

THE JOURNEY

Jim looked around at the crowds assembled on the green in front of the Town Hall. Men, women and children, all with gaunt faces and thin bodies. There were a few exceptions, the well fed local officials and others with bodies swollen as a direct result of hunger and malnutrition.

Looking down into the sombre looking face of his beloved Hannah he said "We are all here and I pray to God he will help us in our quest. Take care of yourself and our Dan and Betsy. Young Jim will be alright with me. Keep the women focused if you can. Help to keep up the spirits of the families left at home. Their long days will be dark with anxiety. Keep the soup kitchens going as long as you can. The women will feel better if they have something to do if they think they are helping." He leaned towards her and hugged her tight. "Goodbye for now, I hope next time I see you, we will be celebrating the end of this period of depression and an uplift in spirit everywhere"

Hannah gave a wry smile "Bless you my love. Just fancy all that way to London by shanks' pony" Then her eyes glistened with unshed tears as she thought of the two hundred plus miles to be walked in shoes and boots already in need of repair and she gripped Jim even tighter. "I hope God will help us all"

Having said their various farewells to their loved ones the men lined up in an orderly column and with Jim and a local M.P. and other union officials at the head ,they moved off leaving their silent relatives staring after them until they were out of sight.

The crowd gradually dispersed leaving Hannah and her committee of women who organised the soup kitchen , distribution of food and clothing donated by others.

Hannah had a list of local sympathetic farmers and Lucy Phillips had her band of ladies who found and distributed clothing for the children. They were the committee but there was an army of helpers who gave what help as and when they could. The women were there offering their various skills. They were there for each other.

The committee was surprised when Hannah suggested a party for all next day. When the adults would be entertained by the children, play games and in turn the adults who usually did turns at all local concerts, would keep everyone amused while Hannah and her army of women cooked a stew in the large cauldrons. Everyone present would receive a hot bowl of stew. She planned that they would all go to bed with a hot meal inside them on that first day of loneliness without their men folk.

The men marched at first with mixed emotions, being separated from their families and the hope that their ordeal of the long march would bring back hope and vitality to their dying villages. Children with rickets, consumption and other wasting diseases.. Mothers depriving themselves to feed their families and as could be expected in their weakened state, fell prey to the diseases themselves.

There were sympathetic doctors accompanying the march and all the men had been medically examined before the march to select only those most likely to complete the whole journey. Even so there would be those who would drop out along the way.

They had some friends along the journey who provided basic accommodation in village halls, barns etc. Friendly boot repairers were able to give some boots a longer life and others provided food. These places and people were quite a long way apart so for most of the men, the journey was a test of endurance which required brave hearts.

Their march and rest periods were lightened by music from mouth organs, penny whistles and some had even brought along their cornets and trumpets. Whenever a friendly rest stop was approached, the musicians would play a lively march or other cheerful music and the marchers lifted their tired bodies and marched with dignity towards friends.

Jim's son Jim was only sixteen and full of life and energy for the cause and raised the morale of the company by talking about his views and hopes for the future. "Dad, I am going to night school when I get back home and I will study for my mining engineers qualification. I want to be educated to be a pit boss and then I will change a lot of things".

His father patted his shoulder and smiled "Aye lad thou'll show the lot of them, but if you ask me, you talk enough to be in that talking shop, the houses of parliament"

"Do you mean that Dad?"

"Son, when you are sixteen, nothing is impossible"

"Aw well, you wait and see. One day Mam will be dressed in her mink coat sitting in the gallery watching me making my maiden speech"

The little crowd around them all roared with laughter including young Jim.

“Oh! Dad it’s a long time since we tasted hot pot! I will never forget these people.

This is a feast”

“You’re right there lad, but don’t tell your mother it was so special or she will think you are criticising her cooking”

Father and son grinned at each other over their food laden plates and then tucked in to their hot meal with pure enjoyment.

Doc was doing his daily round inspecting feet, boots, teeth, gums etc. Poor old Charley, who had served in World War I was at the age of forty two, considered a tough character but nobody could have endured the last three miles as he had done with both feet sore and bleeding. There were no soles left on his worn out old boots.

“Sorry Charley, even if we could find you some more boots, your feet aren’t up to it”

Charley, tears ready to spill, plucked at the fluffy bits of thread on the bandages. He swallowed hard and cleared his throat before he looked up at Doc..”Right ye are

doctor. I did want to get there, to be there,Oh! I really wanted to be there..” choking again, he looked away and stared at the engraving on the entrance to the church

annexe. He shuddered as he was reminded of the flowers and ivy carved on

gravestones. Turning his face to the sky he noted the rain laden nimbus clouds and thought ‘even God weeps with Charley today’