, Simon. 'You could go to prison, dad. You can't take it lightly like this!'

'Right, Simon,' interjected Hattie, 'Your dad has a cast-iron defence – self-defence. But the technicalities need handling by an expert, Uncle Sid. I know you are an 'owd cuss', but just face up to reality.'

Choruses of agreement.

'I have, Hattie, I have. Look, I love you, I love you all for your concern for me and Mum, but I have thought this through, believe me. I have thought about the effect on Mum and me and all of you. If I can explain, I have no doubt that this prosecution is politically motivated. The DPP, and no doubt the government, and perhaps the police are scared of the fall-out from not charging me. You will remember the furore over cases of people maiming burglars and intruders. Some swear by the legitimate use of arms and some say assault is assault and has to be publicly justified.'

He paused while the family talked together and to him singly and in concert.

'Your self-defence with your hands can't be linked with armed defence,' Simon said in amazement.

'How can anybody support a drunk, drugged up to the eyeballs attacking a man three times his age.'

'Two knives, dad, and you unarmed. Come on.'

'If you don't have a trained professional representing you, dad, there is a chance the prosecution will get you on a technicality. That would be terrible.'

'Uncle Sid.' This from shrewd Hattie, staying the babble of voices around her. 'I sense we will be wasting our time trying to change your mind. So I ask you to explain why you are

doing this and how you intend to defend yourself. I think you intended to do that, so let's have it.'

'Thank you, Hattie. I respect as well as love you, dear. And I know you and Charles will be there to give me all the support and help you can – as I am sure you all will.' A pause and a general shuffling in seats.

'Look, you may not have picked it up yet, but two days ago Richard Smith was convicted and given a 12 month custodial sentence in a Borstal institution, mainly because he did no actual harm.'

Chorus of astonishment.

'But how.....'

Sid stopped the questions. 'The case was heard in Birmingham not here, to avoid or minimise any trouble by one set of supporters or other. I've had a lot of outraged comrades from the war getting in touch, and Rotarians and school colleagues, and you will have read the letters and comments in the *Sentinel* and maybe the national press. There is a lot of anger around about the justice of prosecuting me. But this has given fresh impetus to the 'Justice for All' people. They have been getting more vociferous as you may have noticed, and they are very articulate, and to be fair, have a good point, you know. Justice is for all, and it has to be seen to be for all. Your Uncle Harry and I fought for that, you know. If all the pain and anger, the death and destruction that I was party to, has any meaning.... and it has to have then justice must be at the centre of all our dealings with our fellow humans.' He paused and looked around. No-one stirred.

'That is why I am content to put my case to a jury of my equals. If I have overstepped the mark then I have to face the consequences.'

Sid paused again.... and looked around. He could see sadness and concern. He could feel his eyes watering and he was not sure why. He wiped his hand across his face.

Charles broke the silence, speaking quietly. 'How did the case pass us by, Sid? How did Smith get off so lightly? No-one here seems to have an inkling.'

'That's because Smith pleaded guilty and the whole trial was over in less than half an hour. I gather he refused to plead guilty at first. Then his solicitor reminded him that he had actually threatened an old man with a knife, and that he had not only been roaring drunk but was also found to be on LSD. He would be lucky not to be charged with grievous bodily harm if he decided to go for trial. He agreed pretty quickly, I understand when the lawyer told him the difference between a sentence for assault if he pleaded guilty and a sentence if he pleaded not guilty and lost. So, not only is he serving a custodial sentence but he will be getting treatment for his drinking problem... and also a drug problem.'

'Drugs as well, dad!' cried daughter Emma incredulously. 'So why are they proceeding with prosecuting you, dad? Surely it's obvious you are the victim, not the attacker.'

Sid lifted his hands, 'Your guess is as good as anyone's, dear.' He felt once again a welling of tears. He was feeling the emotional effects of the shows of love.

Hattie said gently to all the family, 'The injuries to Smith have to be explained and justified. That in essence is why we are where we are. Once the police and/or the public prosecutor decide there is a case to answer then the judicial system will grind its course. That is why I wanted your dad to employ a defence counsellor.... to avoid being caught out in what is now as much a quasi-political show-trial as a show of justice in operation. Look, Uncle Sid, before

you go on can I at least extract a promise from you that if for whatever reason you lose you will then hand the case over to a top professional which I will willingly arrange for you. How about that – Plan B? And I am sure we all join together in insisting you listen to professional advice on how to conduct your case, what to say and what not to say. OK?’

Sidney had recovered himself now and readily agreed. He was determined it would not get to Plan B, but you could never be certain.

‘So, what’s your thinking, dad?’ asked Simon. You said you would tell us.’

‘It’s really very simple. I believe in my innocence. I am sure a fair jury will have no difficulty in seeing I acted wholly in self-defence. And I believe what I did was a reasonable defence. So why would I want to put myself through a minimum of four days of fatuous argument and counter-argument over small points of law, eh? That will mean witnesses, examination, cross-examination, speeches and more speeches. And be in no doubt, my character and motives and my war service and fighting background will be examined and dissected. To what avail? It will befog the central issue. A drunken lout lunged at me with two knives and I stopped him by wresting one knife out of one hand and knocked him to the ground when he thrust the other knife at me. That is all that happened. It could take less than a morning to say that and to ask the jury to decide. I don’t suppose the lawyers will let it go quickly but I will not be put through the agony of days of sterile argument, and neither will my family – and that is very important to me. So, that’s that.’

He had done. There was silence, broken again by Charles.

‘That’s powerful stuff, Uncle Sid.’

‘Thank you, Charles. I appreciate that.’

‘Let’s go for it. I will get tuition for you, with the accent on minimum time. What does everyone else think?’ Charles looked round the family group.

The family were agreed. Rehearsals could begin. The stage would be set. And set it was.

The trial took place two months later at the Crown Court in Stoke, before Mr Justice Ackroyd, a no-nonsense judge with a reputation for plain summing-up that juries could easily follow

Sid took his place in the dock while the court settled down and the jury was sworn in.

Sid had time to marvel at who had turned up in the packed court. He could see his family at the back where Molly had discreetly sequestered them. Over on the right there were colleagues from the education office, and, a nice touch, he thought, his long-time secretary, Daphne. A group of Rotarian colleagues sat in the centre and behind them he caught sight of nephew Charles and an elegant silver-haired man alongside a younger man. He smiled to himself. ‘Hattie’s legal fraternity, no doubt.’

On the left he noted at the rear a group of his regimental association old comrades and in front of them, somewhat to his amusement, the band of men and women from the ‘Justice for All’ campaign. He wondered why they had to be so markedly badly groomed and dressed, but then thought, ‘Well, why not. If you want your campaign to be seen and taken note of, you need to look special and act differently. They know their stuff.’

And finally he took in the long table at the front for the legal representatives, currently occupied only by the public prosecutor’s barrister, Mr. Colin Mangan, and his legal helpers.

Sitting with Sid was a solitary friend, David Riley, his trusted chair of the governing body and former local councillor..

Sid scrutinised the members of the jury as they filed in and was satisfied that they seemed like a typical set of ordinary citizens. That is all he wanted. If there was going to be 'justice for all' then that included himself.

The jury was sworn in. Proceedings started. The charge of assault and battery was read out. Sid was asked whether he pleaded 'guilty' or 'not guilty'.

The preliminaries over, the judge formally enquired whether he was being represented. 'No, your Honour,' replied Sid. 'I am conducting my own case.' The judge eyed him over his spectacles for a moment. 'Well, Mr Short. I will not waste time exhorting you to engage an expert legal representative, because I know you will have already met sufficient pressure on this and have stuck to your guns. So we will proceed. I invite you now to come to the front bench.

Sid's notes were already in a folder on the table, as he sat down alongside, but apart from, the prosecution barrister, Mr. Mangan. Just the two of them.

The judge addressed the jury. 'Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Short will be conducting his own case. It is his right, and I make no comment on his decision. But you must not read anything into that one way or the other.... I want you to bear in mind that 'assault' consists of threatening to harm another person or making offensive contact with someone who then believes that this is likely to happen..... 'Battery' covers the actual offensive touching another person. If any of you do not understand what the charge means then you may ask me for clarification at any time. Your job is to listen to the evidence and weigh up the arguments and decide 'beyond reasonable doubt' whether the accused is guilty, or not guilty, of assault and battery on the night in question. Do you all understand, so far?'

None of the jury made any move.

'All right. Then off you go, Mr. Mangan.'

Mr. Mangan opened for the crown prosecution. He told the jury they would hear evidence that Mr. Short had been attacked by a young 17 year old boy in a dark wooded area. He added that Mr Short had a right to defend himself.

'BUT', he thundered, wagging a finger at no-one particular, 'this right does NOT allow unfettered violence, reckless of the consequences.'

A clever pause here... while he flicked over the pages of his notes, allowing the jury to contemplate the magnitude of Sid's crime. He looked up and continued.

'Members of the jury, take note of this....the 'self-defence' that Mr. Short will claim, must be merited and reasonable in the circumstances.....merited and reasonable.... and I put it to you that Mr Short's actions were severe.... one might say.... vicious.... actions.... they were neither merited nor measured. They were 'offensive, in the sense that they went beyond mere defence and amounted to an attack. You must take that into account when coming to your decision.'

The prosecutor promised them that they would hear evidence of excessive damage and trauma caused to Mr Smith, and evidence that Mr Short had not thought about alternative action that he could have taken.

'Mr Short, ladies and gentlemen, thoughtlessly hit Smith in the face causing him to buckle at the knees and crash to the ground – an entirely unreasonable use of force to stop someone who was obviously inebriated and clearly unable to move at speed. There can be no question....' and here Mr. Mangan again resorted to his wagging finger tactic....'There can be no question that other reasonable courses of action were open to Mr Short and he chose not to take them.'

This dramatic conclusion also brought the prosecutor's opening speech to a close

'In conclusion, the Crown is expecting a guilty verdict on the charge of assault and battery.'

Sid made notes through all of this....but he had to admit that he had no idea at this point what he might do with the notes. Other than rhetoric Sid could see nothing substantial to grasp.

Mr. Mangan's first witness, was the Accident and Emergency consultant who had examined Smith and who testified at length that Smith's injuries consisted of a broken nose, facial lacerations and heavily bruised jaw, plus bruises on the right wrist.

'And are these injuries consistent with a forceful twist of the wrist followed by a very heavy punch to the face,' asked Mangan.

The consultant was careful in his answer. 'The blow to the face would have to be heavy enough to break the nasal tissues, and the bruise to the chin would almost certainly have followed the victim's collapse to the ground. The bruises to the right wrist were certainly consonant with a sharp twist.'

'And are the injuries also consistent with a sharp blow to the chin felling the victim who then suffered further injuries to the face when he fell?'

'They are consistent, yes'

'So,' said the barrister. 'Are you saying that whichever blow Mr. Short struck, whether to the nose or chin, the other injuries would follow.'

'Yes, that would be correct.'

'And how long will Smith carry the scars?'

'Probably some of them for life. Others may eventually disappear. It depends on advances in facial surgery.'

'And when you examined Mr. Smith at the hospital on the night in question what was his physical state apart from the injuries you have described?'

'The easiest thing for me to say is that he was both inebriated - drunk as a lord, if I may be pardoned for using the phrase, and full of LSD. He must have taken at least one tablet of the drug.'

'In your view would he have been capable of running after Mr. Short if he had turned and run?'

'I think he would have fallen over after a couple of steps.'

Mr. Mangan turned towards the jury. 'So, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, it would have been the easiest thing in the world for Mr. Short to have run away.....Smith was incapable of catching him.....that is the obvious conclusion.'

Mr. Mangan sat down abruptly and as dramatically as possible.

'Your turn now, Mr. Short,' said the judge.

Sidney asked only one question.

'Sir, when an inebriated patient walks into your consulting room, can you tell immediately that he would be incapable of walking another step, or do you have to conduct tests on him?'

The consultant was about to answer immediately and then paused and thought about it.

'If he has just walked in then, of course, I would have to make tests to check fully the man's state. But by far the majority of my patients I see in A and E, who are full of alcohol and/or drugs would be incapable of walking more than a few steps.'

'Thank you. That's all, judge,' said Sid, and sat down.

'Thank you, Mr. Short. Right, next witness, Mr. Mangan? It is the victim Smith, I believe?'

The barrister cleared his throat.

'No, Your Honour. It was going to be, but it is not now. We have decided not to put Smith, on the stand.'

Judge and barrister stared at each other. The judge was looking for an explanation. Mangan was not going to give him one.

'Very well, Mr. Mangan. Are you ready to call your next witness?' said the judge, looking round the court.

The barrister looked around him as well, and then imploringly at his colleague, David Riley, sitting behind him. Riley shrugged his shoulders. Mr. Mangan spread his arms in embarrassment.

'I'm sorry, your Honour. Our next witness, Mr. Clover, does not appear to be in court. May I request and adjournment so that I can discover what has happened?'

Sidney half rose to object as this might scupper his attempts at finishing in the day. The judge put a hand up to stop him.

'I think I can anticipate what you want to say, Mr. Short.' Then turning to the Crown prosecutor, 'I appreciate Mr. Mangan that this eventuality is likely to be outside your control, but I am bound to say that I do not feel you have been well served by your office if they have left Mr. Clover's appearance here to chance. Mr. Short has been anxious to expedite matters and I appreciate his desire for a speedy end. Although it is barely mid-day we will adjourn now for lunch. That gives you an hour to sort yourselves out. The court will re-convene at 1.00pm precisely, witness or no witness.'

Sid was taken down to the holding area. His family went for a snack. At one o'clock all were back in their places. The judge nodded to Mr. Mangan, who rose slowly.

'I'm sorry, your honour. Mr. Clover is a traveller, a homeless itinerant who happened to be in Station Walks on the night of the incident. He was right there when the incident took place. He appears to have moved on. The police tell me there is no sign of him and has not been for the past week. But we have his statement here, if you would allow me to read it.'

'Well, well, Mr. Mangan. Here's a pretty state of affairs.' Turning to Sidney. 'What is your wish, Mr. Short. Will you object to Mr. Mangan reading the Statement even though you cannot cross-examine Mr. Clover about it?

'I have no objection at all, Your Honour. I was given a copy of the Statement and I think it might help the jury to know what this bystander thinks he saw.'

Sidney felt a little ripple of concern run through his family circle. But he was content. He was determined that everything would be in the open. He did not want any grounds for an appeal.

And so Mr. Mangan read out a Statement which had been signed by Clover. Sidney could not help smiling all the way through. Such was the elegant and formal phrasing that no-one could believe for one moment that it had been pre-written by a non-lawyer. But Clover had signed it.

He said he had seen a person come out of the trees and threaten a man who was walking through the Walks. He now knew that the assailant was Richard Smith because he had shared a drink with him prior to the assault. He said that Smith had stood on one spot waving his arms about with a knife in each hand. He saw the other man grab Smith's wrist and then punch him in the face. Smith, he said, had not moved forward during all this. He then saw Smith fall to the ground with a crash and at that point lots of other people began to arrive. So ended Mr. Clover's written testimony.

Mr. Mangan had no alternative but to call a halt. Sidney was invited to put his case.

At this point he had no precise idea how he would proceed. He was so used to dealing off the cuff with school incidents that he was suspicious of precise planning. He remembered what had been drilled into him in the army. '*No operation plan reaches with any certainty beyond the first encounter with the enemy.*' That seemed just as true here. He trusted himself and his reputation for coming to the point without fuss.

'Your Honour and members of the jury, I am not calling any witnesses because none are needed. The events that Mr. Clover described were just about right. The injuries that the doctor described I do not dispute. I suppose, sir, I will get a chance to state my case in detail?'

'You will, Mr. Short....after Mr. Mangan has summed up for the prosecution. So, your turn to sum up now, Mr. Mangan.....And you get the last word, Mr. Short, if you want it.'

The prosecutor rose slowly. He knew that he should keep the summing up short. Too much emotion had been expended already.

'Members of the jury, you have heard an emotional and highly charged defence from Mr. Short. I ask you now to come down to earth and to look at the facts carefully and soberly, and consider what the accused is charged with.

There is no argument on either side about the basic facts of what happened on that night. What you are being asked to do is to answer the question, 'how far can a citizen go in defending himself, his family, his neighbours, as we say, and his property, against trespassers and assailants?' Can a householder shoot dead an intruder who is stealing his television set, for example? The answer is 'no'. That would be totally unreasonable. So, at what point does it become unreasonable for a person who is attacked to defend themselves. Mr. Short admits that he injured Smith, his attacker, and meant to. It was, despite what Mr. Short has told you, pre-meditated. It was clearly vicious since Smith received injuries that put

him into hospital and which will leave him with scars for the rest of his life. Now I ask you, is that reasonable when the attacker was only guilty of assault, that is...threatening to injure Mr. Short? Smith did not actually harm Mr. Short. It was Mr. Short who harmed him.'

Mangan paused here for another dramatic emphasis. This was the major point he had to get into the jury's consciousness.

'It is our view that Mr. Short went way too far in his reaction. He failed to consider other viable courses of action. He could have called out for help; he could have run away. Mr. Short's military training had dulled his sensitivities to the extent that his reactions were instinctive and wrong. You may consider that it is unfortunate that Mr. Short's military training and experience put him into this position, but that is no defence. Remember that the charge is assault - 'threatening harm', and battery - 'actually harming someone'. It is clear that Mr. Short did both of those. For those reasons it is my view that you can only bring in a verdict of guilty.'

Mr. Justice Ackroyd leaned forward, 'It is your turn to sum up your defence, Mr. Short.'

Again, Sidney had no idea what he was going to say when he stood up, but thought that a short final statement from him might leave the jury thinking about him rather than considering the prosecutor's case.

He stood for a moment looking at the jury.

'My case is simply this..... I was walking home just as I do most Monday nights through the Station Walks. Halfway through I was confronted by a young man, who came out of the trees with a knife demanding my wallet. He was very agitated. I had no intention of giving him my wallet and so I told him to put the knife away and go away himself. I spoke to him very quietly in the hope of cooling him down. I did not succeed. He lunged at me with the knife in his right hand. I grabbed his wrist and twisted it towards the ground.... I should say here that this is what I had been taught as a paratrooper 40 years ago.... I had not lost the knack.'

A knowing jury nodded their heads. They understood.

'The knife fell onto the ground....so far, so good...But I then saw he had another knife in his left hand. I could not move fast enough to transfer my grip on his right hand to his left hand so instead I jabbed him with a straight left to the jaw.....another technique I had retained from my wartime years....'

More smiles and knowing looks from the jury.

'I will tell you straight.....I could have killed Smith,.... or I could have maimed him or paralysed him, I have to confess.... because these were moves I had been taught.'

The jury....and the judge....were now hanging on to his every word.

'But I was also taught how to stop an attacker in his tracks with a short jab..... And so, that is what I did.... Smith fell to the ground and banged his head on the path...That was unfortunate, of course..... but I was not responsible for putting the gravel path there.'

The jury collectively smiled and nodded again.

'And I couldn't invite Smith to step onto the grass before I hit him.'

Outright laughter now.

'That, members of the jury, is what happened on that night.... It was no pre-meditated. How on earth could it be? Once Smith refused to back off the sequence of events was inevitable....don't you think?'

Sid paused, looked along the jury benches and then continued.

'Subsequently Richard Smith has pleaded guilty to assaulting me. That in my book means that he knew what he had done. He is receiving treatment now in a detention centre. Instead of being sent down for life for committing murder. That seems reasonable to me, and I hope it does to you.....That's it, Your Honour.'

Sidney sat down. There was silence throughout the court and then a murmur of sotto voce voices.

The final act was the judge's own summing up to the jury. He repeated the facts they had to consider and the decisions they had to take 'beyond reasonable doubt'. He then paused and cleared his throat.

'Members of the jury, I do not usually make comments when summing up. But I feel moved to say this to you..... We live in strange times, where age-old certainties and the time-honoured actions of ordinary folk are constantly called into question. Is it your view, members of the jury, that in this country we have now reached the stage when a drunken and potentially violent attacker armed with a lethal weapon has to be treated with all the courtesies of visiting royalty?' Mr. Justice Ackroyd again paused, tapping the bench in front of him.

'A predecessor of mine asked a similar question in this court twenty years ago. What is the situation now? It is up to you to decide. However, I am bound to say that whatever our legal theoreticians may say, or the prosecution suggests, the law still does not require a person who is attacked to act like a saint.'

He looked at Sidney. 'That's an interesting point,' thought Sidney.

The judge turned his attention then back at the jury.

'You may think that Mr. Short showed amazing courage and restraint in his defence knowing what he was capable of. You may think that too much tolerance with people who abandon themselves to alcohol and/or drugs leads simply leads to further crime. You have to decide.

You must consider whether what is right and just on the evidence you have heard...and nothing else. You must consider where the line should be drawn in meeting violence with violence, for the reasons so elegantly put by Mr. Mangan. Where should society draw the line?

Finally, please note that the issue before you is not whether the country suffers from an overdose of sentimentality about the criminal responsibility of drunken louts, but whether the prosecution has proved beyond reasonable doubt that Mr. Short was guilty of assault and battery. Go and deliberate and if you think the decision is going to be difficult to reach let me know and I will determine what to do.'

The judge sent the jury to their room and retired to his chambers. Sidney was taken downstairs to wait.

It took less than half an hour for the decision. Virtually no-one had left the courthouse. When everyone was settled the jury foreman was asked for the decision. It was unanimous. 'Not guilty'.

The reaction in the court was ecstatic. The judge let it happen for a moment and then order was called. He thanked the jury and told them they had, in his view, come to the right decision. Then he turned to Sidney. 'You are free to go, Mr. Short. Thank you, too, for the way you have conducted yourself. You have done yourself and your family proud.' Then he was gone.

Barrister Mangan and his entourage swept out of court. While held up at the door by the crush of people Mangan bent down and whispered to his colleague Riley. 'We contributed well to that little charade, didn't we, David?'

'You did brilliantly Colin. Justice was done.'

'And was seen to be done, David. That's the point. Very satisfying.'

With that they were free from the court and off to a pie and a pint, well out of sight of any court.

Meanwhile, Sid was struggling to push his way through the crowd of family and friends out of the court and into the crush hall. There to his astonishment was a phalanx of cameras and reporters. He thought it would be a good local story, but not this. The national press had inevitably homed in on a David and Goliath story, war hero taking on a 'drunken yob, and the Crown. Perfect! Cameras were clicking and notebooks waved.

Sid's hand was suddenly grasped – by a tall lady in a vivid green jacket and multi-coloured scarf.

'Vicky Chambers, Justice for All,' she yelled. 'Congratulations, Mr. Short. We are satisfied that justice was done. It was the right result.' She disappeared into the crowd.

Sid shook his head and tried to look around him. Across the hall and over the head of the crowd he caught sight of nephew Charles and the silver-haired gentleman and companion. The man was staring at him fixedly. He then turned to Charles, said something and then looked Sid's way again and made a small salute.

Sid.... assailed by a reporter and his notebook at that moment.... froze. Time stood still again. The noise around him stopped. The reporter's lips were moving but Sid could hear no sound. He entered the cocoon again. That salute!... Surely it couldn't be? But it must. He looked again towards the door but the man and the younger man had reached the exit door. The silver-haired man turned and nodded his way.

'Klaus,' he whispered. 'Klaus Kissel.' He raised his own hand in salute but the two men had gone. He broke away from his interrogator and started towards the door. By now Charles was by his side, holding his arm.

'No, Uncle Sid. He's gone.'

'But why did you let him go, Charles. Stop him, for God's sake!' He pulled away and started to push his way through the crowd. Molly stood in his way.

'It's no good, Sid. He's already got a taxi and is off.'

'What's going on, Molly? How do you know Klaus?'

'He introduced himself, and his son, Peter, when he arrived, and I asked Charles to look after him.'

'But why has he gone - after all these years, Molly, and how did he know about this?' Sidney was nearly in tears, 'Can we contact him?'

'Sid,' said Molly gently. 'Klaus knew you had all this reaction to deal with. He said it was not proper to thrust himself into your life for the second time unannounced. He's a real gentleman..... He searched for you after the war forty years ago just to find out if you had survived. It was not difficult through the Old Comrades Association. But forget it now. We have your victory to celebrate, and the press want a word.'

'Blast all of them, Molly. This is important.'

'Please stay calm, my dear. He said he would contact us before long. I gave him our address.'

And he did. Just once, via his son.

Barely two weeks later a package arrived with a letter folded inside and a second large envelope. Sid and Molly read it together on the sofa in the lounge. Sid was grateful for the glass of whisky that Molly had put on the coffee table in front of him.

The letter was from Klaus's son, Peter.

Dear Mr. Short,

I am sorry to have to tell you that my father died earlier this week from cancer. He knew he was dying when he came over two weeks ago but hoped he had more time left. It was not to be.

Once he had discovered you had survived the war he was content to let things stay like that. He was very aware that he and you had only met for about ten minutes in your lives – and you had both had your eyes closed for much of that time. You both had your lives to rebuild. He did not want to intrude.

He became an eminent lawyer. And later I became a banker, and transferred to London a few years back. I stumbled across the story of your impending trial in The Times. When I sent him the article he was irate that you were put in this predicament. He wrote immediately to the court telling the judge your joint story of that day by the Rhine. I read the letter. He told the judge that he should know that Mr. Short was not just a good man; he was a giver of life.... he was a saint.

He did not know whether the judge had received the letter or read it if he had.'

'He did, Molly,' Sid muttered wiping his eyes. 'He read it all right.'

The letter ended with Peter drawing attention to the other package. Sid opened it carefully. Inside was a neatly folded paratroopers' yellow neck scarf, still carrying the outline of a faded bloodstain. Charles stared at it in a world of his own. Images of that day flashed by his mind. He shook himself out of the trance and opened Klaus's letter, written on beautiful hand-made paper.

My dear Sidney (I hope I may call you that)

When you get this letter I will have passed away. But that is forty years after I should have died. Thanks to you, my British Tommy comrade, I lived to have a beautiful wife, children, and career.

I must apologise, Sidney, for firing a bullet at you. It was an accident. I did not mean to press the trigger and schiess you. but I hatte scheissangst (not schiess angst, Sidney, if you remember) and so the gun went off.

But you did not kill me. You saved me. I am returning the scarf that made the miracle.

You were and are a good man, Sidney, a saint.

Goodbye, and aufwiedersehen,

Klaus

Sidney sat with the letter in his trembling hands. He always thought he was not emotional but all his family knew he was. Molly slithered from the sofa, leaving him to come to terms with what he had read.

'Oh, Klaus, Klaus,' he whispered to himself. He pressed the scarf to his cheek, and let his tears fall onto the stain. 'You fired at me but did not mean to..... But I did mean to kill you, old friend. When I saw you lift your gun, I did press the trigger. It was instinctive.... .but there were no bullets in the magazine. That is why I had to knock the gun out of your hand, and why I decided to try to save your life..... I am no saint, my dear ten- minute comrade, no saint at all.....but there is a God, you see.'

He closed his eyes and thought for a while, then picked up his whisky and lifted it in salute.

'Cheers, Klaus. We did our duty....We were good men.'
