

The Diary of a White Feather Girl

Beatrix Anne Heath-Hassell

*Runner up
in the 11 to 15 category of the
Young Walter Scott Prize 2021*

23rd October 1917

Mother has taken ill. I had to nurse her all day, she was in a shocking state. Elderly Dr Potts looked very grave when he first came to see her, but by evening he said she was doing well. "She's very strong," he told me, smiling.

"Oh yes," I replied. "Even when she heard the news about Father and Richard, she didn't collapse or faint or anything like that. She just went very still and sat down, and that was all."

The smile on Dr Potts' face vanished. Like so many others, he thinks the best way to deal with the war is to pretend that it isn't happening. As if all of the men in England have simply popped down to the pub, and will be back late at night, drunk and staggering. Father used to go to the pub sometimes. The Earl and Elephant. When he returned and came up to say goodnight, he'd ruffle my hair and slurrily tell me that I was his special darling and he loved me and sweet dreams and chuckle, chuckle, don't let the bedbugs bite. Richard and I used to giggle and imitate Father when he was drunk to each other, in those brother-and-sister moments we'll never have again. It all seems so long ago now.

It's a pity I had to look after Mother today. I know Clara Wilkins and a few other girls were planning to go out around London this afternoon, giving out feathers, and make an evening of it. I was going to go too. I've collected twenty-seven feathers in the last few days - it's really surprising how many there are if you only look for them.

I got into handing out feathers almost a year ago, after John was killed. That was the last straw for me. My father, my brother, my fiancé. They all died bravely, fighting for their country, and yet there are so many cowards among us who can't even face the trenches. It's ridiculous. How do they expect to win this war if they're too afraid to fight?

24th October 1917

Mother has recovered quite a bit today - enough to lie on the sofa and bark at Sarah to make her a cup of tea - *no, not like that, foolish girl, my way, with extra milk and sugar*. Then she starts complaining about rationing when Sarah patiently explains that if she makes it her way, we'll have no milk and sugar left for the rest of the week.

I didn't get out much today. I just went to pay a brief call on Mrs Byrd, our neighbour, whose youngest son Billy was killed at the Front a couple of days ago. I gave her my own and Mother's condolences. She looked utterly pitiful. There were shadows under her eyes, black against her pallid skin, and she looked as if she hadn't eaten a thing since she got the news. She didn't say anything when I tried to speak to her, just stared, motionless, at the worn-out carpet. The lighting was dim, reflecting the mood. Her daughter Mary told me, with tears in her eyes, that the funeral is in a week's time. I promised I wouldn't miss it for the world, and that Mother would come too if she was able. Mary just nodded, unable to speak. She and I haven't always been on the best terms - she doesn't approve of my handing out white feathers, she says it should be a man's choice if he wants to risk his life - but I knew exactly how she was feeling. She called on us when Richard and Father were killed, so I had to return the favour, however unpleasant it was to stand in that dark house, haunted by grief, the clock ticking away, nobody saying anything. A very unpleasant favour indeed.

25th October 1917

Mother is almost better, so I went out a bit more today. I gave away two feathers while walking through the park - one to a red-haired young man who couldn't have looked more shocked if I'd slapped him, and one to a slightly older man smoking a pipe, who told me, in a

most offended voice, that he was Army, just out of uniform. I don't know if he was telling the truth or if he was lying to save embarrassment.

I saw Clara Wilkins and told her why I couldn't come to her outing the other night.

"It's alright," she said. "I understand."

"Did I hear your sister Margaret has volunteered for nursing work?" I asked.

Clara nodded, eyes bright. "I'm thinking of doing the same." She paused and scanned the crowd for any army-eligible young men who might be deserving of a feather. There were none. Maybe our efforts were working. "So I'll leave you, Martha, to teach those cowards a lesson. I'll be too busy to go around handing out feathers if I do become a nurse. I've quite a few gathered in my bag right now, as a matter of fact. Would you like some?"

I said yes, and went home with ten extra feathers. Clara had almost a hundred stuffed into her bag!

"However did you get all of these?" I marvelled.

She winked at me. "I pulled some out of my bolster."

"That explains why they're so soft!" I laughed.

"Just like the chicken-hearts we give them to!"

I went home and listened to Mother going on and on for a quarter of an hour about what a useless maid Sarah was, and how simply dreadful she felt, and would I fetch her snuff box, dear, until I was nearly driven demented. It maddens me to think of the cowards who won't

fight, for I would enlist for two pins. I would kill the people who killed my family and end this bloody war at last.

26th October 1917

Today I gave away five feathers, not counting one I accidentally gave to a man who then showed me the stump of his right arm and handed the feather straight back. I felt sick. I hate it when that happens. One feels so dreadfully guilty.

There was quite a commotion down the road at around noon, so I went to see what it was. It turned out that Alfred Jones, who is the younger brother of Alice, a dear friend of mine and fellow feather-giver, who since the war has started teaching at the nearby school - anyway, her brother Alfred was being sent off to war. He turned nineteen just last week and insisted on enlisting straight away. I was glad when I heard this, for otherwise I might have had occasion to give him a feather, and that would never do.

All of the Joneses' neighbours had gathered round and were saying things such as: "Goodbye, Alfie darling!" "Good luck at the Front!" "Give Jerry a good beating for me, won't you?" It was quite an affecting sight. I watched for a while and then bid him goodbye myself. Alfred's a nice lad. I do hope he makes it through the war unharmed.

Sadly, the chances of that happening are slim.

27th October 1917

Oh God. What a fool I am.

Today I was out, running errands, when I noticed a young man standing next to a lampost. Well, not so much standing as trembling next to a lampost. He was very pale and his eyes were dark and haunted. I marched up to him and tried to give him one of Clara's feathers. He turned away and sobbed.

"You're a coward if you don't fight," I said coolly. At the word fight the man keeled onto the floor and started shaking. It was extraordinary. "I...can't!" he cried. "I'm sorry! I know I'm a coward but I...just...can't!" A crowd was starting to gather. I shooed them away with a gloved hand and turned back to the crying man.

When he recovered a little, he met my eyes, panting. "It's worse than you can possibly imagine," he said slowly. "The sky a muddy grey. The ground is so wet the earth sucks you in and you can barely walk. The lice, they crawl into your blood and agonise you. It's hell. The shouts, the...the screams. The dead. They are everywhere. They lie, rotting corpses no one has the strength to remove. The bombs...They blast all day and night and you feel like you're already dead. The blinding light, the deafening explosions. A woman who lives on this pretty little street, with flowers outside every house, handing out feathers, could...n-never understand!"

The last words were cried with such vehemence that I took a step backwards. I tried to get away from this man, who was clearly shell-shocked and out of his mind, but he pulled me back. I gasped. How dare he lay hands on me! He continued.

"No, stay here. I need to make someone understand. Anyone...even a white feather girl like you!" He uttered the words white feather girl with such desperate disgust. This clearly wasn't his first encounter with someone like me.

"A white feather girl!" he moaned again, eyes rolling back into his head. "A white feather girl!"

I felt myself bristle and my temper flared. "I'm not a girl!" I hissed. "I am twenty-three years old and I do what I do so that Britain wins this war!"

"WHO BLOODY CARES IF BRITAIN WINS THE WAR!" he shrieked. People were staring, muttering. I glimpsed Clara Wilkins on the street. She was watching me, still clutching her white feather and attempting to placate the crazy shell-shocked man.

"Who cares who wins the war as long as it ends?"

I widened my eyes, astonished. The man slumped sideways down onto the pavement and croaked softly, "You...don't...understand." I believe he fainted.

Clara Wilkins elbowed her way through the crowd and came up to me. She glanced briefly at the man on the floor.

"Shell-shock."

I nodded.

"You've got to ignore those ones who rave on about the burning battlefield and whatnot."

I nodded.

"Are you alright, Martha?"

I nodded.

28th October 1917

I'm not alright. I had nightmares last night about the 'burning battlefield' of the soldier's description. I woke up gasping, drowning in my heavy bedsheets, imagining the sound of gunfire, crying out desperately for Richard and for Father and for John.

I remember when Richard came home on his first leave. He had gone off to war a proud, upright man in uniform, and came back a pale, shrunken boy with death in his eyes. I've tried to ignore the image all I can, but I can't stop thinking about it today.

They're not cowards. They know the truth and we mock them for it.

Oh God. Who have I turned into in the last few months?

I'm restless. I walk about the house, wondering why I ever wanted to be a soldier. Mother scolds me concernedly and tells me to get out of the house for a bit. She is in perfect health now, ready to go out herself. She'll certainly be coming with me for Billy's funeral. Billy was too young to die.

They all were.

At around four o'clock I start walking away, away, far away from home, further and further, until I reach a large park. There's a fountain in the centre and that's what I aim for. I'm carrying all of my feathers in a big bundle. This is the only thing I can think of to do.

I drop the bundle into the clear water. The lighter feathers float at the top, the others flutter slowly to the bottom of the stone basin.

"Goodbye," I say aloud.

© Beatrix Anne Heath-Hassell 2022