

Forever England

By Rosie Brooker

Introduction by the author

My story is about Westcote, a man from a rich family who has returned to his ancestral home after serving in the First World War. An old friend, Spats, comes to stay, and in their seemingly inconsequential conversation, Westcote revisits the horrors of the war, his disconnect with his present situation in life, and the lost hope and love of the past – whilst Spats remains pleasantly (or callously) oblivious to it all. A catalyst for their conversation is Rupert Brooke, who was a real poet famous for his hopeful and poignant verse about the war. At the heart of the story is the idea of Westcote's voicelessness and his need to suppress his fears and emotions, and I chose to set my story in this period – the time of transition from the battlefield and war poems, back to 'normal' everyday life and the witty prose of Wodehouse – in order to explore those constrained, conflicting traumas which so many people like Westcote were forced to live with ever after: there was no recognisable 'normal' which they could go back to.

Lord Westcote, son of the late Viscount Westcote of Grouseton Abbey, who in turn was the grandson of the famed Earl Roderick of Whitby, who was a direct descendant of a Norman baron originally from the region of *Pays de la Loire* where they produce the finest *Sauvignon blanc* – Lord Westcote was reading a book when there was a knock on the door.

'Come in,' Westcote murmured. His words were muffled by the thick smoke from his cigarette.

'I say, old boy, I do hope you got my letter, otherwise I fear that I'm uninvited.'

Westcote would have known that voice anywhere. It belonged to Spats, an old friend from Oxford named after the garments which were habitually to be seen peeking out from underneath his meticulously pressed hems. Westcote remembered him as the timeless English gentleman: suavely mannered, enviably tailored and perfectly pedigreed.

'I did receive your letter,' Westcote said. He did not elaborate on whether Spats could stay at Grouseton Abbey or not, which had been the purpose of his letter. Instead, Westcote

remained motionless, watching Spats through the smoke of his cigarette. The only sound in the room was of Earl Roderick's marble-faced clock, ticking away relentlessly.

'Well, I'm glad.' Spats eased himself into a winged armchair opposite the fire and rested his feet in the grate. 'I haven't been here since before the war. It's a wonderful house, what?'

Westcote did not think so: it was a house of garish opulence, tastelessly baroque, brimming with priceless heirlooms and antiques which glared ludicrously at him from a forgotten, gilded past.

'Yes, wonderful, wonderful,' Spats murmured, surveying the room with a practised eye.

'Mother used to have a cabinet just like that... I suppose you inherited this place from your father?'

'Yes.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Why?'

'Well, because he... he's...' Spats trailed off; the word 'dead' did not quite leave his lips.

Westcote grunted and turned back to his book. He had been viscount since 1915, when his father died whilst he was in the Dardanelles. Spats must have been thinking the same thing because he started to look uncomfortable and nervously drank Westcote's whisky and soda, thinking it his own. Earl Roderick's clock struck a doleful eleven o'clock.

'Anyway,' said Spats briskly, 'I've been sent here on a mission from Margaret. You remember Margaret, don't you?'

'Your sister?'

'Yes. She used to sing and play duets with you.'

Flurry of chords – lilting voice – stream of semiquavers: Westcote remembered all too well. The echo of Margaret's voice haunted every note he played, although he had not touched his piano for years.

'Well,' Spats continued, 'She's of a poetical disposition and wants to write an article about a poet, whom you apparently knew. I haven't a clue why the newspapers accept work from ignorant little girls these days, but there it is.'

‘Who is this man?’

‘Rupert Brooke.’

Silence.

It took all of Westcote’s self-control to ask eventually, ‘Why does she want to write about him?’

‘Well, he’s a sort of national hero, isn’t he? Young, patriotic, all the hope from the beginning of the war. Margaret called him a martyred hero – he died in Greece like Byron, after all – and it’s all very romantic and classical, dying on the way to the Dardanelles like someone from the *Iliad*... Don’t you think?’

Westcote snuffed out his cigarette and stood up, avoiding Spats’ eyes.

‘And then I suppose Margaret found him interesting because she’s a girl and Brooke was – what did Yeats call him? – the handsomest ma–’

‘... man in England,’ Westcote finished bitterly. ‘Yes. I knew him.’

Westcote could see Brooke in Spats’ eyes – worse, in Margaret’s – as a golden, Classical hero, a poet, a martyr: an idol of lost youth and hope. Agitated, Westcote picked up an antique snuffbox off the mantelpiece and fingered it absently, his fingers stumbling over its grooves and curves under a carpet of dust.

‘Well?’ Spats prompted.

‘Well what? Brooke was a family friend. I met him again on the ship bound for Gallipoli.’ Westcote faltered slightly. ‘But of course he died before we got there.’

‘Yes, yes, I know. But Margaret wants something more personal – an anecdote, perhaps?’

‘An anecdote...’ Westcote mused. He paused, distracted by the miniature painting of cherubs and gods in the lid of the snuffbox. From its shadowed surface, a face peered back at Westcote from the depths of his mind: young and deathly handsome. Was it Brooke’s face as he slipped from woman to woman, from artist to Hollywood actress? Was it Brooke’s face as he basked in Tahitian sunlight, hidden from the world? Or was it Brooke’s face as he sat in Antwerp in the officer’s uniform he had wheedled for himself, penning his war poems hundreds of miles from any fighting?

‘Well?’ Spats prompted again.

‘I didn’t know him well enough for an anecdote,’ Westcote lied. ‘Anyway, I didn’t see him in 1914 because I was... elsewhere.’

Westcote’s mind blurred with other memories – thick mud sloshing with slurry, rats fattened with human rot, a horizon of shapeless corpses – and he dropped the snuffbox onto the mantelpiece with a crash. He abruptly started to pace up and down the room. The light from the fire was dim and red, casting the room in oily shadows which slid greasily over a polished handle here, a golden trinket there.

Westcote remembered Brooke coming to stay here once on a whim, a little like Spats was doing. Brooke had been famous even then, and he wore his fame effortlessly, as if he had been born to be adored. His intense magnetism filled the house with energy and brightness. Westcote remembered most vividly the evening when Brooke, light, laughing, louche, had let himself be persuaded to read his poems aloud and they had all been seduced by his rich voice and glittering eyes.

‘Westcote!’

‘Hm?’ Snapped out of his reverie, Westcote fumbled with his thoughts. ‘Where was I?’

‘I think you were getting to the bit where you met him again on the ship. On the way to Gallipoli.’

‘Yes, well, he was heading to Gallipoli after having seen no action in Antwerp. We spoke a little on the ship. Then he died a few days after. They thought it was sunstroke at first, but it was probably blood poisoning.’

Westcote bit his lip so that he would not continue: *Two days before we got to Gallipoli. Two days before we were slaughtered. He died two days before – he, the hero, the poet, the national treasure – having never seen action at all.*

But he could not restrain himself from adding, ‘So, in the end, that corner of a foreign field which is forever England happens to be an olive farm in Greece.’

Westcote expected the bathos to affect Spats, but it did not; Spats was still lounging in the armchair as comfortably as if all of Grouseton belonged to him. The ancestral splendour cosseted him, and Westcote recalled how Spats had maintained his complacent ignorance: his affluent father had orchestrated Spats into an indispensable role at a company which produced officer’s uniforms during the war, thereby exempting Spats from military service. It

was Spats' habit to boast that he had once commissioned a pair of breeches for General Haig himself.

'But Margaret shouldn't write any of what I've just said in her article,' Westcote said suddenly. 'She should write about Brooke's pastoral poetry, his early, hopeful verse, and bring in the Trojans defending the Dardanelles before the Ottomans did, to keep it heroic. Write what people want to hear.'

Even if it's a lie.

Westcote stopped, suddenly aware of how his words had slid from advisory to bitter. Something had crept into his tone – some terrible, lurking, haunting fear – which he tried to chase away by saying somewhat inanely, 'But of course Margaret can write it for herself. She doesn't need my suggestions.'

Before he could think better of it, Westcote asked, 'Margaret became a nurse in the war, didn't she?'

'Oh, yes. She worked in a hospital.'

Westcote knew that he shouldn't have asked, because his next thought was: *Well then, she did more to help the war effort than either Brooke or her brother.* He started to pace up and down again, unable to look Spats in the eye.

Westcote looked over at the crystal tumbler and saw a dead man staring back at him, his face shredded with shrapnel, his hair still writhing with the lice that had outlived him. Westcote, startled, turned away, but his mind was seized with the steady drone of machine guns, the bite of barbed wire, the mindless, pitiless, toil. Westcote stared into the marble face of Earl Roderick's clock and saw a reflection in it of himself, that summer, that fateful summer, when he was fresh from his first term at the Conservatoire in Paris, young, patrician, ready to do his duty, fluent in French – *It'll be like a holiday in France, boys, won't it?* – his mind busy with strains of Mozart and phrases of Vivaldi – although Debussy was always his favourite – and he was hopeful – naïve, only twenty-one – and dreamt of heroes – still had enough schoolboy Greek to tackle the *Iliad* – and was filled with his own sort of poetry –
Silence.

The piano in the corner of the room was covered in a thick cloth, hazy with dust. His French was dominated by words of war: *fusils, ordres, morts*... The Viscounts and Earls and Norman barons of the past stared down at him reproachfully from the walls, mocking him.

He, the Fifth Viscount of Grouseton Abbey, the Honourable Lord Richard Westcote, lived in a silent abhorrence of the world.

‘Margaret told me to ask after you, too. She’s missed seeing you.’

Tell her that I’ve missed her, Westcote thought. Tell her that I missed the angels in her voice, the music in her youth, the poetry in her being. Tell her that always I’ll miss her.

Brooke’s poisoned words drifted dream-like into Westcote’s mind, as euphonious and hollow as they had been when Brooke had read them:

Hear the calling of the moon,

And the whispering scents that stray

Hasten, hand in human hand,

Down the dark, the flowered way.

Snare in flowers, and kiss, and call,

With lips that fade, and human laughter

Westcote had not seen Margaret since before the war. He was not sure whether he would want to, because he knew that he could not be a hero to her: heroes are either dead or liars.

Earl Roderick’s clock struck midnight.

‘Well, then, my dear fellow,’ said Spats, standing up, ‘I’d better turn in. Your maid has put my things in the Green Room, I think?’

Snare in flowers, and kiss, and call,

With lips that fade, and human laughter...

Westcote, haunted by Brooke’s silver-tongued duplicity, dreaming of Margaret’s mellifluous voice, broken by his burden – Westcote opened his mouth to reply to speak, to say something, to feel his voice in his throat, to stop choking on other people’s words...

Silence.