



The Barnbow Lasses by Tom Palmer

Three

Jas's head of year glanced quizzically at her, then tried to help by telling the hall full of year eights what Jas was going to do.

'Jasminder has been doing some research into the soldiers of the First World War as part of her citizenship project. She's now going to tell us a bit about it before we hold a minute's silence for the men who have lost their lives during wars. Jasminder?'

Jas glanced at Mrs Milner, then at the figure standing beside her.

Edith Sykes.

She had come.

And the look in Edith's eyes gave Jas something she had never felt before. The need to tell people something important that they might not know about. Even though she was scared.

And it gave her the courage to speak in public.

'I've been doing some research into soldiers from Leeds,' Jas said, hesitating to glance at Edith. At her yellow skin, her familiar frown. 'Soldiers who went to fight in the First World War and never came home.'

'But I hope those soldiers don't mind – and I hope they know I respect them equally – but today I want to talk about some other war heroes.'

Jas noticed that Mrs Milner had shifted onto her front foot, like she was going to walk from the side of the hall and make Jas stop.

‘I want to tell you about some people who used to live round here. People who gave their lives for their country too.’

Jasminder studied the two hundred faces in front of her. She didn’t know what it was, but she could sense that the audience was puzzled, even interested in what she was going to say. The things she had learned that morning.

‘During the First World War,’ she told them, ‘we needed millions of shells to help us beat the Germans. Shells – if you don’t know – are bombs that you can fire from big guns or mortars on the ground.

‘The biggest shell factory in the country was here. In Leeds. Less than a mile from where we are right now. Nearly 16,000 women worked there in three shifts. Around the clock. Their job was to fill the shells with explosives, then screw the fuse onto the top and send it off to the front line. It was really dangerous work. They had to cover their hair, wear overalls, rubber boots and gloves. And they weren’t allowed hairpins or jewellery that might cause a spark – and disaster. There was a lady at the door to the factory called the danger woman. Dressed in red, she’d check everyone had nothing on them that could cause an explosion.

‘But – even so – the chemicals in the explosives – got to them and poisoned them, meaning they would be sick, would have sore throats, would have blurred vision and gradually they turned yellow, as they became more and more ill. People who saw them away from the factory would call them canaries.

‘But the work they did was top secret. Nobody was allowed to talk about it, so the Germans didn’t find out where this massive factory was.

‘At 10.27 p.m. on 5th December 1916 a huge explosion was heard across Leeds and even in York. Inside the factory a shell had accidentally exploded. And – even though the factory had great walls of sandbags and sheets of metal to shield the workers – it was a disaster.’

Jas remembered what she had seen in the factory that morning.

‘There were dozens more injured,’ she went on, aware she was talking fast to stop herself becoming too emotional. ‘The room was dark and cold and

covered in blood and steam. Some died in the factory and others were taken to Leeds General Infirmary and died later. In all, 35 women were killed. It was the largest loss of female life in the whole of the war. There is a memorial to them in Manston Park. You know, the one up from the shops.'

Jas swallowed and looked at the floor. She was feeling more and more upset and – surprised she had got this far without crying – was determined to finish. To do it for the Barnbow Lasses. For Edith.

Courage.

She just had to show courage.

Like they had.

'After the explosion the factory was cleaned up and – within hours – other women volunteered to work in the part of factory where so many of their fellow shell-fillers had died to help win the war.

'And – after their shift – when the women were asked what the explosion had been – they couldn't tell the truth. The factory had to be a secret. When their deaths were announced in the newspaper all that could be said for each woman or girl was that they died by accident. Not that they had died for their country.

'One of the women – well, girls – was 15. Her name was Edith...'

Jas stopped, too upset to go on, half expecting someone in the audience to laugh. But no-one did. They were all transfixed by Jas's story. Jas glanced at Edith, still stood beside her.

'Edith Sykes,' Jas gasped. 'And... and ... where I live there are nine roads named after the Barnbow Lasses. I live on Edith Sykes Drive.'

Jas couldn't speak. She feared she wasn't quite making sense anymore. She had tried her best and now she looked into the eyes of Edith Sykes to see that her frown was gone.

And it was. Because Edith Sykes was smiling.

Now Mrs Milner came to stand alongside Jas.

Jas faced her, half-expecting to be told off for not doing what she had been asked to do. Until she saw that her head of year had tears on her cheeks and that she was nodding.

Mrs Milner put her hand on Jas's shoulder and smiled.

'That was excellent, Jasminder. And I am sorry to stop you, but it's nearly eleven o'clock.'

'The minute's silence?' Jas asked.

'Yes,' Mrs Milner said gravely. 'Yes, so if everyone would like to stand, we're going to hold a minute's silence to reflect on everyone who gave their lives for their country in wartime. For the soldiers, the sailors, the airmen and women. And – of course – for the Barnbow Lasses.'

Standing now, everyone watched as the second hand moved to the top of the clock. Some looked at the clock. Others at their feet. Some closed their eyes. And some stared at the front of the hall.

Looking back at them, Jas watched the year eights' faces change.

In astonishment.

Their mouths open, nudging each other.

Some gasped.

There was a strange unearthly silence in the hall. Even the teachers had hands to their mouths.

What was this?

At first Jas looked down at herself. Was she still wearing her slippers, her pyjamas?

No. It wasn't that.

And then she wondered. Had they seen Edith?

Jas turned to look at the ghost of Edith Sykes and felt her legs almost buckle at what she saw before her. This was what the year eights and teachers were so astonished at seeing.

Jas took in a gasp of air, tried not to make a sound, because she was looking not only at Edith Sykes, the ghost of the Barnbow Lass who had guided

her round the site of that terrible disaster, but at thirty-four other women too. All in caps covering their hair, dark overalls. All faintly yellow. All staring back at the children. With looks of courage and pride on their faces.

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