

## THE FILM, 1 JULY 1916

*S*ilence.

The film will be silent, of course: grainy, flickering images of men, machinery, horses and eruptions of earth and smoke. In a few weeks its audiences will watch it to the accompaniment of stirring piano music but they, and those still watching a century later, will have to imagine, from the white faces of the soldiers and the sudden crumpling of their bodies, what the real soundtrack might sound like. In the knowledge of where they are headed, these anonymous men, it will be disturbing and embarrassing to look at their faces: too tired, too resigned, too young, too old, too real. Yet somehow it is impossible to look away. What are they thinking, these men, stripped down by the camera to animal fear?

At 7.29 in the morning of 1 July, the cinematographer finds himself filming silence itself. One hundred and twenty seconds of silence. After a week of shelling, day and night, the air and the ground and the men trembling and afire: stillness. The massive mines have been detonated; he has, with a certain exultation, trapped the explosion. The moment of a landscape being altered for ever. It will be his most famous image: the convulsion of earth that looks, on film, like an elm tree in full leaf. Clouts of earth and chalk and terror are still falling but then the barrage lifts, just like that; by coincidence, both sides ceasing fire simultaneously.

What the cinematographer cannot capture on his 35-millimetre film is the particular quality of this silence: silence and a few larks

singing, and no one yet aware how significant their song will become. Even the photographer does not know quite what it is he is filming: the last seconds of the old world, with half a war still to run.

Is the camera trembling? It pans over the men waiting, the attack about to begin, the expected victory still ahead. It moves unevenly down the barrel of a howitzer to the puzzled face of a gunner corporal. The man sticks a finger in his gritty ear. The bombardment has stopped on all sides; his ears are ringing with the sudden absence of war. He hears birds: larks that he associates with Lancashire mornings, walking to his early shift, knowing he'll be dancing with his girl come evening. But the camera just catches the gunner looking up, squinting before moving into position; the film will say nothing about the hazy grey blue that suggests a hot day ahead or that the Lancashire sky is coming with him, the larks singing like some unholy miracle.

The camera closes in on a subaltern of the 11th Suffolks, a keen bird-watcher who returns monthly reports to the Royal Ornithological Society. But not today. Not now. He is oblivious that he is being filmed as he watches the waiting men in his section. The camera follows his glance, lingering almost lovingly on the soldiers in the trench. A couple, like their officer, gaze upwards at the birds; some look worried, perhaps by the invisible cessation of noise. Some have set their faces, stonily, to the hours ahead and seem unaware of either gunfire or birdsong, tight and frozen with eyes dark and fixed. The young subaltern, prep-schoolmaster for two years, infantry officer for eighteen weeks, thinks that when the time comes he will blow his whistle, climb the ladder, then fling away his helmet, his Sam Browne and his Webley, open his arms wide, lift his face to the sky and feel the sun upon it and the breeze in his hair and run, run across the lush, flat Suffolk fields of the Stour under the pipits, curlews and lapwings, and Tilly barking ahead of him with the joy of it.

Steadier now, the camera moves along an untidy row of squatting men, half sheltered in a sunken road, and is challenged by a scowling trooper, who stares right back at it. The camera mistakes the expression, under a helmet pushed too far back on his head, for hostility but

it is, in fact, impotent terror. He is thinking something else has obviously gone wrong again, just their bleeding luck. The gunners, useless buggers, have probably stopped for a mug of tea. He looks at the man next to him, his brother actually, but Albert's eyes are narrowed. He's miles away, probably dreaming of sticking Jerry. Albert had grinned when the major had said they couldn't afford to take prisoners. Not, the major said, that they would meet many living Germans. They would just saunter – 'saunter like a masher up Piccadilly' were the words he used – across to the enemy lines because the guns would have taken out all their positions. 'Blown to smithereens,' the major said, and the wire (never mind it is clear enough now to see the wire, looking as if it is holding up pretty well) 'ripped to confetti'. The trooper thinks of all the bad things that have happened. He thinks of Germans and tries to hate them enough to feel his bayonet slice through their uniform, through soft flesh and tight muscle and grate along their ribs and wonders what it would feel like to be on the receiving end. In all his time as a soldier he's never yet fired his gun.

How many men are thinking about salvation, the first-aider wonders? The cinematographer, with the first-aider's thoughts inaccessible to him, has to make do with images of hands rolling bandages. They'd rolled enough days ago, but the first-aider, a searcher who will follow the first waves of attack and treat the injured, finds it a soothing task despite the gauze catching on his rough and raw skin. It takes him back to being a child, watching the women roll up used wool. He can hear shouting and the sound of a breeze catching an unsecured canvas tent flap. He can smell fresh earth – the mass grave they'd dug behind the hospital. They are ready for 10,000 casualties, the senior MO had explained yesterday. Far greater capacity than would ever be required but soldiers deserved to know they'd be cared for if they were wounded or worse. A junior MO had made a small grimace.

The camera sees nothing of God, who is never far from the first-aider's side. God who had wanted him to be a pacifist and with whom the first-aider had made a deal, mistakenly thinking it would be easier to be a first-aider than a conscientious objector. Now God

is calling in the debt, sending him forward to face the great enemy, death, hauling back victims from death's indiscriminate feast to life.

The camera gathers speed across the small airfields, the tents, the mechanics, the men of the Royal Flying Corps. But once airborne, the filmed planes are nothing more than darting birds. The camera can't follow the pilot upwards or see him in his cockpit, unable to hear the silence or the birds or even his own voice singing, 'Row, row, row your boat, merrily down the stream.' He is 2500 feet above ground in the cockpit of his nifty Parasol and what he feels, vibrating through his feet and hands, is the sweet running of the motor. The pilot looks down on the landscape below, bounded by small dark copses, red hamlets, the green-edged River Ancre and the Somme marshes, and crossed with the busy arcs of trenches.

He is thinking about a dark-haired girl in Paris and a sapper captain he'd met in the mess four days earlier. The man's affable face had been creased with dirt, fatigue and frustration. 'William Bolitho,' he'd said, putting out his hand. 'Digging for King and country.' And then just before their fingers touched, he withdrew it and smiled, looking down at his palm. 'Sorry – filthy – you wouldn't want to shake it.'

As they drank their way through most of a bottle of Scotch, the sapper had explained flaws in their objective, using matchsticks and a pencil. The pilot remembers that the flaws had to do with sightlines and trajectories and didn't seem to involve anything in the air above the level of shells.

Now the pilot looks down on the relief map of Picardy below him, watching tiny convoys of men or horses moving, apparently arbitrarily, from one point to another, of howitzers and field guns and the raw white scars of Hawthorn Ridge where the earth itself has just been hurled into the air, blowing his frail machine off course. He thinks the sapper might have liked to see the arcs and fans and parallel lines of his labours. It is like a message carved in code to be read by the gods.

Below him, silently, the camera runs on, making history from unknown lives: such ordinary chaps and volunteers every one.

BEFORE, 1913



## CHAPTER ONE

JEAN-BAPTISTE MALLET, CORBIE,  
FRANCE, JULY 1913

*S*ome day he would steal a boat and row all the way to the sea. He sat on the bank of the river, where willows trailed on the surface of the water and where carp sometimes basked – a flash of silver just under the surface – and he threw a stone into the tiny scum of broken leaves and twigs, caught in the river's slow bend. In high summer everything here was green – the water, the trees, the bright duckweed – and the smell; the beginning of slightly rotten vegetation, the deep smell of mud and fat eels who lived on flesh and everything mad with growing. He liked the river here where it broadened, like a man describing the hips of a shapely woman with his hands, and where the small island was left in the middle, dense with trees.

In the rushes was the boat. It was a small, tidy boat, well kept and covered with a canvas, held down by rocks, in case of rain. Inside lay two new oars and fishing tackle was stowed under the seat. It was called *Sans Souci* and belonged to Vignon, the doctor. When the roads were bad Vignon sometimes rowed out to patients but mostly he used the boat to fish. There was never such a man for fishing,

Jean-Baptiste's mother said. There was never such a man for Madame de Potiers, either, Jean-Baptiste thought. He had watched the doctor's astonishingly hairy backside moving energetically between Madame de Potiers' white knees and spread skirts, forcing himself down repeatedly as if he was driving in a wedge to split a log, roaring as he went. It was always on Thursdays, Vignon's day off, that the boat would be moored on the far side of the island. Jean-Baptiste had started by swimming across in curiosity to watch the doctor's fishing. The doctor did fish, afterwards, as he could always be seen with two or three pike, singing (in Italian, some said) as he walked back to his house. He sang only on Thursdays – and sometimes on Sundays in church, of course. Perhaps he is singing a song about fish, the women said, as Vignon returned, his trouser knees stained green, to the neat red-brick house with its railings and its pear trees on the edge of town.

It was Vignon's boat that Jean-Baptiste planned to row to the sea. Meanwhile he exercised to strengthen his arms and chest. His mother thought he was doing it to join the army and sometimes felt the muscle of his upper arms approvingly as she passed behind him while he was chopping kindling. A strong son made a widow's life easier. She dreamed that Jean-Baptiste would march away a cuirassier and return a moustachioed sergeant like the picture that had hung in her bedroom all Jean-Baptiste's life. It was more likely that when he turned twenty he'd be pitched off for three dreary years on the eastern borders with Germany and live on weevils in the rain. That's where most of the conscripted Corbie boys went. They came back with moustaches and harder faces, and they spoke of women. But he and his mother both knew that he was lucky to have been offered a position in the forge of the widower Godet, the blacksmith. Their busybody of a neighbour, Madame Laporte, whose son Lucien's early career had reached its highest point when he was the school bully, had also told anyone who wanted to listen that Jean-Baptiste was lucky to have a handsome mother, and smirked. Lucien was a lumpy, pale boy who now passed his time



drawing obscene pictures on walls around town and, rumour had it, was responsible for the number of dead cats and hens that were found mutilated on people's doorsteps. Now it was Lucien who was off to be a soldier, which seemed to offer him undreamed-of opportunities to pursue his hobbies.

'Good riddance,' Jean-Baptiste's mother had said. 'The boy's funny in the head. In a bad way.'

Jean-Baptiste offered to take Dr Vignon on his riverside rounds, hoping that he could learn to row better. Vignon was no great rower and seemed relieved. Once he was sure the boy could master the currents and use the oars without splashing them both with water, Vignon relaxed and usually sat back and smoked. After a few weeks Jean-Baptiste couldn't resist asking whether the doctor would like him to row him to the island on Thursdays for the fishing. Vignon's eyes narrowed. He drew hard on his cigarette. 'How old are you now?'

'Fifteen.'

'You need to see more of the world,' Vignon had said and his gaze never left Jean-Baptiste's face. 'There's more to life than Corbie.'

Jean-Baptiste had come to like, even admire, the doctor with his singing, his sweet-smelling tobacco, his neat, glistening, black beard, his hairy arse and possession of Madame de Potiers' perfect, aristocratic thighs, even if he was from Paris, but he couldn't tell the doctor, of course, of his plans to do just that – to see the world by stealing the doctor's boat. But he had made his plans. The river's history was as long as the world's and it could be relied upon to bear him north but no more: it had its own loyalties. When the curé was a boy two Englishmen had found mammoth bones and a huge flint axe in the river bank near Amiens, and they had tried to claim that these monsters and these fighting axe-men had been here before anyone thought God created the earth. Then they had been taught at school that the Duke of Normandy had invaded the English from the harbour at St Valery, and the river had played its part, first in beating the English at Crécy but then helping them win at

Agincourt. It had let the Spanish advance into Corbie, but seen them beaten off by 40,000 men sent by Louis the Just.

What started as a muddy trickle in the dense forest of Arrouaise wound its way north for many, many kilometres, past Abbeville, St Valery and Le Crotoy. Befitting its changeable nature, sometimes it was a brisk stream, sometimes a deep pool, sometimes a reedy lake. For a stretch men had tamed it into a canal; he had seen a school map and there was the canal, straight and regular, and there beside it the untidy undulations of the ancient river, its meres and marshland. He had imagined the canal water always trying to seep back to its wild home. At Amiens the river was a watery maze where black barges tended the garden *hortillonages*, from time to time it was a peat fen rich in wildfowl, but still it kept going. It took in smaller rivers – Jean-Baptiste had himself been born and lived all his life in the small town where the Ancre met the greater river – and then, the schoolmaster had told them, it mingled with the Avre and the Selle and the Hallue, and with the burden of all this water it got wider and fuller as more streams ran to join it in its rush to the sea, and then it opened into a vast mouth: half sand, half water.

Jean-Baptiste knew two men who had seen this. The curé said the mouth was known to be nearly as wide as the whole distance between Albert and Paris; and then, as if realising nobody could imagine such a distance, he explained it was so wide a man would need a horse to ride from one side to the other and it would take much more than a day. He said it was a wild, godforsaken place of screaming birds, knifing, briny winds, and hills of sand and coarse grass. Vignon said it was an in-between place where the sky saw its reflection in the water, where the sea sometimes drew itself so far back that the seabed became shore, where the light turned the beach to mother-of-pearl. If you walked barefoot the sand felt like carved ripples under your toes and the froth of breakers was like lace as the river fought a little before surrendering silently to the ocean.

The sea of course was salty and Jean-Baptiste didn't know at what point the fresh river water turned to salt, or at what point its

greenness would be overwhelmed by the cold slate grey that sailors talked about, but when he rowed away he would find out these things. The boat would not be diverted into fens or lakes; it would find the sea, like a fish returning upriver to spawn, and if he kept rowing, he could even reach England. He would see what was to be seen and then come back a strong man with tales to tell, far more extraordinary than those told by boys who had just sat on the German border in the rain.

Before then he would need to learn a few words in English and he had tried to get Vignon to tell him what might be useful – without giving him grounds for suspicion – but Vignon had been surprisingly vague for a man who had travelled. A man born in an unnamed city rich with treasure left by the Gauls and the Romans and Charlemagne himself. A man who had once lived in Paris. Had seen Monsieur Eiffel's tower.

'Sausage,' the doctor had said. And then, 'God save the King.' His lip had curled. 'How do you do?'

How do you do what, Jean-Baptiste had wondered and considered whether he was more inclined to believe the curé's or the doctor's account of the meeting of the river and the sea. Soon he would find out the truth.

Now Vignon sat back, lighting another cigarette. He picked a yellow leaf off the sole of his boot. The toecaps shone like a conker; the laces were plump and tidily crossed and the leather was rarely muddy or wet, except on Thursdays. Jean-Baptiste thought of his own boots. After his father's death his mother had kept his boots, much repaired though they were, as an earthly relic. If he thought of his father at all, it was only as these boots. He couldn't remember much else of him above the level of the eyelets for the laces and, somewhere above that, a voice shouting. His father sleeping was a pair of empty boots in the scullery; his father dead was two scarred, upturned soles, one at right angles to the other at the bottom of the stairs. His mother had started making Jean-Baptiste wear the boots when he was twelve, stuffing the toes with rags and

putting goose fat on his chafed shins. She was still insisting he keep them even though it was obvious that he was growing into a much larger man than his father, and he had to curl his toes up when he wore them. His nail beds were bruised if he walked any distance and, out of her sight, he returned to his sabots with relief. But he rowed barefoot, finding the sensations in his feet and toes responded to the messages the water transmitted through planks and oars. He steered the small boat precisely and gracefully, having left his sabots under a bush.

‘Despite everything, this strange region is quite charming.’ The doctor waved his cigarette towards the lagoon. ‘I’m surprised you aren’t all born web-footed. And how well named your river is,’ he said, in the tone he sometimes used that made Jean-Baptiste feel less guilty about intending to steal boat, and that made it clear that Vignon had seen more reliable land and far bigger, probably more patriotic rivers, including the Seine itself, and that, in the scale of things, this small town, this Picardy backwater, his patients, even Madame de Potiers, were a temporary amusement.

‘Tranquillity. That’s what the name Somme means,’ Vignon said. ‘In an ancient language.’ He waved an arm in the direction of the past. ‘And here we are tranquil in our boat. Or at least I’m tranquil and you are sweating like a bull – so we’d better tie her up for the evening or your mother will be round to deal with me, fierce as a tigress.’

Giving Jean-Baptiste another of his slow smiles, lines radiating outwards from his black eyes, he pulled out a white handkerchief from his creased linen jacket, raised his hat and mopped his brow.

‘One must never be late for a lady.’