CHAPTER 7

IT WAS JUST after reveille the next morning and we were rummaging around in our nosebags for the last of our oats, when I saw Captain Jamie Stewart striding along the horselines towards us. Behind him, swamped in a vast greatcoat and a peaked cap, trailed a young trooper I had never seen before. He was pinkfaced and young under his hat and reminded me at once of Albert. I sensed that he was nervous of me, for his approach was hesitant and reluctant.

Captain Stewart felt Topthorn's ears and stroked his soft muzzle as he always did the first thing in the morning, and then reaching across he patted me gently on the neck. 'Well Trooper Warren, here he is,' said Captain Stewart. 'Come closer Trooper, he won't bite. This is Joey. This horse belonged to the best friend I ever had, so you look after him, d'you hear?' His tone was firm but not unsympathetic. 'And Trooper, I shall be able to keep my eye on you all the time because these two horses are inseparable. They are the two best horses in the squadron, and they know it.' He stepped closer to me and lifted my forelock clear of my face. 'Joey,' he whispered. 'You take care of him. He's only a little lad and he's had a rough ride in this war so far.'

So when the squadron moved out of the wood that morning I found I could no longer walk alongside Topthorn as I had before with Captain Nicholls, but was now just one of the troop following behind the officers in a long column of troopers. But whenever we stopped to feed or drink Trooper Warren was careful to walk me over to where Topthorn stood so that we could be together.

Trooper Warren was not a good horseman – I could tell that the minute he mounted me. He was always tense and rode me heavy in the saddle like a sack of potatoes. He had neither the experience and confidence of Corporal Samuel Perkins nor the finesse and sensitivity of Captain Nicholls. He rocked unevenly in the saddle and rode me always on too tight a rein so that I was forced to toss my head continuously to loosen it. But once out of the saddle he was the gentlest of men. He was meticulous and kind in his grooming and attended at once to my frequent and painful saddle sores, chafings and windgalls to which I was particularly prone. He cared for me as no one had since I left home. Over the next few months it was his loving attention that was to keep me alive.

There were a few minor skirmishes during that first autumn of the war, but as Captain Nicholls had predicted, we were used less and less as cavalry and more as transport for mounted infantry. Whenever we came across the enemy the squadron would dismount, drawing their rifles from their buckets, and the horses would be left behind out of sight under the care of a few troopers, so that we never saw any action ourselves but heard the distant crackle of rifle-fire and the rattle of machine-guns. When the troop returned and the squadron moved off again, there were always one or two horses without riders.

We would be on the march for hours and days on end it seemed. Then suddenly a motorcycle would roar past us through the dust and there would be the barked commands and the shrill call of the bugles and the squadron would swing off the road and into action once more.

It was during these long, stifling marches and during the cold nights that followed, that Trooper Warren began to talk to me. He told me how in the same action in which Captain Nicholls had been killed, he had had his horse shot down from beneath him and how only a few weeks before he had been an apprentice black-smith with his father. Then the war had broken out. He did not want to join up, he said; but the squire of the village had spoken to his father and his father, who rented his house and his smithy from the squire, had no option but to send him off to war, and since he had grown up around

horses he volunteered to join the cavalry. ‘I tell you, Joey,’ he said one evening as he was picking out my hooves, ‘I tell you I never thought I would get on a horse again after that first battle. Strange thing is, Joey, that it wasn’t the shooting, somehow I didn’t mind that; it was just the idea of riding a horse again that terrified the life out of me. Wouldn’t think that possible, would you? Not with me being a smithy and all. Still, I’m over it now and you’ve done that for me Joey. Given me back my confidence. Feel I can do anything now. Feel like one of those knights in armour when I’m up on you.’

Then, with the onset of winter, the rain came down in sheets. It was refreshing at first and a welcome break from the dust and the flies, but soon the fields and paths turned to mud beneath us. The squadron could no longer bivouac in the dry for there was little enough shelter and so both man and horse were constantly soaked to the skin. There was little or no protection from the driving rain, and at night we stood now over our fetlocks in cold, oozing mud. But Trooper Warren looked after me with great devotion, finding shelter for me wherever and whenever he could, rubbing some warmth into me with whisps of dry straw whenever he could find it and ensuring that I always got a good ration of oats in my nosebag to keep me going. As the weeks passed his pride in my strength and stamina became obvious to everyone, as did my affection for him. If only, I thought, if only he could just groom me and care for me and someone else could ride me.

My Trooper Warren would talk a great deal about how the war was going. We were, he said, to be withdrawn to reserve camps behind our own lines. The armies it appeared had pounded each other to a stand-still in the mud and had dug in. The dugouts had soon become trenches and the trenches had joined each other, zigzagging across the country from the sea to Switzerland. In the spring, he said, we would be needed again to break the deadlock. The cavalry could go where the infantry could not and were fast enough to overrun the trenches. We’d show the infantry how to do it, he said. But there was the winter to survive before the ground became hard enough again for the cavalry to be used effectively.

Topthorn and I spent that winter sheltering each other as best we could from the snow and the sleet, whilst only a few miles away we could hear the guns pounding each other day and night incessantly. We saw the cheery soldiers smiling under their tin hats as they marched off to the front line, whistling and singing and joking as they went, and we watched the remnants struggling back haggard and silent under their dripping capes in the rain.

Every once in a while Trooper Warren would receive a letter from home and he would read it out to me in a guarded whisper in case anyone else should overhear. The letters were all from his mother and they all said much the same thing.

‘*My dear Charlie,*’ he would read. ‘*Your Father hopes you are well and so do I. We missed having you with us at Christmas – the table in the kitchen seemed empty without you. But your little brother helps when he can with the work and Father says he’s coming on well even though he’s still a bit little and not strong enough yet to hold the farmhorses. Minnie Whittle, that old widow from Hanniford Farm, died in her sleep last week. She was eighty so she can’t grumble at that, though I expect she would if she could. She was always the world’s worst grumbler, do you remember? Well, son, that’s about all our news. Your Sally from the village sends her best and says to tell you that she’ll be writing soon. Keep safe, dearest boy, and come home soon.*

‘*Your loving Mother.*

‘But Sally won’t write, Joey, because she can’t, well not very well anyway. But just as soon as this

lot's over and finished with I'll get back home and marry her. I've grown up with her, Joey, known her all my life. S'pose I know her almost as well as I know myself, and I like her a lot better.'

Trooper Warren broke the terrible monotony of that winter. He lifted my spirits and I could see that Topthorn too welcomed every visit he made to the horselines. He never knew how much good he did us. During that awful winter so many of the horses went off to the veterinary hospital and never came back. Like all army horses we were clipped out like hunters so that all our lower quarters were exposed to the mud and rain. The weaker ones amongst us suffered first, for they had little resilience and went downhill fast. But Topthorn and I came through to the spring, Topthorn surviving a severe cough that shook his whole massive frame as if it was trying to tear the life out of him from the inside. It was Captain Stewart who saved him, feeding him up with a hot mash and covering him as best he could in the bleakest weather.

And then, one ice-cold night in early spring, with frost lying on our backs, the troopers came to the horselines unexpectedly early. It was before dawn. There had been a night of incessant heavy barrage. There was a new bustle and excitement in the camp. This was not one of the routine exercises we had come to expect. The troopers came along the horselines in full service order, two bandoliers, respiratory haversack, rifle and sword. We were saddled up and moved silently out of the camp and onto the road. The troopers talked of the battle ahead and all the frustrations and irritations of imposed idleness vanished as they sang in the saddle. And my Trooper Warren was singing along with them as lustily as any of them. In the cold grey of the night the squadron joined the regiment in the remnants of a little ruined village peopled only by cats, and waited there for an hour until the pale light of dawn crept over the horizon. Still the guns bellowed out their fury and the ground shook beneath us. We passed the field hospitals and the light guns before trotting over the support trenches to catch our first sight of the battle-field. Desolation and destruction were everywhere. Not a building was left intact. Not a blade of grass grew in the torn and ravaged soil. The singing around me stopped and we moved on in ominous silence and out over the trenches that were crammed with men, their bayonets fixed to their rifles. They gave us a sporadic cheer as we clattered over the boards and out into the wilderness of no man's land, into a wilderness of wire and shell holes and the terrible litter of war. Suddenly the guns stopped firing overhead. We were through the wire. The squadron fanned out in a wide, uneven echelon and the bugle sounded. I felt the spurs biting into my sides and moved up alongside Topthorn as we broke into a trot. 'Do me proud, Joey,' said Trooper Warren, drawing his sword. 'Do me proud.'

CHAPTER 8

FOR JUST A few short moments we moved forward at the trot as we had done in training. In the eery silence of no man's land all that could be heard was the jingle of the harness and the snorting of the horses. We picked our way around the craters keeping our line as best we could. Up ahead of us at the top of a gentle sloping hill were the battered remnants of a wood and just below a hideous, rusting roll of barbed wire that stretched out along the horizon as far as the eye could see.

'Wire,' I heard Trooper Warren whisper through his teeth. 'Oh God, Joey, they said the wire would be gone, they said the guns would deal with the wire. Oh my God!'

We were into a canter now and still there was no sound nor sight of any enemy. The troopers were shouting at an invisible foe, leaning over their horses' necks, their sabres stretched out in front of them. I galvanised myself into a gallop to keep with Topthorn and as I did, so the first terrible shells fell amongst us and the machine guns opened up. The bedlam of battle had begun. All around me men cried and fell to the ground, and horses reared and screamed in an agony of fear and pain. The ground erupted on either side of me, throwing horses and riders clear into the air. The shells whined and roared overhead, and every explosion seemed like an earthquake to us. But the squadron galloped on inexorably through it all towards the wire at the top of the hill, and I went with them.

On my back Trooper Warren held me in an iron grip with his knees. I stumbled once and felt him lose a stirrup, and slowed so that he could find it again. Topthorn was still ahead of me, his head up, his tail whisking from side to side. I found more strength in my legs and charged after him. Trooper Warren prayed aloud as he rode, but his prayers turned soon to curses as he saw the carnage around him. Only a few horses reached the wire and Topthorn and I were amongst them. There were indeed a few holes blasted through the wire by our bombardment so that some of us could find a way through; and we came at last upon the first line of enemy trenches, but they were empty. The firing came now from higher up in amongst the trees; and so the squadron, or what was left of it, regrouped and galloped up into the wood, only to be met by a line of hidden wire in amongst the trees. Some of the horses ran into the wire before they could be stopped, and stuck there, their riders trying feverishly to extract them. I saw one trooper dismount deliberately once he saw his horse was caught. He pulled out his rifle and shot his mount before falling dead himself on the wire. I could see at once that there was no way through, that the only way was to jump the wire and when I saw Topthorn and Captain Stewart leap over where the wire was lowest, I followed them and we found ourselves at last in amongst the enemy. From behind every tree, from trenches all around it seemed, they ran forward in their piked helmets to counter-attack. They rushed past us, ignoring us until we found ourselves surrounded by an entire company of soldiers, their rifles pointing up at us.

The crump of the shelling and the spitting of rifle-fire had suddenly stopped. I looked around me for the rest of the squadron, to discover that we were alone. Behind us the riderless horses, all that was left of a proud cavalry squadron, galloped back towards our trenches, and the hillside below was strewn with the dead and dying.

'Throw down your sword, Trooper,' said Captain Stewart, bending in his saddle and dropping his sword to the ground. 'There's been enough useless slaughter today. No sense in adding to it.' He walked Topthorn closer towards us and reined in. 'Trooper, I told you once we had the best horses in the squadron, and today they showed us they are the best horses in the entire regiment, in the whole confounded army – and there's not a scratch on them.' He dismounted as the German soldiers closed

in and Trooper Warren followed suit. They stood side by side holding our reins while we were surrounded. We looked back down the hill at the battle-field. A few horses were still struggling on the wire, but one by one they were put out of their misery by the advancing German infantry, who had already regained their line of trenches. They were the last shots in the battle.

'What a waste,' the Captain said. 'What a ghastly waste. Maybe now when they see this they'll understand that you can't send horses into wire and machine-guns. Maybe now they'll think again.'

The soldiers around us seemed wary of us and kept their distance. They seemed not to know quite what to do with us. 'The horses, sir?' Trooper Warren asked. 'Joey and Topthorn, what happens to them now?'

'Same as us, Trooper,' said Captain Stewart. 'They're prisoners of war just as we are.' Flanked by the soldiers who hardly spoke, we were escorted over the brow of a hill and down into the valley below. Here the valley was still green for there had been no battle over this ground as yet. All the while Trooper Warren had his arm over my neck to reassure me and I felt then that he was beginning to say goodbye.

He spoke softly into my ear. 'Don't suppose they'll let you come with me where I'm going, Joey. I wish they could, but they can't. But I shan't ever forget you. I promise you that.'

'Don't you worry, Trooper,' Captain Stewart said. 'The Germans love their horses every bit as much as we do. They'll be all right. Anyway, Topthorn will look after your Joey – you can be sure of that.'

As we came out of the wood and onto the road below we were halted by our escort. Captain Stewart and Trooper Warren were marched away down the road towards a cluster of ruined buildings that must at one time have been a village, whilst Topthorn and I were led away across the fields and further down the valley. There was no time for long farewells – just a brief last stroke of the muzzle for each of us and they were gone. As they walked away, Captain Stewart had his arm around Trooper Warren's shoulder.

CHAPTER 9

WE WERE LED away by two nervous soldiers down farm tracks, through orchards and across a bridge before being tied up beside a hospital tent some miles from where we had been captured. A knot of wounded soldiers gathered around us at once. They patted and stroked us and I began to whisk my tail with impatience. I was hungry and thirsty and angry that I had been separated from my Trooper Warren.

Still no one seemed to know quite what to do with us until an officer in a long grey coat with a bandage round his head emerged from the tent. He was an immensely tall man standing a full head higher than anyone around him. The manner of his gait and the way he held himself indicated a man clearly accustomed to wielding authority. A bandage came down over one eye so that he had only half a face visible. As he walked towards us I saw that he was limping, that one foot was heavily bandaged and that he needed the support of a stick. The soldiers sprang back at his approach and stood stiffly to attention. He looked us both over in undisguised admiration, shaking his head and sighing as he did so. Then he turned to the men. 'There are hundreds like these dead out on our wire. I tell you, if we had had one jot of the courage of these animals we should be in Paris by now and not slugging it out here in the mud. These two horses came through hell-fire to get here – they were the only two to make it. It was not their fault they were sent on a fool's errand. They are not circus animals, they are heroes, do you understand, heroes, and they should be treated as such. And you stand around and gawp at them. You are none of you badly wounded and the doctor is far too busy to see you at present. So, I want these horses unsaddled, rubbed down, fed and watered at once. They will need oats and hay, and a blanket for each of them, now get moving.'

The soldiers hurried away, scattering in all directions, and within a few minutes Topthorn and I were being lavished with all manner of clumsy kindness. None of them had handled a horse before it seemed, but that did not matter to us so grateful were we for all the fodder they brought us and the water. We lacked for nothing that morning, and all the time the tall officer supervised from under the trees, leaning on his stick. From time to time he would come up to us and run his hand along our backs and over our quarters, nodding his approval and lecturing his men on the finer points of horse breeding as he examined us. After a time he was joined by a man in a white coat who emerged from the tent, his hair dishevelled, his face pale with exhaustion. There was blood on his coat.

'Headquarters phoned through about the horses, Herr Hauptmann,' said the man in white. 'And they say I am to keep them for the stretcher cases. I know your views on the matter Hauptmann, but I'm afraid you cannot have them. We need them here desperately, and the way things are going I fear we will need more. That was just the first attack – there will be more to come. We expect a sustained offensive – it will be a long battle. We are the same on both sides, once we start something we seem to have to prove a point and that takes time and lives. We'll need all the ambulance transport we can get, motorised or horse.'

The tall officer drew himself up to his full height, and bristled with indignation. He was a formidable sight as he advanced on the man in white. 'Doctor, you cannot put fine British cavalry horses to pulling carts! Any of our horse regiments, my own Regiment of Lancers indeed, would be proud, indeed overwhelmed to have such splendid creatures in their ranks. You cannot do it, Doctor, I will not permit it.'

'Herr Hauptmann,' said the doctor patiently – he was clearly not at all intimidated. 'Do you

really imagine that after this morning's madness that either side will be using cavalry again in this war? Can you not understand that we need transport, Herr Hauptmann? And we need it now. There are men, brave men, German and English lying out there on stretchers in the trenches and at present there's not enough transport to bring them back to the hospital here. Now do you want them all to die, Herr Hauptmann? Tell me that. Do you want them to die? If these horses could be hitched up to a cart they could bring them back in their dozens. We just do not have enough ambulances to cope, and what we do have break down or get stuck in the mud. Please, Herr Hauptmann. We need your help.'

'The world,' said the German officer, shaking his head, 'the world has gone quite mad. When noble creatures such as these are forced to become beasts of burden, the world has gone mad. But I can see that you are right. I am a lancer, Herr Doctor, but even I know that men are more important than horses. But you must see to it that you have someone in charge of these two who knows horses – I don't want any dirty-fingered mechanic getting his hands on these two. And you must tell them that they are riding horses. They won't take kindly to pulling carts, no matter how noble the cause.'

'Thank you, Herr Hauptmann,' said the doctor. 'You are most kind, but I have a problem, Herr Hauptmann. As I am sure you will agree, they will need an expert to manage them to start with, particularly if they have never been put in a cart before. The problem is that I have only medical orderlies here. True, one of them has worked horses on a farm before the war; but to tell you the truth, Herr Hauptmann, I have no one who could manage these two – no one that is except you. You are due to go to Base Hospital on the next convoy of ambulances, but they won't be here before this evening. I know it's a lot to ask of a wounded man, but you can see how desperate I am. The farmer down below has several carts, and I should imagine all the harness you would need. What do you say, Herr Hauptmann? Can you help me?'

The bandaged officer limped back towards us and stroked our noses tenderly. Then he smiled and nodded. 'Very well. It's a sacrilege, Doctor, a sacrilege,' he said. 'But if it's got to be done, then I'd rather do it myself and see it is done properly.'

So that same afternoon after our capture, Topthorn and I were hitched up side by side to an old hay cart and with the officer directing two orderlies, we were driven up through the woods back towards the thunder of the gunfire and the wounded that awaited us. Topthorn was all the time in a great state of alarm for it was clear he had never pulled before in his life; and at last I was able in my turn to help him, to lead, to compensate and to reassure him. The officer led us at first, limping along beside me with his stick, but he was soon confident enough to mount the cart with the two orderlies and take the reins. 'You've done a bit of this before, my friend,' he said. 'I can tell that. I always knew the British were mad. Now I know that they use horses such as you as cart-horses, I am quite sure of it. That's what this war is all about, my friend. It's about which of us is the madder. And clearly you British started with an advantage. You were mad beforehand.'

All that afternoon and evening while the battle raged we trudged up to the lines, loaded up with the stretcher cases and brought them back to the Field Hospital. It was several miles each way over roads and tracks filled with shell holes and littered with the corpses of mules and men. The artillery barrage from both sides was continuous. It roared overhead all day as the armies hurled their men at each other across no man's land, and the wounded that could walk poured back along the roads. I had seen the same grey faces looking out from under their helmets somewhere before. All that was different were the uniforms – they were grey now with red piping, and the helmets were no longer round with a broad brim.

It was almost night before the tall officer left us, waving goodbye to us and to the doctor from the back of the ambulance as it bumped its way across the field and out of sight. The doctor turned to the

orderlies who had been with us all day. ‘See to it that they are well cared for, those two,’ he said. ‘They saved good lives today, those two – good German lives and good English lives. They deserve the best of care. See to it that they have it.’

For the first time that night since we came to the war, Topthorn and I had the luxury of a stable. The shed in the farm that lay across the fields from the hospital was emptied of pigs and poultry and we were led in to find a rack brimming full with sweet hay and buckets of soothing, cold water.

That night after we had finished our hay, Topthorn and I were lying down together at the back of the shed. I was half awake and could think only of my aching muscles and sore feet. Suddenly the door creaked open and the stable filled with a flickering orange light. Behind the light there were footsteps. We looked up and I was seized at that moment with a kind of panic. For a fleeting moment I imagined myself back at home in the stable with old Zoey. The dancing light triggered off an alarm in me, reminding me at once of Albert’s father. I was on my feet in an instant and backing away from the light with Topthorn beside me, protecting me. However, when the voice spoke it was not the rasping, drunken voice of Albert’s father, but rather a soft, gentle tone of a girl’s voice, a young girl. I could see now that there were two people behind the light, an old man, a bent old man in rough clothes and clogs, and beside him stood a young girl, her head and shoulders wrapped in a shawl.

‘There you are, Grandpapa,’ she said. ‘I told you they put them in here. Have you ever seen anything so beautiful? Oh can they be mine, Grandpapa? Please can they be mine?’