

A WHITE MAN'S WAR

By

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MUSIC: WWI THEME. FADE UNDER...

SCENE: CRAIGLOCKHART HOSPITAL,  
EDINBURGH, 1917. MIXED RACE JAMAICAN  
OFFICER DAVID CLEMETSON, 24, WAKES UP  
IN A STRANGE BED.

HE IS DAZZLED BY SUNLIGHT STREAMING  
THROUGH A TALL WINDOW.

CLEMETSON: (RUBBING EYES) I don't belong here.

Could you lower the blinds a little...?

So I can see you clearly. Know whether you are  
friend, or foe.

Friend. Or foe...

This could be heaven. Nuns scurry past, in  
starched white veils and aprons. Busy-busy  
angels of mercy. Their heads are bowed, so  
they rarely look you straight in the eye.  
Perhaps they have never seen a black man  
before, let alone a black soldier.

I am David Louis Clemetson.

Grandson of a white plantation owner and a  
black slave. What does that make me? Am I

brown? Somewhere in between, in no man's land...?

God may be in this room. An imposing figure, with gold rimmed spectacles and a clipboard.

But his name badge says Dr W. Rivers.

Here to save us, apparently.

Not from physical injuries, but our mental trauma.

Impossible to see.

Difficult to understand.

Harder to heal.

The doctor is trying a new therapy known as talking.

Talking!

Back home in Jamaica, I used to get a row in class, for talking too much.

Quiet, boy!

Today we are going to learn about Oliver Cromwell. One of the great people in history. British history. Well, that's all the history you need to know, right?

UNCLIPS PATIENT NOTES FROM END OF  
BED, AND BEGINS WRITING.

*"Born in 1599, Oliver Cromwell was a  
political and military leader who sentenced the  
King of England, Charles I, to death..."*

Wait.

He killed the king...of his own country? And  
that made him great?

RETURNS CLIPBOARD TO END OF BED.

Today I don't feel much like talking. But Dr  
Rivers believes his magic therapy will make me  
feel better, soon.

Do you notice how much Dr Rivers enjoys talking  
to one soldier in particular? A Captain  
Sassoon.

Yes. Him.

With the strong cheekbones and dark, expressive  
eyes. He's Jewish, I believe, and fond of  
writing poetry...

*"...clumsily bowed with bombs and guns  
and shovels and battle-gear,*

*Men jostle and climb to meet the  
bristling fire.  
Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked  
with fear,  
They leave their trenches, going over the  
top."*

HE SEES A NUN/NURSE APPROACHING.

Sit up straight.

Here comes Sister Ernestina.

Her face is round and blotchy so it's hard to  
tell when she's blushing. She has red rimmed  
eyes so it looks as if she's been crying.

Are nuns even allowed to cry?

Her lashes are caked with yellowy crusts and  
she blinks often, so perhaps she has an eye  
infection.

Sister Ernestina has been assigned to me  
because she's done missionary work in the  
Congo. I've never been to Africa but I will be  
sure to ask her about her travels when I get  
the chance. Though not today.

- Good morning, Sister Ernestina!

She carefully tucks the bedsheets under the mattress as she speaks, to avoid making eye contact.

- "You must be anxious to get home to Jamaica."

Anxious. Home. Jamaica.

Anxious. Home. JAMAICA!

I have suspected for some time that I am not in Jamaica. Not even close. The rain tap-tap-taps against unblinking hospital windows. The skies are gunmetal grey.

This is not my home.

You may wonder - in this day and age - how does a man of colour get into the British Army?

Only a tiny handful of black soldiers are allowed to become officers, in charge of white troops.

It's not really the done thing, old chap. Give the black men weapons? Bloody dangerous, I tell you!

I'm not entirely black. In the army recruitment office they write "dusky" on my application form. Up until now, I'd never really given it a second thought. I feel a

little sorry for the recruitment officers.  
They've a difficult job to do.

- "So you're not pure European?" they say.

Is it easier if I pretend to be white?

How should I answer? Do I lie?

Then I hear my mother's voice.

- "Always tell the truth, David. Even if it  
hurts."

I am brave. I say no. And still they allow me  
to enlist.

But I'm one of the lucky ones. Many others are  
turned down because they are "too black".

One of the lucky ones....

Suddenly, there is a heavy creaking in the  
ward. And a click. A creak and a click. Like  
a wheelbarrow on a rocky road, somewhere on the  
Eastern front, transporting the injured. To  
where? Who knows? Who cares?

But it's not a wheelbarrow. It's Sister  
Ernestina, bringing comfort and joy with the  
tea trolley. And a welcome treat for all the

poor souls in our little ward, in this remote corner of Pottyville. Actually, it's Craiglockhart Hospital - but the residents call it Pottyville. Because of all the wounded soldiers who don't know why they're here, or are too tired to ask.

Sister Ernestina has piled a bone china plate precariously high with round white biscuits. They look quite foreign to me.

I reach forward, with great effort, to take one. Before eating it I inspect it carefully, turning it over and back again. One can't be too careful, nowadays.

Each biscuit has a neat circle of icing on top. White. And what looks like a red cherry - or at least a piece of one - sitting right in the middle of it. Like a spot of blood on a cotton bandage.

- "What's the matter, Officer Clemetson?" says Sister Ernestina. "Never seen an Empire biscuit before?"



My bed-next-door neighbour, a middle aged Yorkshireman called Trevor, usually has little to say. But now he is very animated.

- "My father was a baker in Ilkley," he shouts, waving his biscuit around enthusiastically with his good hand.

"They was Linzer biscuits, back in the day, bein' from Austria, an' all that.

But of course, things being the way they are with (WHISPERS) THE ENEMY, an' such an' such, they call 'em Empire biscuits now."

And he leans towards me, as if to share a secret, and whispers, loudly:

- "Guess you don't see many o' them in old Jamaica, right?"

And he laughs so hard he almost drops his precious biscuit.

Another soldier, this time an American, joins in our humble debate. George, once a good looking chap, has lost one side of his face after being hit by a shell. Think he's been sent here to recover from the stress of it all. Best of luck to him.

- "That's right, buddy, and in the States we're callin' sauerkraut 'liberty cabbage'! It's true, I swear it. Same goes for frankfurters. Now you gotta say hot dog. Honest Injun."

George is lucky. People can see his scars clearly. No-one can see mine. I'm unsullied. Unbroken. On the surface, at least...

I don't belong here.

By now I've eaten my Empire biscuit - it's dry but it's better than nothing - and I wonder how my family is doing back home in Jamaica. Last thing I heard, my cousin Cecil was helping recruit volunteers to fight for the mother country.

(THROUGH LOUD HAILER) "All able bodied men should show their patriotism. No country's subjects are better treated than those of the British Empire."

They come forward in their thousands, of course, because they love their Queen. Even though she died a good few years before war broke out.

My memory's not as good as it was. But I can remember Queen Victoria as a stern-faced woman who wore many layers of clothing.

In the main square in Kingston I look up at her statue while I try to avoid an aerial assault by pigeons.

Empire Day, 1900.

Jamaicans are celebrating the Queen's birthday.

Waving flags.

Singing British songs.

Drinking lemonade and eating cake.

Why does this rather serious woman inspire such devotion? You may well ask. Because she has never been to Jamaica!

My mother, of course, has the answer.

- "The Queen is a very busy woman, David! She looks after many children. All alone, because her poor husband died.

"Don't forget, son, she is responsible for many countries in the Empire, not just us!

Drink up your lemonade, and you will make the Queen very happy."

Back in school we learn even more about this very serious woman. Another one of the "great" people in history, apparently...

Only a year after Victoria ascended the throne, the Emancipation Act came into being. That meant the end of slavery, after almost two centuries.

Time to say goodbye to the old "black" Jamaica, with all its immorality, superstition, fetish and paganism.

Time to welcome a new Victorian utopia, with its middle-class, Christian values.

Black Jamaican children will be "socially uplifted" through education, and sport.

Sport.

Where you must set aside all your personal inclinations and learn to play with the team. Keep a stiff upper lip. Do what needs to be done.

Missus Queen was supposed to be immortal,  
invincible.

But she dies, suddenly, in 1901. Jamaicans  
are beside themselves with grief.

My mother is crying at the kitchen sink. I am  
eight. I want to comfort her, but have no idea  
how.

- "Get ready for church, David".

- "But mother, everyone has the day off!"

My pleas fall on deaf ears.

Hand in hand, we trudge down to the local  
church. So many people. So far away from  
London. Mourning the English Queen.

Mother.

Protector.

- "If it hadn't been for her we'd still be  
slaves. Every last one of us," my mother  
reminds me before we bow our heads in prayer.

And then she whispers:

- "Have you washed behind your ears, David?

Because it would be very disrespectful to Her Majesty if you haven't".

MUSIC: FUNERAL MUSIC, FADE UNDER...

Most Jamaicans, and the other Caribbean men who answer the call to arms - some 16,000 in all - are bitterly disappointed.

Very few are allowed to fight: they get the dirtiest, and most dangerous jobs.

Digging trenches...

Removing dead bodies...

Laying telephone wires...

Digging and emptying toilets...

Transporting shells. Live ones, of course...

Digging, And more digging, and...

Am in heaven? Or hell? Because that was on the battlefield in Salonika. I should be there with my men.

Sometimes it feels like I am still there.

SFX: DISTANT GUNFIRE, MUFFLED  
EXPLOSIONS. FADE UNDER...

May 1917. The Macedonian front. It's hot and  
dusty and we pray for water. Some of us  
are badly injured. They're burying the dead  
next to the poor donkeys who no longer have the  
strength to carry the injured.

Row after row. No green fields, or poppies.

Just mud and sand and small rocks over which we  
stumble and fall, in the heat of an unforgiving  
sun.

I'm not hurt but I feel unwell. Anxious.

I am far from home.

"Neurotic depression", the medic says.

Next thing I know we are being escorted  
hastily onto a troop ship. The HMNS Dover.  
Has a reassuring ring to it.

But as we steam through the Mediterranean,  
there is a loud explosion, below decks.

SFX: SHIP'S SIREN, MUFFLED  
EXPLOSIONS.

We've been hit by a German torpedo. Unlucky for some.

Soon we are surrounded by water. It's not turquoise, like the water around my home in Port Maria, but bluey-black, the surface reflecting the glow of the HMNS Dover, as it splinters and burns.

Giant waves crash over our heads, lifting us up and tossing us around, like a shoal of tiny brown fish.

Men are shouting all around me and their arms flail as they gasp for air.

It should be a terrible moment. But, now I find myself rowing on the River Cam, a carefree student at Cambridge. Trinity College. A fact which has seriously impressed all my mother's friends.

PICKS UP CRUTCHES, SETS THEM ON  
EITHER SIDE OF THE BED.

So that makes me... 19. And in great shape. My whole life is ahead of me.

- You're a fine sportsman, Clemetson!



A loud cannon signals the start of the race,  
and we are off!

HE ROWS, ENERGETICALLY.

I row with superhuman strength, yet I do not  
belong here. Since when did they allow black -  
or even brown - people into Cambridge?

One of my tutors says, rather loudly:

- "Chop chop, boy! Get that essay finished.

You're not on the banana plantation now!"

I don't like to remind my tutor that my family  
actually owns our plantation in Jamaica.

It all began with the unthinkable - white flesh  
pressing into black, and brown children born  
out of wedlock. The beginning of a new  
dynasty, of light skinned, affluent Jamaicans  
with their own land, and houses. Servants,  
too. Thanks to an inheritance when the Civil  
War ended.

I close my eyes, and I'm near my plantation  
Home...on the beach at Port Maria, wading through  
turquoise blue waters, my light brown feet  
sinking into shimmering, silvery sand.

Sinking.

There must be a way out of this hospital.

No-one's looking. This is my chance.

SNEAKS OUT OF BED, PREPARING TO RUN.

A gun goes off in my head and I sprint along the oak-panelled corridor. It's long and dark with no means of escape.

The wooden doors, all along on either side, with their shiny brass fingerplates are firmly shut. I've seen the nuns polishing them, with great gusto. They're rather fond of their brass here.

I must find the entrance.

Which way to the front, I wonder?

DON'T SEND ME BACK TO THE FRONT!

Back or front, front or back? It's all terribly confusing.

I run faster, so the nuns can't catch me.

- Keep running, Clemetson - never look back...

I was an excellent runner in my day, you know. One of the best at my old school in Bristol, Clifton College. There's a monument on the

door, to 582 schoolboys who didn't come back  
from the war.

*"From the great Marshall to the last  
recruit  
Those Cliftons were thyself thy spirit in  
deed  
The flower of chivalry thy fallen fruit  
And thine immortal seed."*

I am one of the lucky ones.

Yet now I find myself out of breath. Can't run  
like I used to. And so many dead ends...

Then I see the sign. Reception. I must be  
close to the front door now. And freedom...

And then...

There is a clicking of heels, behind me.

I turn. An older woman with a kindly face  
approaches, arms outstretched.

Friend...or foe?

. Her white blouse is fastened with a simple  
brooch at the neck, and she smells of starch  
and roses after rainfall. She gently takes  
my arm. Are you all right, sir?

- Are you Queen Victoria?
- You're going to be fine, the woman assures me as she leads me back to the ward. You just need to rest...

But that's not so easy at Pottyville because it's terribly noisy.

Sister Ernestina has been juggling the soup bowls.

SFX: CROCKERY HITTING TILED FLOOR.

It upsets the men.

TRIES TO COVER HIS EARS TO BLOCK  
OUT THE NOISE.

Matron gives her a terrible row.

- We can't afford to lose any more plates!

Red-faced and perspiring, Sister Ernestina sweeps up the broken pieces.

Listen. Have you heard what the other residents of Pottyville are saying? That the doctors want to "cure" us so we can be sent back to the front line, as soon as possible.

But we've already given so much to the mother country!

Mother.

MOTHER!

CAN YOU HEAR ME?

Oh god. It's that time again.

The Prince of Pottyville - Dr Rivers - sits at my bedside, his arms folded, like a wise owl. He smiles and studies my face, closely. I'm sure he'd rather be talking to Captain Sassoon, but...

- How are you feeling, he asks.
- I'd like to go home, please! I'm not well enough to butter a piece of toast.

Dr Rivers laughs.

- At least you've got your sense of humour, Clemetson. Look, what you're feeling is perfectly normal. There's no shame in admitting you're a bit poorly. It's good to talk...

I am clearly out of my depth here. I am a scholar and an excellent sportsman, so how can things be so confusing?

My name is...

READS MEDICAL NOTES AGAIN.

Oliver Cromwell. Born 1599.

No!

FLICKS THROUGH PAGES, ANXIOUSLY.

See? It's all here, in black and white.

I am David.

David Louis Clemetson, 23.

It says so right here!

Privately educated.

Fit and healthy.

Tall, at least six foot.

Not too black.

I tick all the boxes.

I'm clearly the type of recruit the Sportsmans  
Battalion is looking for. The "hard as nails"  
corps. Only the strongest and fittest need  
apply...

*New to the soldier's trade, into the  
scrum we came,  
But we didn't care much what game we  
played*

*So long as we played the game...*

Maybe I borrow your pen, Dr Rivers?

WRITES, QUICKLY.

"Dear Mother:

"You'll be pleased to hear I'm in the rugby team. The Sportsmans First 15, no less. Played a splendid match against St Thomas' Hospital..."

SFX: GENERAL NOISE AT RUGBY MATCH.

HE TAKES A PAPER CUTTING FROM HIS  
PYJAMA POCKET AND READS IT.

*"Many excellent forward rushes were led by Clemetson, Gilmour and Thompson. But a try by St Thomas put them ahead by nine points.*

*"The Sportsmen after this seemed to get a new lease of life into them. After a magnificent forward rush by Clemetson - THAT'S ME - and Spurway, supported by Taylor, Pearce crossed the line most cleverly.*

*"With only 15 minutes to play they  
needed five more points to be victors.  
This was managed by another grand rush by  
Clemetson and his forwards..."*

Stiff upper lip, old boy. We're all equals on  
the field...

I am an athlete.

But now my legs are now so weak I can barely  
stand. And my memory's not what it should be.

Memory.

Memories.

It's good to recall things, says Dr Rivers.  
Good or bad. Far better than shutting them away  
in a box, Lieutenant.

Wait.

You keep calling me Lieutenant.

Last thing I remember I was acting Lance  
Sergeant. You've clearly got the wrong man!!!

I SHOULDN'T BE HERE!

I knew it...



Says here... you were promoted to Lieutenant in...  
July, says Dr Rivers.

Here? In this hospital?

I don't remember any ceremony.

No waving of flags.

No ceremonial cups of tea. Or lemonade, or...

And how can you promote someone when they're  
lying flat on their back?

- Has anyone told my mother?
- There's a letter from the War Office here,  
Lieutenant. Seems you're now the only black  
person to hold this rank in the entire  
British army.
- That's quite a feat, son. You should be  
proud.

But am I getting better?

Dr Rivers says although I am much improved, I  
need more treatment.

- Still not sleeping well, Lieutenant  
Clemetson? Oh dear. That will never do.
- You see, Doctor, when I do sleep, I have  
terrible nightmares.

The other night I dreamt I was back on the eastern front, trying to push a boulder to the top of a hill, in the heat of an unforgiving sun.

Though it wasn't a boulder, but an Empire biscuit, heavier and much bigger than me and almost impossible to shift...

Don't ask me how the next bit happened.

By the end of the summer I am declared fit enough to return to duty.

Trevor in the next bed is dumbfounded. George would also be, if he hadn't succumbed to an infection. And Sister Ernestina looks down, avoiding my gaze, as she focuses intently on the watch pinned to her crisp white apron.

This makes me very anxious.

Anxious.

Home.

Jamaica.

NO!

After three weeks' leave in London, I join a  
Welsh regiment and soon I am on the front line,  
fighting for the mother country once again...

They must all be potty in Pottyville because  
no-one told me this would happen. Even the  
god-like Dr Rivers. That despite my loss of  
memory...

The shattering of my confidence...

My fear of falling crockery,

And those terrifying nightmares,

I am back in the firing line, on the Somme.

In no man's land...

Far from home.

I don't belong here.

SFX: RUMBLE OF GUNS.

I can see, in the distance, a British flag.

- Is that you, Cecil?

And once again I am home in Jamaica on Empire  
Day.

Seven years old.

Red, white and blue fireworks sparkle above my head.

And my mother's arm is around me.

The great protector...

But the British flag is mud-spattered and torn,  
and the sky is an angry ochre, with speckles of  
black and heavy plumes of smoke. And shells  
are landing all around us.

- RUN, CLEMETSON, RUN!

- YOU'RE NOT ON THE PLANTATION NOW!!!

SFX: LOUD EXPLOSION CLOSE BY, SHOUTS  
OF WOUNDED MEN

I run, and run, but my lungs are choked by  
smoke, and I don't know which way to go...

- FASTER, CLEMETSON, FASTER!!!

Perhaps...old chaps...we should sing...

SALUTES AS HE SINGS, WEAKLY:

*Rule Britannia!*

*Britannia rules the waves;*

*Britons never ever ever shall be slaves..."*

It's only 52 days till the war ends...till it's  
all over.

And I am on the beach at Port Maria, washing  
the sand off my feet in turquoise waters...

Have you heard? Someone has written a poem  
about me.

Not Captain Sassoon, or he would have told me.

I wish I could thank whoever it was for their  
kind words. But it's not possible for me. You  
understand.

*"Somewhere in France you are sleeping  
The warrior's last sleep  
Far from the land that gave you birth  
And the eyes that for you weep  
So a last salute we'll offer you  
And a last farewell we'll wave  
God rest our gallant countrymen  
Till we meet beyond the grave."*

FADE IN WAR THEME. FADE OUT...

[CURTAIN]