

Waiting

Waiting came naturally to Kaiser. It was etched into his DNA. He was an Irish Vanner, the product of generations of selective breeding by gypsies and carters to give them the perfect workhorse for pulling their caravans and carts. Kaiser had all the required attributes: strength, stamina, intelligence, patience and a mild temperament – and he was particularly good at waiting. He was waiting now, in the yard, as the two women struggled with the milk churn. His ears pricked at the scolding tone.

‘A lazy good-for-nothing! That’s what he is,’ said Mary.

‘He’s not Mam,’ said Abigail, rolling her eyes. ‘He’s gone with the rest of The Liverpool Pals to serve King and country.’ The two women heaved and between them managed to lift the metal churn into the milk float.

‘Aye. Typical men,’ said Mary, catching her breath. ‘Any excuse to get out of a hard day’s work.’

‘Maaam. They’re going to war, for heaven’s sakes.’

‘That’s as may be. But who’s left behind to pick up the pieces, eh? As if us women didn’t have enough to do. Now we’re having to do the work of the menfolk as well.’

‘They say it’ll be a year at most Mam. They’ll teach the Huns a lesson and be back before you know it. At least that’s what Orlando said.’

Mary was quietly proud that her daughter was showing some of the family grit in dealing with the absence of her husband. When he had signed up, Abigail

hadn't gone to pieces; she had simply sent word to her mother that she needed a hand with running the dairy.

'I wouldn't believe anything that good-for-nothing says,' Mary continued to chide her daughter. 'According to your dearly beloved this 'ere horse of yours knows the milk round like the inside of his blinkers. Totally dependable, he said.' She gave the horse a slap on its rear and ran her hand along its flank. 'Just turn left out of the yard and Kaiser will take you all the way - even knows where to stop, he said.' She took hold of the halter with one hand while patting the horse's neck with the other. 'Can't see it myself. It's one thing for a horse to know its way down the Pately Bridge turnpike but this city is just street after street after street. God himself only knows how any person can find their way around this forsaken place, let alone a horse.' She cupped her hand under the horse's muzzle so it could begin to associate her scent with the authority in her voice.

'Well, you had better hope that Orlando was right in what he says. 'Cos, if old Kaiser doesn't know the way then we are really in trouble, seeing as neither me nor the kids have ever been out on the round.'

'Hmm. Don't tell me – that's because its men's work. They're off out and about while us womenfolk work our fingers to the bone with all the milking, feeding, mucking out...'

'To say nothing of the washing, cleaning, scrubbing and scalding,' added Abigail with a wry smile.

'Aye, and that's before we're making all the cheese and butter to sell in the shop.'

'We're a family, Mam. We all do our bit.'

‘That’s as may be. But now we’re having to do a bit more, aren’t we?’

‘Aye, Mam. That we are,’ said Abigail with a tight-lipped smile.

Since arriving at the dairy only a day ago, Mary had noticed a change in her daughter. Abigail appeared to carry herself differently – more upright, squarer in the shoulders. She seemed to have resigned herself to being without her man and now, whilst waiting for his return, was going about her work with an air of quiet determination.

While Abigail busied herself unbolting and opening the gates to the yard, Mary went back into the scullery. There she gave her hands one last good scrubbing before donning her bleached-white dairy apron. It wasn’t sufficient simply to *tell* your customers that your business was clean and hygienic, you had to *show* them as well.

When she returned to the yard, Mary found Abigail standing next to the open gates. Kaiser was doing what he did best – he was waiting. Mary hitched up her dress, climbed aboard the milk float, sat herself down and took up the reins.

‘Sure you’ll be alright Mam?’

‘Course I will. They don’t call me Millstone Grit Mary for nothing you know.’

The church clock struck the quarter hour. They were running about half an hour behind the dairy’s usual schedule but both women were confident that they would settle into the new regime and have the place running smoothly in no time at all.

With a click of her tongue and a slap of the reins Mary instructed the horse to walk on. Kaiser leaned into his collar and as the chain traces tightened, the milk float rolled forward across the cobbled yard and out through the gates. Mary pulled him

to the left. The women had agreed that Mary would do the first round after morning milking and that Abigail would do the second round following afternoon milking. The first round was left out of the gate and the second was right out of the gate. After that it was all down to the horse.

At most times of the day there were hundreds of workhorses on the streets of Liverpool, pulling carts, wagons and cabs. Fortunately for Mary, at this early hour the streets were not yet busy. The horse walked on for two blocks and then stopped at the end of a street. Kaiser waited. Mary waited. But no one approached. Sitting there in the milk float with only the horse for company made her feel distinctly uncomfortable. She cast her gaze around and made a mental note of her surroundings.

There was not much about city life that met with Mary's approval. She disliked its hustle 'n' bustle, its noise and its foul air. Once out of the yard the healthy smell of fresh cow muck had immediately surrendered to the sourness of the nearby brewery mixing with the sickly sweetness of the neighbouring sugar refinery. Admittedly, on occasions that heavy odour was blown away by a fresh breeze coming up the road from the great riverside docks, carrying with it a hint of the salty Irish Sea beyond. But that was only a temporary reprieve from what, to Mary's rural nose and throat, was the malodour of a hundred works and the smoke of a thousand chimneystacks.

She became aware of voices in the street. Another thing that did not meet with her approval was that god-awful nasal whine of an accent that clipped every word of its meaning and put a threat into every statement. It was as if these people spoke a foreign language, so far removed was it from Mary's native Dales drawl,

which to her ears, flowed as smooth as the River Wharfe. *Scousers*, they were called. Fancy naming yourselves after a pan of leftovers! She was sure she would never understand this Liverpool sense of humour.

Of course this was not the first time Mary had journeyed from her Wharfedale home to the banks of the Mersey. She had visited on a handful of occasions since Abigail and Orlando had moved here. The journey alone was quite an ordeal, catching trains from Threshfield to Skipton, from Skipton to Colne and finally from Colne to the cathedral that was Lime Street Station, Liverpool. But, Millstone Grit Mary had gotten use to it. And now she knew she would have to get use to the city itself – at least until that son-in-law of hers returned from the war and got himself back to work.

‘Lazy good-for-nothing,’ she cursed Orlando aloud. Still no one came out to buy milk. She began to doubt herself – had she forgotten something? Maybe it was because they were running late. Maybe the customers had given up waiting and were now about their business.

‘Walk on, ‘orse,’ she said with an irritated slap of the reins. She had no intention of calling the horse by its name. Fancy calling a horse ‘Kaiser’ for goodness sakes! What sort of a name was that - especially now that we were at war with Germany? Probably one of Orlando’s little jokes. He seemed to have adopted the local sense of humour, but as far as Mary was concerned ‘orse would suffice.

Kaiser did as instructed and then duly pulled up again half way down the street. But this time, to Mary’s relief, the women came out of their houses carrying their jugs and pots. ‘Mornin’ Missus Metcalf,’ they greeted her as she ladled the milk

from the churn at the rear of the float. 'Lando said yer'd be cummin' round this mornin'.'

As she accepted their coppers, dropping them into her leather satchel, Mary gave the customers her best smile, though it was as tight-lipped as that of her daughter's. Once all were served, Mary clicked her tongue and slapped the reins and Kaiser walked on to the next stop. This was also at the end of a street and this also resulted in no customers appearing. Kaiser waited. Mary waited.

It had been no surprise to Mary that all of the customers had been women. After all, buying provisions was women's work. But as the women had paid for their milk, each had looked her in the eye and given her the same nod of thanks. She sensed that there was more than just 'thanks' in that nod. It was a nod of recognition, of acknowledgement. It said: we are all in this together – all doing our bit to fill the void left by our fathers, husbands and sons who had taken the King's shilling.

She looked about, puzzled as to why the horse had stopped here. Orlando's assurance that 'the horse knows the round' came back to her. 'Lazy good-for-nothing,' she said aloud and then, shaking her head at her absent son-in-law, she instructed the horse to 'Walk on!'

The next four stops all produced customers. The women queued at the rear of the float and indulged in good-humoured banter with each other. Mary could not follow all that was being said – it would take her ears a while to get accustomed to the accent. Despite the women enjoying some local craic, when Mary accepted payment from them she saw in their faces that same tight-lipped smile of resigned determination. It was like an unspoken bond between all of the local womenfolk and

they were including her in their circle. She felt herself beginning to warm to this sorority of Scousers, despite their funny way of talking. They weren't unlike herself – used to day after day of thankless hard work but facing it with their own brand of grit – Mersey grit - and a seemingly irrepressible sense of humour.

When Kaiser pulled up at the end of the next street, Mary was not surprised that no customers appeared. She took a moment to reflect on the situation of these city women – all having to make the best of things while they waited for the safe return of their menfolk. She thought about Abigail, about how her daughter was putting on such a brave face now that Orlando was gone to war. Her inner Millstone Grit began to weather. Perhaps she was being a bit too harsh on her son-in-law. Perhaps he wasn't totally good-for-nothing. After all, he was out there risking life and limb for king and country. And, he was making a go of this cowkeeping business, as the weight of the coppers in her leather satchel bore testament. Indeed, he seemed to be taking good care of his family, which was more than some could boast. (She would have already known if he had been the sort to take his hand to his wife – he wasn't). And look, he had been right about this horse knowing the milk round, hadn't he? Well, that is apart from these stops at the ends of streets where there were no customers. With that, she snapped herself out of her ruminations and moved the horse on.

After an hour and a half of stop-start-stop-start, the milk churn was nearly empty. However, Mary was beginning to recognise her surroundings – they must be getting close to the dairy, in which case the round must be nearly over. At the end of the street Kaiser pulled up behind a brewer's dray. The men unloading the barrels

looked too old to be called up, but the publican, who stood keeping a watchful eye on them, was a woman.

‘Mornin’,’ the woman greeted Mary. She had that same resigned but determined look about her – a woman filling the vacant shoes of her man. ‘You’ll be Mrs Metcalf then.’

‘Aye, that’s me,’ nodded Mary.

‘Lando usually stops here for a drink when he’s finished his round. Can I get you anything? First one’s on the house.’

‘Thank you kindly but I’m running a bit late today. Maybe next time.’ The two women exchanged knowing nods and the publican went indoors.

So, Orlando stops for a pint at the end of the round does he? Well, she couldn’t really blame him for that. This smoky city air soon dries out your throat. As Kaiser waited, Mary began to orientate herself. She ran through the route of the milk round in her head. If the horse could remember it, then surely she could. Yes, she could just about recall each of the streets and certainly most of the stops. There was a certain kind of logic to the route. Orlando had certainly done a good job in planning it out. But then there were those half a dozen occasions when the horse had stopped for no apparent reason – at the end of streets where there were no customers. What was all that about?

The brewer’s dray went on its way but Mary stayed where she was. The problem gnawed at her. The horse knew to stop and she had confidence in its equine intelligence. So, was there something that Orlando had omitted to tell her or had she missed something? Was there something she was supposed to do at those stops? She tried to create a mental picture of each of the locations. Maybe they had

something in common? Well, yes, each was at the end of a street and... And then it dawned on her – each stop was outside a pub.

‘Why you lazy, good-for-nothing, son-of-a-Yorkshire swineherd! Just wait ‘til you get home!’

She said it so loud and with such vitriol that, despite his calm Irish Vanner temperament, Kaiser danced forward and broke into a trot. The staccato of his metal-shod hooves on the cobblestones rang out like a military firing squad. His horse sense told him that, for today at least, there would be no more waiting.