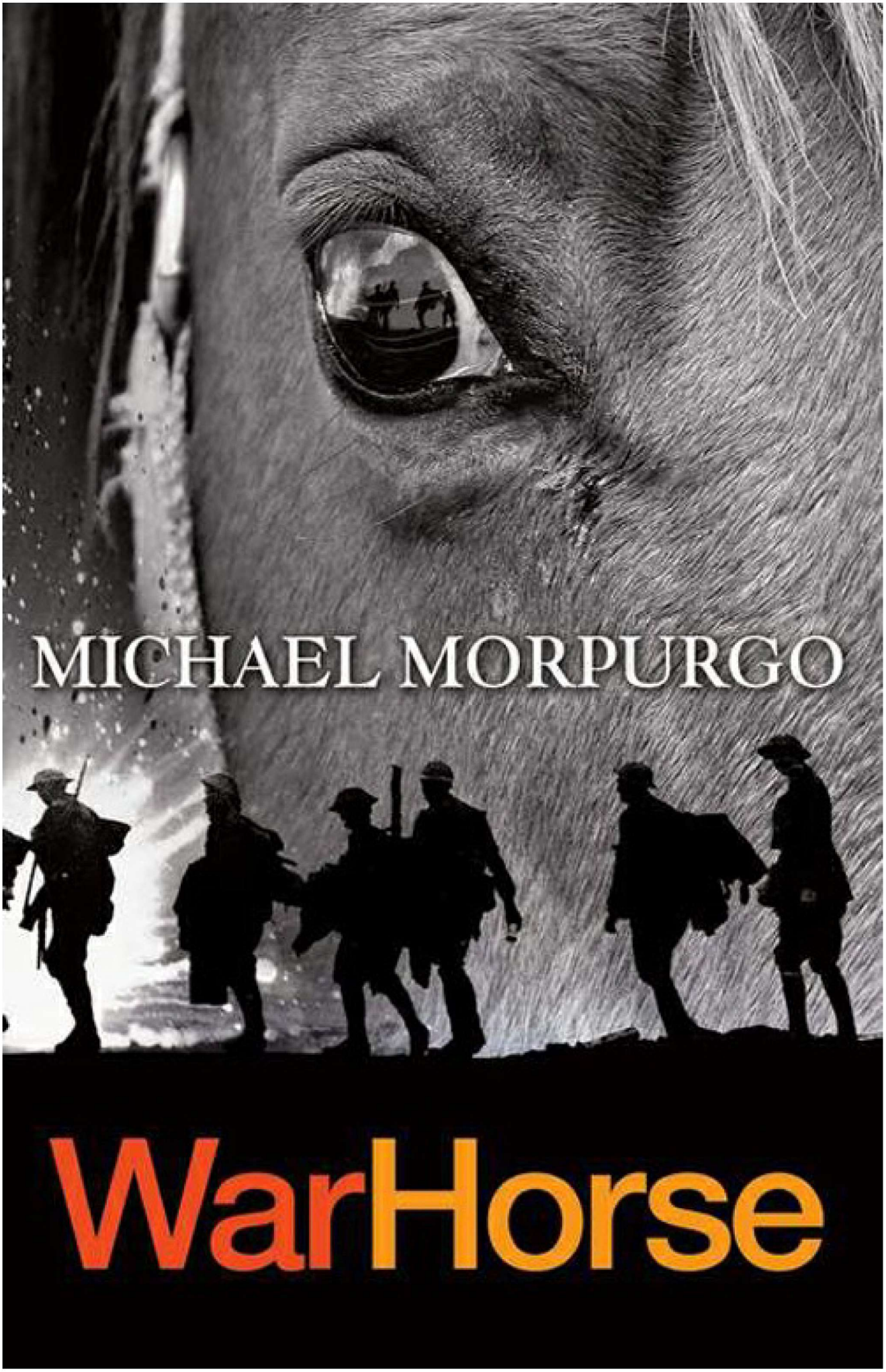
MICHAEL MORPURGO
WarHorse

CHAPTER 4

TYING A LONG rope to the halter he walked me out of the stable. I went with him because Zoey was out there looking back over her shoulder at me and I was always happy to go anywhere and with anyone as long as she was with me. All the while I noticed that Albert's father was speaking in a hushed voice and looking around him like a thief.

He must have known that I would follow old Zoey, for he roped me up to her saddle and led us both quietly out of the yard down the track and over the bridge. Once in the lane he mounted Zoey swiftly and we trotted up the hill and into the village. He never spoke a word to either of us. I knew the road well enough of course for I had been there often enough with Albert, and indeed I loved going there because there were always other horses to meet and people to see. It was in the village only a short time before that I had met my first motor-car outside the Post Office and had stiffened with fear as it rattled past, but I had stood steady and I remember that Albert had made a great fuss of me after that. But now as we neared the village I could see that several motor-cars were parked up around the green and there was a greater gathering of men and horses than I had ever seen. Excited as I was, I remember that a sense of deep apprehension came over me as we trotted up into the village.

There were men in khaki uniforms everywhere; and then as Albert's father dismounted and led us up past the church towards the green a military band struck up a rousing, pounding march. The pulse of the great bass drum beat out through the village and there were children everywhere, some marching up and down with broomsticks over their shoulders and some leaning out of windows waving flags.

As we approached the flagpole in the centre of the green where the Union Jack hung limp in the sun against the white pole, an officer pushed through the crowd towards us. He was tall and elegant in his jodhpurs and Sam Brown belt, with a silver sword at his side. He shook Albert's father by the hand. 'I told you I'd come, Captain Nicholls, sir,' said Albert's father. 'It's because I need the money, you understand. Wouldn't part with a horse like this 'less I had to.'

'Well farmer,' said the officer, nodding his appreciation as he looked me over. 'I'd thought you'd be exaggerating when we talked in The George last evening. "Finest horse in the parish" you said, but then everyone says that. But this one is different – I can see that.' And he smoothed my neck gently and scratched me behind my ears. Both his hand and his voice were kind and I did not shrink away from him. 'You're right, farmer, he'd make a fine mount for any regiment and we'd be proud to have him – I wouldn't mind using him myself. No, I wouldn't mind at all. If he turns out to be all he looks, then he'd suit me well enough. Fine looking animal, no question about it.'

'Forty pounds you'll pay me, Captain Nicholls, like you promised yesterday?' Albert's father said in a voice that was unnaturally low, almost as if he did not want to be heard by anyone else. 'I can't let him go for a penny less. Man's got to live.'

'That's what I promised you last evening, farmer,' Captain Nicholls said, opening my mouth and examining my teeth. 'He's a fine young horse, strong neck, sloping shoulder, straight fetlocks. Done much work has he? Hunted him out yet, have you?'

'My son rides him out every day,' said Albert's father. 'Goes like a racer, jumps like a hunter he tells me.'

'Well,' said the officer, 'as long as our vet passes him as fit and sound in wind and limb, you'll have your forty pounds, as we agreed.'

‘I can’t be long, sir,’ Albert’s father said, glancing back over his shoulder. ‘I have to get back. I have my work to see to.’

‘Well, we’re busy recruiting in the village as well as buying,’ said the officer. ‘But we’ll be as quick as we can for you. True, there’s a lot more good men volunteers than there are good horses in these parts, and the vet doesn’t have to examine the men, does he? You wait here, I’ll only be a few minutes.’

Captain Nicholls led me away through the archway opposite the public house and into a large garden beyond where there were men in white coats and a uniformed clerk sitting down at a table taking notes. I thought I heard old Zoey calling after me, so I shouted back to reassure her for I felt no fear at this moment. I was too interested in what was going on around me. The officer talked to me gently as we walked away, so I went along almost eagerly. The vet, a small, bustling man with a bushy black moustache, prodded me all over, lifted each of my feet to examine them – which I objected to – and then peered into my eyes and my mouth, sniffing at my breath. Then I was trotted round and round the garden before he pronounced me a perfect specimen. ‘Sound as a bell. Fit for anything, cavalry or artillery,’ were the words he used. ‘No splints, no curbs, good feet and teeth. Buy him, Captain,’ he said. ‘He’s a good one.’

I was led back to Albert’s father who took the offered notes from Captain Nicholls, stuffing them quickly into his trouser pocket. ‘You’ll look after him, sir?’ he said. ‘You’ll see he comes to no harm? My son’s very fond of him you see.’ He reached out and brushed my nose with his hand. There were tears filling his eyes. At that moment he became almost a likeable man for me. ‘You’ll be all right, old son,’ he whispered to me. ‘You won’t understand and neither will Albert, but unless I sell you I can’t keep up with the mortgage and we’ll lose the farm. I’ve treated you bad – I’ve treated everyone bad. I know it and I’m sorry for it.’ And he walked away from me leading Zoey behind him. His head was lowered and he looked suddenly a shrunken man.

It was then that I fully realised I was being abandoned and I began to neigh, a high-pitched cry of pain and anxiety that shrieked out through the village. Even old Zoey, obedient and placid as she always was, stopped and would not be moved on no matter how hard Albert’s father pulled her. She turned, tossed up her head and shouted her farewell. But her cries became weaker and she was finally dragged away and out of my sight. Kind hands tried to contain me and to console me, but I was unconsolable.

I had just about given up all hope, when I saw my Albert running up towards me through the crowd, his face red with exertion. The band had stopped playing and the entire village looked on as he came up to me and put his arms around my neck.

‘He’s sold him, hasn’t he?’ he said quietly, looking up at Captain Nicholls who was holding me. ‘Joey is my horse. He’s my horse and he always will be, no matter who buys him. I can’t stop my father from selling him, but if Joey goes with you, I go. I want to join up and stay with him.’

‘You’ve the right spirit for a soldier, young man,’ said the officer, taking off his peaked cap and wiping his brow with the back of his hand. He had black curly hair and a kind, open look on his face. ‘You’ve the spirit but you haven’t the years. You’re too young and you know it. Seventeen’s the youngest we take. Come back in a year or so and then we’ll see.’

‘I look seventeen,’ Albert said, almost pleading. ‘I’m bigger than most seventeen year olds.’ But even as he spoke he could see he was getting nowhere. ‘You won’t take me then, sir? Not even as a stable boy? I’ll do anything, anything.’

‘What’s your name, young man?’ Captain Nicholls asked.

‘Narracott, sir. Albert Narracott.’

‘Well, Mr Narracott. I’m sorry I can’t help you.’ The officer shook his head and replaced his cap. ‘I’m sorry, young man, regulations. But don’t you worry about your Joey. I shall take good care of him until you’re ready to join us. You’ve done a fine job on him. You should be proud of him – he’s a fine, fine horse, but your father needed the money for the farm, and a farm won’t run without money. You must know that. I like your spirit, so when you’re old enough you must come and join the Yeomanry. We shall need men like you, and it will be a long war I fear, longer than people think. Mention my name. I’m Captain Nicholls, and I’d be proud to have you with us.’

‘There’s no way then?’ Albert asked. ‘There’s nothing I can do?’

‘Nothing,’ said Captain Nicholls. ‘Your horse belongs to the army now and you’re too young to join up. Don’t you worry – we’ll look after him. I’ll take personal care of him, and that’s a promise.’

Albert wriggled my nose for me as he often did and stroked my ears. He was trying to smile but could not. ‘I’ll find you again, you old silly,’ he said quietly. ‘Wherever you are, I’ll find you, Joey. Take good care of him, please sir, till I find him again. There’s not another horse like him, not in the whole world – you’ll find that out. Say you promise?’

‘I promise,’ said Captain Nicholls. ‘I’ll do everything I can.’ And Albert turned and went away through the crowd until I could see him no more.

CHAPTER 5

IN THE FEW short weeks before I went off to war I was to be changed from a working farmhorse into a cavalry mount. It was no easy transformation, for I resented deeply the tight disciplines of the riding school and the hard hot hours out on manoeuvres on the Plain. Back at home with Albert I had revelled in the long rides along the lanes and over the fields, and the heat and the flies had not seemed to matter; I had loved the aching days of ploughing and harrowing alongside Zoey, but that was because there had been a bond between us of trust and devotion. Now there were endless tedious hours circling the school. Gone was the gentle snaffle bit that I was so used to, and in its place was an uncomfortable, cumbersome Weymouth that snagged the corners of my mouth and infuriated me beyond belief.

But it was my rider that I disliked more than anything in my new life. Corporal Samuel Perkins was a hard, gritty little man, an ex-jockey whose only pleasure in life seemed to be the power he could exert over a horse. He was universally feared by all troopers and horses alike. Even the officers, I felt, went in trepidation of him; for he knew it seemed all there was to know about horses and had the experience of a lifetime behind him. And he rode hard and heavy-handed. With him the whip and the spurs were not just for show.

He would never beat me or lose his temper with me, indeed sometimes when he was grooming me I think maybe he quite liked me and I certainly felt for him a degree of respect, but this was based on fear and not love. In my anger and unhappiness I tried several times to throw him off but never succeeded. His knees had a grip of iron and he seemed instinctively to know what I was about to do.

My only consolation in those early days of training were the visits of Captain Nicholls every evening to the stables. He alone seemed to have the time to come and talk to me as Albert had done before. Sitting on an upturned bucket in the corner of my stable, a sketch-book on his knees, he would draw me as he talked. ‘I’ve done a few sketches of you now,’ he said one evening, ‘and when I’ve finished this one I’ll be ready to paint a picture of you. It won’t be Stubbs – it’ll be better than Stubbs because Stubbs never had a horse as beautiful as you to paint. I can’t take it with me to France – no point, is there? So I’m going to send it off to your friend Albert, just so that he’ll know that I meant what I said when I promised I would look after you.’ He kept looking up and down at me as he worked and I longed to tell him how much I wished he would take over my training himself and how hard the Corporal was and how my sides hurt and my feet hurt. ‘To be honest with you, Joey, I hope this war will be over before he’s old enough to join us because – you mark my words – it’s going to be nasty, very nasty indeed. Back in the Mess they’re all talking about how they’ll set about Jerry, how the cavalry will smash through them and throw them clear back to Berlin before Christmas. It’s just Jamie and me, we’re the only ones that don’t agree, Joey. We have our doubts, I can tell you that. We have our doubts. None of them in there seem to have heard of machine-guns and artillery. I tell you, Joey, one machine-gun operated right could wipe out an entire squadron of the best cavalry in the world – German or British. I mean, look what happened to the Light Brigade at Balaclava when they took on the Russian guns – none of them seem to remember that. And the French learnt the lesson in the Franco-Prussian War. But you can’t say anything to them, Joey. If you do they call you defeatist, or some such rubbish. I honestly think that some of them in there only want to win this war if the cavalry can win it.’

He stood up, tucked his sketchbook under his arm and came over towards me and tickled me

behind the ears. ‘You like that old son, don’t you? Below all that fire and brimstone you’re a soppy old date at heart. Come to think of it we have a lot in common you and I. First, we don’t much like it here and would rather be somewhere else. Second, we’ve neither of us ever been to war – never even heard a shot fired in anger, have we? I just hope I’m up to it when the time comes – that’s what worries me more than anything, Joey. Because I tell you, and I haven’t even told Jamie this – I’m frightened as hell, so you’d better have enough courage for the two of us.’

A door banged across the yard and I heard the familiar sound of boots, crisp on the cobbles. It was Corporal Samuel Perkins passing along the lines of stables on his evening rounds, stopping at each one to check until at last he came to mine. ‘Good evening, sir,’ he said, saluting smartly. ‘Sketching again?’

‘Doing my best, Corporal,’ said Captain Nicholls. ‘Doing my best to do him justice. Is he not the finest mount in the entire squadron? I’ve never seen a horse so well put together as he is, have you?’

‘Oh he’s special enough to look at, sir,’ said the Corporal of Horse. Even his voice put my ears back, there was a thin, acid tone to it that I dreaded. ‘I grant you that, but looks aren’t everything, are they, sir? There’s always more to a horse than meets the eye, isn’t that right, sir? How shall I put it, sir?’

‘However you like, Corporal,’ said Captain Nicholls somewhat frostily, ‘but be careful what you say for that’s my horse you’re speaking about, so take care.’

‘Let’s say I feel he has a mind of his own. Yes, let’s put it that way. He’s good enough out on manoeuvres – a real stayer, one of the very best – but inside the school, sir, he’s a devil, and a strong devil too. Never been properly schooled, sir, you can tell that. Farmhorse he is and farm trained. If he’s to make a cavalry horse, sir, he’ll have to learn to accept the disciplines. He has to learn to obey instantly and instinctively. You don’t want a prima donna under you when the bullets start flying.’

‘Fortunately, Corporal,’ said Captain Nicholls. ‘Fortunately this war will be fought out of doors and not indoors. I asked you to train Joey because I think you are the best man for the job – there’s no one better in the squadron. But perhaps you should ease up on him just a bit. You’ve got to remember where he came from. He’s a willing soul – he just needs a bit of gentle persuasion, that’s all. But keep it gentle, Corporal, keep it gentle. I don’t want him soured. This horse is going to carry me through the war and with any luck out the other side of it. He’s special to me Corporal, you know that. So make sure you look after him as if he was your own, won’t you? We leave for France in under a week now. If I had the time I’d be schooling him on myself, but I’m far too busy trying to turn troopers into mounted infantry. A horse may carry you through, Corporal, but he can’t do your fighting for you. And there’s some of them still think they’ll only be needing their sabres when they get out there. Some of them really believe that flashing their sabres around will frighten Jerry all the way home. I tell you they have got to learn to shoot straight – we’ll all have to learn to shoot straight if we want to win this war.’

‘Yes sir,’ said the corporal with a new respect in his voice. He was more meek and mild now than I had ever seen him.

‘And Corporal,’ said Captain Nicholls walking towards the stable door, ‘I’d be obliged if you’d feed Joey up somewhat, he’s lost a bit of condition, gone back a bit I’d say. I shall be taking him out myself on final manoeuvres in two or three days and I want him fit and shining. He’s to look the best in the squadron.’

It was only in that last week of my military education that I began at last to settle into the work. Corporal Samuel Perkins seemed less harsh towards me after that evening. He used the spurs less and gave me more rein. We did less work now in the school and more formation work on the open plains

outside the camp. I took the Weymouth bit more readily now and began to play with it between my teeth as I had always done with the snaffle. I began to appreciate the good food and the grooming and the buffing up, all the unending attention and care that was devoted to me. As the days passed I began to think less and less of the farm and old Zoey and of my early life. But Albert, his face and his voice stayed clear in my mind despite the unerring routine of the work that was turning me imperceptibly into an army horse.

By the time Captain Nicholls came to take me out on those last manoeuvres before we went to war I was already quite resigned to, even contented in my new life. Dressed now in field service marching order, Captain Nicholls weighed heavy on my back as the entire regiment moved out onto Salisbury Plain. I remember mostly the heat and the flies that day for there were hours of standing about in the sun waiting for things to happen. Then with the evening sun spreading and dying along the flat horizon the entire regiment lined up in echelon for the charge, the climax of our last manoeuvres.

The order was given to draw swords and we walked forward. As we waited for the bugle calls the air was electric with anticipation. It passed between every horse and his rider, between horse and horse, between trooper and trooper. I felt inside me a surge of such excitement that I found it difficult to contain myself. Captain Nicholls was leading his troop and alongside him rode his friend Captain Jamie Stewart on a horse I had never seen before. He was a tall, shining black stallion. As we walked forward I glanced up at him and caught his eye. He seemed to acknowledge it briefly. The walk moved into a trot and then into a canter. I heard the bugles blow and caught sight of his sabre pointing over my right ear. Captain Nicholls leant forward in the saddle and urged me into a gallop. The thunder and the dust and the roar of men's voices in my ears took a hold to me and held me at a pitch of exhilaration I had never before experienced. I flew over the ground way out ahead of the rest of them except for one. The only horse to stay with me was the shining black stallion. Although nothing was said between Captain Nicholls and Captain Stewart, I felt it was suddenly important that I should not allow this horse to get ahead of me. One look told me that he felt the same, for there was a grim determination in his eyes and his brow was furrowed with concentration. When we overran the 'enemy' position it was all our riders could do to bring us to a halt, and finally we stood nose to nose, blowing and panting with both captains breathless with exertion.

'You see, Jamie, I told you so,' said Captain Nicholls, and there was such pride in his voice as he spoke. 'This is the horse I was telling you about – found in deepest Devon – and if we had gone on much longer your Topthorn would have been struggling to stay with him. You can't deny it.'

Topthorn and I looked warily at each other at first. He was half a hand or more higher than me, a huge sleek horse that held his head with majestic dignity. He was the first horse I had ever come across that I felt could challenge me for strength, but there was also a kindness in his eye that held no threat for me.

'My Topthorn is the finest mount in this regiment, or any other,' said Captain Jamie Stewart. 'Joey might be faster, and all right I'll grant he looks as good as any horse I've ever seen pulling a milk float, but there's no one to match my Topthorn for stamina – why he could have gone on for ever and ever. He's an eight horse-power horse, and that's a fact.'

On the way back to the barracks that evening the two officers debated the virtues of their respective horses, whilst Topthorn and I plodded along shoulder to shoulder, heads hanging – our strength sapped by the sun and the long gallop. We were stabled side by side that night, and again on the boat the next day we found ourselves together in the bowels of the converted liner that was to carry us off to France and away to the war.

CHAPTER 6

THERE WAS ALL about us on the ship an air of great exuberance and expectancy. The soldiers were buoyant with optimism, as if they were embarking on some great military picnic; it seemed none of them had a care in the world. As they tended us in our stalls the troopers joked and laughed together as I had never heard them before. And we were to need their confidence around us, for it was a stormy crossing and many of us became overwrought and apprehensive as the ship tossed wildly in the sea. Some of us kicked out at our stalls in a desperate effort to break free and to find ground that did not pitch and plunge under our feet, but the troopers were always there to hold us steady and to comfort us.

My comfort, however, came not from Corporal Samuel Perkins, who came to hold my head through the worst of it; for even when he patted me he did it in such a peremptory fashion that I did not feel he meant it. My comfort came from Topthorn who remained calm throughout. He would lean his great head over the stall and let me rest on his neck while I tried to obliterate from my mind the sinking surge of the ship and the noise of uncontrolled terror from the horses all around me.

But the moment we docked the mood changed. The horses recovered their composure with solid still land under their hooves once more, but the troopers fell silent and sombre as we walked past unending lines of wounded waiting to board the ship back to England. As we disembarked and were led away along the quayside Captain Nicholls walked by my head turning his eyes out to sea so that no one should notice the tears in them. The wounded were everywhere – on stretchers, on crutches, in open ambulances, and etched on every man was the look of wretched misery and pain. The tried to put a brave face on it, but even the jokes and quips they shouted out as we passed were heavy with gloom and sarcasm. No sergeant major, no enemy barrage could have silenced a body of soldiers as effectively as that terrible sight, for here for the first time the men saw for themselves the kind of war they were going into and there was not a single man in the squadron who seemed prepared for it.

Once out into the flat open country the squadron threw off its unfamiliar shroud of despondency and regained its jocular spirits. The men sang again in their saddles and laughed amongst themselves. It was to be a long, long march through the dust, all that day and the next. We would stop once every hour for a few minutes and would ride on until dusk before making camp near a village and always by a stream or a river. They cared for us well on that march, often dismounting and walking beside us to give us the rest we needed. But sweetest of all were the full buckets of cooling, quenching water they would bring us whenever we stopped beside a stream. Topthorn, I noticed, always shook his head in the water before he started to drink so that alongside him I was showered all over my face and neck with cooling water.

The mounts were tethered in horse lines out in the open as we had been on manoeuvres back in England. So we were already hardened to living out. But it was colder now as the damp mists of autumn fell each evening and chilled us where we stood. We had plenty of fodder morning and evening, a generous ration of corn from our nosebags and we grazed whenever we could. Like the men we had to learn to live off the land as much as possible.

Every hour of the march brought us nearer the distant thunder of the guns, and at night now the horizon would be bright with orange flashes from one end to the other. I had heard the crack of rifle fire before back at the barracks and this had not upset me one bit, but the growling crescendo of the big guns sent tremors of fear along my back and broke my sleep into a succession of jagged

nightmares. But whenever I woke, dragged back to consciousness by the guns, I found Topthorn was always by me and would breathe his courage into me to support me. It was a slow baptism of fire for me, but without Topthorn I think I should never have become accustomed to the guns, for the fury and the violence of the thunder as we came ever nearer to the front line seemed to sap my strength as well as my spirits.

On the march Topthorn and I walked always together, side by side, for Captain Nicholls and Captain Stewart were rarely apart. They seemed somehow separate in spirit from their heartier fellow officers. The more I got to know Captain Nicholls, the more I liked him. He rode me as Albert had, with a gentle hand and a firm grip of the knees, so that despite his size – and he was a big man – he was always light on me. And there was always some warm word of encouragement or gratitude after a long ride. This was a welcome contrast to Corporal Samuel Perkins who had ridden me so hard whilst in training. I caught sight of him from time to time and pitied the horse he rode.

Captain Nicholls did not sing or whistle as Albert had, but he talked to me from time to time when we were alone together. No one it appeared really knew where the enemy was. That he was advancing and that we were retreating was not in doubt. We were supposed to try to ensure that the enemy did not outflank us – we did not want the enemy to get between us and the sea and turn the flank of the whole British expeditionary force. But the squadron had first to find the enemy and they were never anywhere to be seen. We scoured the countryside for days before finally blundering into them – and that was a day I shall never forget, the day of our first battle.

Rumour rippled back along the column that the enemy had been sighted, a battalion of infantry on the march. They were out in the open a mile or so away, hidden from us by a long thick copse of oaks that ran alongside the road. The orders rang out: ‘Forward! Form squadron column! Draw swords!’ As one, the men reached down and grasped their swords from their sheaths and the air flickered with bright steel before the blades settled on the troopers’ shoulders. ‘Squadron, right shoulder!’ came the command, and we walked in line abreast into the wood. I felt Captain Nicholls’ knees close right around me and he loosened the reins. His body was taut and for the first time he felt heavy on my back. ‘Easy Joey,’ he said softly. ‘Easy now. Don’t get excited. We’ll come out of this all right, don’t you worry.’

I turned to look at Topthorn who was already up on his toes ready for the trot that we knew was to come. I moved instinctively closer to him and then as the bugle sounded we charged out of the shade of the wood and into the sunlight of battle.

The gentle squeak of leather, the jingling harness and the noise of hastily barked orders were drowned now by the pounding of hooves and the shout of the troopers as we galloped down on the enemy in the valley below us. Out of the corner of my eye, I was aware of the glint of Captain Nicholls’ heavy sword. I felt his spurs in my side and I heard his battle cry. I saw the grey soldiers ahead of us raise their rifles and heard the death rattle of a machine-gun, and then quite suddenly I found that I had no rider, that I had no weight on my back any more and that I was alone out in front of the squadron. Topthorn was no longer beside me, but with horses behind me I knew there was only one way to gallop and that was forward. Blind terror drove me on, with my flying stirrups whipping me into a frenzy. With no rider to carry I reached the kneeling riflemen first and they scattered as I came upon them.

I ran on until I found myself alone and away from the noise of the battle, and I would never have stopped at all had I not found Topthorn once more beside me with Captain Stewart leaning over to gather up my reins before leading me back to the battlefield.

We had won, I heard it said; but horses lay dead and dying everywhere. More than a quarter of

the squadron had been lost in that one action. It had all been so quick and so deadly. A cluster of grey uniformed prisoners had been taken and they huddled together now under the trees whilst the squadron regrouped and exchanged extravagant reminiscenses of a victory that had happened almost by accident rather than by design.

I never saw Captain Nicholls again and that was a great and terrible sadness for me for he had been a kind and gentle man and had cared for me well as he had promised. As I was to learn, there were few enough such good men in the world. ‘He’d have been proud of you, Joey,’ said Captain Stewart as he led me back to the horselines with Topthorn. ‘He’d have been proud of you the way you kept going out there. He died leading that charge and you finished it for him. He’d have been proud of you.’

Topthorn stood over me that night as we bivouacked on the edge of the woods. We looked out together over the moonlit valley, and I longed for home. Only the occasional coughing and stamping of the sentries broke the still of the night. The guns were silent at last. Topthorn sank down beside me and we slept.