

“Eulogy for Thomas Bryant”

Welcome friends and family (1). We are here this afternoon to pay respects to the memory of Thomas Bryant, husband of Marguerite, and my father.

Thomas was a brave, selfless, funny man. I still remember the way he used to hide under the stairs and then jump out at me, grinning, when I came down for breakfast (2). I used to nearly hit the roof. I have fond memories of how he used to take me down to the lake on Sunday mornings with our Labrador, Bessie, and teach me how to skim stones on the glazy water (3). He was a very social man, before the war, and loved his brandy. I remember the elaborate dinner parties he used to throw for his friends, you people (4), in the hot summers of June. How he used to become very loud after the third or fourth brandy, his powerful laugh wafting up the stairs with the strong smell of cigars.

Father always believed in the equal, fair treatment of others, and the advance of England. So when he heard that the Germans were bayoneting women and children and ‘nailing cats to church doors’ he was all too keen to sign up to fight the good fight (5). It was odd not having father around the house, it missed that cheerful buzz that was usually around wherever he was. We used to cherish the few letters home from him. I was quite young of course so Mother used to read them to me. The authorities used to censor much of what he wrote but we still got the impression in between the lines that things were difficult at times out there and he missed us (6).

When we heard the village bells on November the 11th, we were overjoyed because we knew we were going to get back a father and husband from the war that had so roughly taken away him away from us. Mother and I stood at the jetty in our best clothes, her arm around me. I still remember the face of my father as he stepped off the gangway and into our arms. It was so different to what I remembered. The once plump, jolly face of my father had been twisted into a thin almost unrecognisable form. It was like skin had been stretched, very tightly over a wooden mask, his mouth permanently stretched into awful false smiles. Deep gauged chasms surrounded nervous, sunken eyes that flicked from side to side (7). It was frightening.

The next ten years were very hard on my father. He never spoke about the atrocities he must have faced. I don’t blame him. What he experienced, however, came out in other ways. My once loud, laughing father was gone, replaced, instead, by a silent solitary shadow who took long solitary walks along our lake (8). He no longer fitted into daily life. He became more and more secluded from his friends, family and loved ones (9). A door slamming in the wind would make him jump uncontrollably (10). This was not the man that left this village 4 years ago (11). I don’t like to think of my father as ‘that’ man. The real Thomas Bryant died in the trenches with the shells and rifle fire. This was an empty shell of a man, his soul stripped bare by war (12).

Forever in my heart is the man that used to read me bedtime stories, the man that taught me how to ride a bike and skim stones on glazy water (13). I ask you not to remember the ghost that returned from war or the man that hung himself in our garage. That man was an imposter, a man warped by hell on earth (14). Think back

instead... to peace time, when all was well and good and Thomas Bryant was the loud and funny and kind man we all knew and loved... Thank you for coming today.