

Prologue

(The following passage is a short excerpt from the Prologue that appears at the beginning of "Shoot Straight You Bastards!")

UNSEEN EYES from both thorn trees and kraal tracked Morant and Handcock as they appeared together on the veldt in the grey half-light of dawn and walked, flanked by the two armed sentries, towards the knot of 30 dun uniforms that had gathered few hundred yards into the veldt. **This was it then- the small corner of God's earth reserved for executions.**

Ahead of them the eerie silhouettes of the waiting Cameron Highlanders were black against the lightening sky, as if pasted on to a theatre backdrop, their funereal black tartan kilts flapping against their bare knees in the stiff breeze like the wings of the predators which hovered hopefully overhead.

The shooting party made up of eighteen riflemen and a Major stood apart from the rest of the party and awaited the deliverance of their victims. Major Thomas Souter, whose men had the dubious honour of carrying out the sentence, resisted wiping away the beads of perspiration that had formed on his brow despite the coolness of the early hour.

One of the rifles had a blank in its breech, but he knew that some of the men would still fire to the side rather than live with the possibility that theirs had been the fatal shot that had ended the life of one of the soldiers who were, at the end of it all, brothers in arms. Who could blame them?

Souter watched the prisoners approach. The shorter, stocky Morant was known by reputation, if not by name. The Australians called him "The Breaker" - a great horseman by all accounts. He was a cool customer, no doubt about it.

Standing in the forefront was Victor Newland. He had caroused long and hard with Morant during their wild outback days and they had joined the Second South Australian Contingent on the same day in Adelaide. Later he would pay testimony in his diary to the courage with which his cobber Harry Morant faced death,

"... I can see it so plainly yet... his debonair swagger out into the damp coolness of morning; his bright greeting to all".

But for now, Newland had no words - only a hard stiff knot in the pit of his belly as he wondered what his final words to his friend would be.

As the prisoners and their escort came level with the Cameron Major, Morant stopped and reached into the breast pocket of his tunic. Opening the beautiful, ornate silver cigarette case he carefully selected one for himself. Lighting it, he handed the case to Souter and said,

"A souvenir of this auspicious day, Jock. I won't be needing it where I'm going." The defiant smile had just a hint of sadness in it. The Highland Major just nodded.

Morant said loudly enough for all to hear, his voice steady,

"I was given orders to shoot Boers, but only did so after the Boers murdered my C.O. Captain Hunt, the best mate I had in the world."

That sent a frisson through the Cameron ranks like a message down a telegraph wire. Some of them twitched uneasily and Souter cursed inwardly as he heard

McPhail's muttered obscenity in the ranks. **Trust that wee shite stirring Heilan' teuchter tae get a haud o' it.**

"Whar's Lord Kitchener the day, then?" hissed the small, feisty re-headed McPhail, his sun reddened face showing his open contempt for all authority and especially the titled variety.

"Awa' fechtin' Boers, nae doot," came the sarcastic reply from somewhere in the ranks of the shooting party. There was the raucous clearing of phlegm and a soft splat as the glob of saliva and mucus hit the ground.

The Major decided to ignore it and raised his chin to ease his neck away from the cutting edge of the military jacket that had suddenly become too tight. Rumour had it Kitchener had gone up country, once London had confirmed the men's sentences - just to be sure there'd be no last minute appeal or reprieve. Major Thomas, the Australians' lawyer, had been told that General Kitchener could not be reached...

"Aye, an' leavin' us tae dae his dirty work," complained Private McPhail sourly.

"Haud yer wheest mon, afore we're killed 'an 'a", came the urgent reminder that they were within earshot of the British Military top brass who would not tolerate dissent in the ranks. **Dirty work, aye there was something in that right enough,** thought Souter reflectively... though it was best never said out loud...

Major Souter had not attended the courts martial himself, but kept up with the gossip out of curiosity and if the truth be known, not a little sympathy for the accused. He did not consider himself especially well educated and had little more than a rudimentary knowledge of Military Law, but even he could see what was going on. Oh, it all looked and sounded fine enough, but it was what was not said that concerned him. They'd all been told what to do with Boer prisoners. As many serving men had testified at the trial, they'd shot many a Boer themselves on patrol under what Morant had termed, "Rule 303" - the bullet gauge of their Lee Metford rifles. It was common knowledge that The Gordons, the other Highland Regiment serving in the Transvaal, had taken revenge on the train wreckers who claimed some 20 of their men in a single raid.

Glancing sideways at his own men he counted half a dozen who, but for the Grace of God, could be standing at the wrong end of their own rifles, right now. There's more to this than meets the eye, but it's too late for these two now. They'll have to settle with Kitchener at that higher tribunal, in their own time.

He was jolted back to the present by Provost Marshall Robert Poore stepping forwards and nodding curtly for him to proceed. Such military occasions lacked the ceremony and theatre of their civil counterpart. There was no reading of the charges and sentences, no priest to deliver their last rites and no last testimony from the accused, but Morant wasn't going to let that stop him. He launched a broadside of fiery invective at the Provost Marshall who returned a little too quickly to the bosom of his fellow officers with the harsh words nipping at his tail.

Then, in stark contrast to the bombast he'd shown all the way through this terrible ordeal, Morant reached out and took Handcock's hand and together they walked their last few steps across the veldt to where two chairs had been placed side by side.

Before they blindfolded him Morant stared down his executioners across the 25 paces of rough ground that separated them. As though he had telepathically intercepted their earlier thoughts, he rolled the fag, whose life expectancy was now about as short as his own, to the corner of his mouth and called out nonchalantly to them,

“Better fire all those bullets lads, or I'll come down those fucking barrels looking for 'em!” Feet shuffled nervously as the directness of the words found their mark among the uneasy men. It was as if he'd been privy to their innermost thoughts. Souter looked across at Morant in sudden respect and saw no hint of fear in those bright blue eyes. He was not mocking either. The mad bastard intended to go out with all guns blazing...

*He also noted that Hancock said nothing, just sat with his head down. **Mibee thinkin' about his wife and bairns oot in Australia.***

The lightening sky over the faraway hills signalled that it was time for the final scene. The best thing was to end it quickly. The Major straightened his shoulders and moved forward to take charge of his men.

***"... God! How dreadful it was when they bound his eyes and sat him in the chair, square and fearless, a dead man yet alive"** - more of Victor Newlands words that were destined for another day. All that tumbled to his lips in the last moment of farewell was a quick “God bless, Harry...”, as he had passed within earshot, that and a hand on his shoulder, pressing hard.*

“Ready!” shouted Soutar looking along the row of men, rifles at the ready, youthful faces pale, the usually belligerent McPhail looking as if he was ready to spew. He prayed that a return to military ordinance would banish the spectres of doubt that had been mingling about this sorry gathering for too long.

There was one last exchange between the two waiting men blindfolded out on the veldt.

“Goodbye, Peter,” said Morant, a half smile creasing up the corners of his mouth.

“So long, Harry, mate” replied Hancock, raising his head and turning his blindfolded eyes towards him.

“Pre-sent arms!”

As the Camerons raised their rifles in a ragged reluctant row, Major Souter glanced instinctively towards the prison, as if half expecting to see someone sprinting across the veldt waving a last minute reprieve. But only the red, white and blue of the “Butchers Apron” - the mocking term used for the Union flag - fluttered impatiently above the ramparts as if to remind him that any order given under its Imperial authority would be expected to be carried out, as was his bounden duty as a servant to the Crown.

*Morant used that momentary pause to great dramatic effect. The line of silent, waiting muzzles had given him a strong sense of *deja vu*, but this time he saw the face that had appeared in front of him in his dream.*

He saw no compassion in those cold cobalt eyes. As those thin lips below the neatly clipped military moustache again formed that single word, he knew that this time he would not wake up and cheat the bullets and decided to go out in style. Victor Newland described what happened next, a moment of pure theatre, the kind of performance “The Breaker” had been famous for.

***"...Then from the chair rises the Breaker - down flutters the blinding kerchief: I catch a glimpse of tawny fearless eyes alight with understanding and pity for the man who must call death upon him. Lightly swings his hand to his breast... Smartly drop his arms to his sides - square set his shoulders: a steady, motionless figure he stands"**.*

With his heartbeat roaring in his ears like a herd of runaway brumbies Harry "The Breaker" Morant knew his moment of destiny had arrived. He opened his mouth, sucked in one last sweet, clean breath and let his final eulogy rip through the still morning air. Last words... no plea for redemption, only a command mixed with a prayer, not only for himself, but for Peter who had walked every inch of the way with him.

"Shoot straight, you bastards! Don't make a mess of it."

*"Fir fucks sake, min!" hissed McPhail savagely, squeezing his eyes shut as Souter granted Morant's final request. Victor Newlands stood by helplessly as his mate drew his last breath, **"Then comes the word of his doom, "Fire!"***

The wooden stocks of eighteen rifles slapped back hard into their shoulders as they discharged the deadly volley that threw the two men backwards into the dust and sent flocks of screeching, cawing birds wheeling into the air in alarm.

The Cameron Highlanders slowly brought down their rifles and listened to the rumble as the celestial chariots, bearing away the souls of the dead warriors, rolled down the veldt towards Valhalla.

George Witton also heard them pass overhead as he stood on the railway platform a mile away and closed his eyes in silent prayer. He later wrote,

"... the death knell of my late comrades... out went two brave and fearless soldiers, men that the Empire could ill afford to lose".

The sun chose that moment to rise in salute above the far horizon and bathed the scene in a watery golden light. Souter stepped forwards and drew his revolver in case a final coup de grace was needed. Thankfully, it was not.

Morant lay on his back with eyes wide open and a surprised expression on his face. Souter could have sworn he was about to speak, but where his eyes had been defiant before, they were now vacant. "The Breaker" was dead and his soul departed. He'd taken most of it down the left side, his right arm crossed over his chest above his heart in an oddly Christian gesture for a "pagan".

"The Breaker" was dead and his soul departed.

Souter bent down and closed his eyes on this world, so that in the next, he could face his Maker with his eyes wide open - an old Pictish superstition that well befitted a man who insisted he was a pagan. Except for the gaping wounds in his chest, Peter Handcock looked as if he had just turned over and gone back to the sleep he had been so abruptly disturbed from at dawn.

The Major straightened, and with a terse nod to the Provost Marshall confirmed that the sentence had been carried out. Satisfied, Poore led the officers back to their mess for a cup of tea to wash away the caustic taste of cordite and guilt

Despite their outward disdain, their diaries admitted a grudging respect for the men they'd just consigned to history. "Died game" was the overall verdict. Poore noted:

"... Major Souter (Cameron Highlanders) who was in charge of the firing party conducted operations very badly."

Only Major Thomas, who had been the men's defence counsel, remained still, white-faced and shocked. With a heavy heart he watched a group of slouch-hatted Australians lug two wooden coffins out from behind the clump of trees. Paraded on

the square during the execution amid rumours of a mutiny, they were given leave to claim the bodies before the blowflies and rigor mortis began their grim work. On his return to Australia he never again used the title of Major.

Souter turned and dismissed the firing party who had gone quiet since they discharged their volley, no doubt taking the time to absorb what they'd just done and silently praying for God's forgiveness. The Almighty was not far away from his own thoughts as looked on the face of Harry Morant for the last time.

"Nane'll judge ye noo, but the Lord himsel'," he whispered by way of a final benediction.

He was wrong about that.

***JUST OUTSIDE** of Harrismith, some two hundred miles south of Pretoria, Lord Kitchener was sitting on his favourite chestnut mount watching the long line of captured Boer wagons and cattle filing slowly across the horizon under the watchful eye of his mounted corps. A staff officer galloped up, saluted and placed a cable in his hand. It was a concise one- line message befitting both military custom and the rudimentary nature of telegraph technology at the end of Victoria's reign.*

"EXECUTIONS CARRIED OUT AT DAWN. STOP"

Kitchener inwardly breathed a sigh of relief, tapping the paper reflectively against the pommel of his saddle.

"Majuba Day" had been a great success. On this very day, 21 years before, the Boers had defeated the British forces at Majuba Hill and wrested back control of the Transvaal. Today would go down in history as the day he, Lord Kitchener, restored the Empire's honour... twice! Once in Sudan and now in South Africa.

A sudden breeze blew across the dry vastness of the veldt and spun dust devils of whirling grit into the faces of the Boers, just to add further insult to injury. The rogue wind also ripped the cablegram from the General's distracted hand and carried it away across the coarse grass. As Lord Kitchener watched it tumble off into the distance he thought it wholly appropriate. It was the last the world would ever hear of Harry Morant.

Lord Kitchener- like Major Souter- would also be proved very wrong. A century after Kitchener ordered those executions Harry "The Breaker" Morant is an Australian legend and the issue of their innocence and guilt is still being fiercely debated. History... not Lord Kitchener will have the last word on that.