



# The Messenger

By John Slate

(Adult Category)

No-one noticed the tall, gaunt figure who stood, quietly, alongside the hallowed ground outside the Minster. Not the little old lady with hat pulled down and scarfed neck, scurrying towards the Square, shopping bag in hand. Not the young lads sliding on the thin layer of snow, which the morning sun had not yet reached. Not even the cleric on his way to church, his mind on ecclesiastical matters, no doubt, noticed the stranger.

He cautiously approached the Minster entrance and paused in front of the doors, unsure whether to go in. A sudden gust of biting, icy wind blew him sideways and made the decision for him. Pushing open the door he entered and was relieved to be out of from the wind. He stood for a few moments taking in the calm of the Minster and how safe he felt in this, to him, alien place, before sitting on a nearby chair, thankful for a rest. After a while he heard footsteps approaching down the aisle. Should I be here, he thought, worrying that his presence might not be welcome.

'Hello, can I help you?'

He turned around to see a lady with a welcoming smile. She was dressed in a long warm winter coat.

'I'm here to do the flowers, not that there are many at this time of the year' she laughed, 'but there are plenty of twigs and berries. How can I help you?' she repeated, seeing him shiver.

The stranger was nervous and made no reply.

'You look cold. You must be dying for a cup of tea - come with me. I'm Mrs Johnson, Celia, what's your name?'

'Jack, Jack Smith. I'm here to deliver a letter'

'Who to?'

'It's for Mrs Buxton.'

'Who gave it to you?'

'It's from my friend, Bob. He told me he was from Wimborne but he never spoke much of his family so I don't know where they live. I'm hoping someone can help me find them'.

Jack pulled a crumpled envelope from his greatcoat pocket and handed it to Celia. The address on the envelope was written in a faint, almost illegible hand and bore only the name 'Mrs Buxton'. There was no address.

'Oh, dear.' said Celia, 'Why is there no address?'

Jack was nervous and found it difficult to speak.

'Take your time, Jack, there's no hurry. Let's start again. Where are you from?'

'I'm local as well, born just outside Wimborne, but I've been away for the past year or so. I've been making my way here from Northern France. Bob and I were fighting for King and Country on the Somme. I'm sorry I am such a mess but it's very muddy in the trenches. It's been hell on earth. The ground was a wilderness of mud and we crouched in flooded trenches trying to avoid the shells and sniper's bullets. We've been under fire so long. There are not many of us left and we have lost so many friends. It's the hopelessness of it all. You see grown men crying and praying, but not for their God to save them, they pray for the sniper's bullet that will release them from their living hell. We all knew we were 'done for' and there was no escape. My mate, Bob, and I wrote letters to our families and promised to deliver them if anything should happen to either of us. Bob didn't have time to address his before he was hit by shell fragments. He died in my arms. I'm trying to find his family as I promised to deliver his letter no matter what'.

'Let me think' said Celia. 'I'm sure there is a family called Buxton over towards Holt. I'll ask Anne who helps with the flowers, she lives over that way. You stay here where it's warm'.

Celia was gone about ten minutes.

'Did you have any luck, Mrs Johnson?'

'Well yes,' smiled Celia, 'I have good news. My friend, Anne, does know a Mrs Buxton with a son called Bob. She'll be glad to take your letter and deliver it on her way home tonight. Would you like go with her?'

'No, I don't think so. I'm pleased she'll get the letter and my promise to Bob will be fulfilled. My time here is over.'

I promised Bob I wouldn't be long so I'll thank you again for your kindness and say my goodbyes.'

That evening Anne handed the letter to Mrs Buxton, explaining how she came to have it. Seeing her son's handwriting Mrs Buxton opened the letter expectantly. It had been some time since she had last heard from him.

'Dear Mum,' it read, 'I'm writing to let you know that all is well with me and my good friend, Jack. Don't worry about me. We are both looking forward to returning home before long. Love from your son, Bob. xx. PS. I'll write again soon.'

The following day Mrs Buxton heard a knock at her door. A military gentleman introduced himself.

'May I come in?'

She ushered him into the parlour and he hesitated for a moment before beginning the speech he'd rehearsed.

'Mrs Buxton, please sit down.' He paused. 'It is my sad duty to inform you that your son, Bob, was killed by a shell in the battle of Ancre Heights on the Somme. It may be some comfort to know that he died cradled in the arms of his friend, Jack. The same shell also injured Jack who, sadly, died of his wounds not long after'.

No one noticed the tall, gaunt figure leave the Minster and pause for a few moments alongside the hallowed ground. Not the little old lady, bundled up against the cold. Not the young lads sliding on the snow. Not even the cleric on his way to church. No one, that is, except Celia, the flower lady.