

So Played the Pipes in Arras

by Janet Aldrich

Harry McDonald shuffled down the hall to answer the door. He opened it to find his regular mail carrier, an oblong box in hand. "Good morning, Mr. McDonald! Ready for Christmas?"

Taking the box, he raised a bushy eyebrow. "Happen I am, lass. Happen I am." He put the box on the nearest flat surface and took the clipboard he was offered. "Where do I sign, then?"

After he closed the door, Harry stared at the box for a long time before picking it up. *I know what it is and I know what it means. Bloody hell. And at Christmas of all times.* He was expecting his grandson any day, home from Afghanistan on furlough. *I'll put it aside for now.*

As he passed down the hallway, he searched through the framed pictures on the wall and stopped at one of them. He ran his hand over the picture, looking at each of his mates in turn. *Sandy, Hamish, Alasdair, David... all the twelve of us. Gone one at a time. And now, Jamie-lad. Only me left. Only me.*

There was another knock at the door. Putting down the box down again, he hurried as fast as he could and flung the door open in welcome.

"Hal! 'Tis braw to see ye, indaid!"

"Grandpa," Hal came in and hugged him. "You're looking fine." The younger man was tanned, but drawn and thin.

"Ah, lad. You look —" What he looked was older and worn. Harry reflected that he'd seen it happen all the time when he'd served in World War II. The new recruits arrived, fresh-faced and seeking adventure. In a month, even a week, sometimes less if things were bad enough, they would be wary and tired, only living to make it through another day.

"I know. I look like hell." Hal rubbed his face. "I think you're the only one who has any idea how I feel." He looked the old man straight in the eye. "I came to see you as soon as I could get away. They mean well, Mom and Dad and Tracy and all, but they don't understand. They can't. I couldn't stand one more minute of the hoopla. I was afraid I'd do something I'd regret."

Harry motioned him to sit, and took the chair opposite him. "I understand. When I came to America with my Mary, I would hear young men, bairns too young to fight, say that they had 'done their bit' for the war effort because they had run scrap drives or tire drives or some such thing. She had to hold me back now and again, your grandmother did."

Hal grinned without humor. "I can imagine."

The older man surveyed his grandson, saw the pain in his eyes. "You've been through the mill, have ye nae?" He pulled his chair closer. "Tell me, lad. You've got to tell someone or you'll burn up inside."

Hal let down his guard and told his grandfather of roadside bombs and allies who were suddenly enemies. He fought back tears as he told of his men going down to gunfire and being blown up, of holding hands while his friends died. "I don't want to have to go back to that. How do they expect us to keep going on?" Hands gripped, knuckles white, he struggled not to break down.

"You just do, lad, you just do. Those of us who were pipers, we were the ones who helped the medics and did what we could for the lads. They were strafed or hit by tank fire and we watched them die in the most horrible ways you could imagine. And you don't even have tae imagine. You know."

The two of them were silent, haunted by ghosts — their own and the other's.

Hal's nerves stretched to the breaking point and he got up and paced around the living room to release the tension. He stopped in front of the oblong box. "Christmas present, Gramps?"

"No." He paused and then said, "Bring it here, lad. I've a story to tell — and you're the only one left who would understand it."

Originally, there had been twelve pipers, the old man began. Only one of them hadn't come home from Africa — an amazing record considering that the casualty rate among pipers had been so high in the Great War that the British High Command had issued orders this time around that they weren't to be in combat. He'd heard later that Lord Lovat had told his regimental piper to play for the troops at Normandy anyway: "Ah, but that's the English War Office. You and I are both Scottish, and that doesn't apply."

His own CO had the same attitude, and when the Scottish regiments fought together, the pipers stood as a group and played their troops on.

After one particular battle was over the eleven of them who were left gathered together to mourn their fallen.

"We've naught tae drink, lads." Hamish Williams complained.

"We're still alive. Drink seems nae important." Frank McDougal sighed. "Puir Sandy. I cannae believe it." He and Sandy Grant had been great boyhood friends since Glasgow and he was taking it hard.

"Twas a grand skelloch though." Harry said with satisfaction. "And the Jerries as shocked as they could be."

"Not bloody shocked enough," Frank snapped.

"Sandy should nae ha' been here and that's a fact. Did ye nae try tae talk him oot of it?" David Cullen asked, idly cleaning the chanter on his pipes.

"Did I not? Told him he was too old and his family needed him. And his wife and mither and even the children, they tried. But he kept haverin' on about duty and the like. Well, he did that, didn't he?"

That killed the conversation.

"Well, this is a sad day, and no mistake." Jamie Bruce broke the silence. "I've something here that'll buck us all up, and to drink to Sandy's memory forbye."

Jamie was the youngest of the group, other than Harry. Most of the others exchanged glances and shrugs. When Jamie gave you

something, it was better not to ask where he came by it. He hoisted a bottle gently in the air. "The Glenlivet — 15 years old."

"Let's see that then, bairn." Alasdair McIvor snatched it from him. No one challenged Al; he was six foot four and went 17 stones and none of that fat. "Well, wee Jamie is claiverin' the truth for once." He started to break the seal.

"Don't." It was Dougal Stewart. They listened to him because he rarely spoke, but when he did, "he spoke sense," as Ewan Black put it. "I can think of a better use for it."

Alasdair hooted. "Better than drinkin' it? Man, you're daft."

"No, Alasdair. I'm not." He turned to the others. "My grand-dey fought at Maiwand." The others quieted. "He and his mates, they had a bottle just like that one — well, a different year, but The Glenlivet. And before the battle, they put it aside. Said it belonged to their group, but that the last man standing should open it and drink to them all — then or in 70 years, whatever it was."

They'd grown silent again. No one, not even Alasdair, interrupted him.

"I'm sorry about Sandy, Frank. Sorry for his family. But we have to take care of each other now. We're family, here, the eleven of us, fighters in a common cause. I say we should do the same, Entrust it to —"

"Me!" Jamie piped up.

That provoked a general laugh. "Like as not we'd never see it again," Harry grinned.

Dougal interrupted them. "The oldest man here. That's what my grand-dey said. The oldest man holds it, and when he's —" he stopped. "When he's gone, he has someone pass it on to the next oldest still living, and so on."

"So Harry, or Jamie, like as not, will still get it," Frank said sourly.

"I wouldn't assume that," Ewan Black said gravely. "It's nae as though the Jerries check our id discs before they start shooting. And after the war, well, who knows how that will be."

"True enough."

"We should write this doon tha noo," Duncan said. "So we'll remember."

"I don't think any of us will forget." Ewan glanced at him. "Do you?"

"We'll have to keep in touch after the war," Jamie interjected.

Frank scowled. "You're a grand one for the optimism, Jamie."

"I have to be. I dinnae think I could go on if I wasn't."

Alasdair gave the bottle to Duncan, as the eldest. He stowed it away in his kit. "I'll take care of it, I promise you all. And may it not be opened for a lang time."

The others grunted or nodded in assent. In silent agreement, they flowed away by ones and twos, to rejoin their regiments and doss down for the night.

In the time to come, the eleven men stood side by side whenever the war brought them together, playing away at marches, laments and *piobaireachd* and every other damned bit of music they knew. ("An' I told them, 'Not one note of "The Campbells are Coming, mind you!"') None of them was seriously wounded and no one else was killed. Whether the Germans avoided them because they thought them mad ("That's what they told Bill Mullin after D-Day," Harry chuckled) or because for some other reason Providence preserved them, come V-E Day, they were demobbed and on their way back to Scotland.

Two went right away, less than a year after the war's end; Hamish Williams in an automobile accident within a week of getting back, ("Ye'd nae credit it, would ye now? To go through the war and then get hit by a lorry?"), Dougal Stewart by his own hand.

"Dougie was the kind one, the gentle one. He didnae have the strength to go back to regular life after all he'd seen. I'd like to say I was surprised, but I wasn't. None of us were, I didnae think. Sorry, yes. But not surprised."

"And the others?" Hal asked.

"Oh, time went by and I suppose we went like other men our age, one here and one there, to health problems and accidents and age. Jamie and I wrote back and forth for a good wee bit. But the letters

stopped about a month ago, and I've been expecting this —" he indicated the bottle, "for a while now."

"Are we going to drink to them?"

"We could, an' to your men, too. But I think I have a better use for this bottle." Harry's hands caressed it. He could almost sense the others standing around him, remembered the night as though it was yesterday. "What this gave me was hope, and I think we all felt that way. Hope that we would live through the war and that it wouldn't be drunk for many a year." He put the bottle back in the box and put the lid back on. "I think the lads would think it a grand use to give it to you, for you and your men. To give you hope, like."

Hal picked the box up. "Yes. There's days when it's thin on the ground, you know."

"Aye, I do." Harry stretched. "We should go to your mother and father's. Like as not they're worried about you."

Hal smiled at him. "Yes, we should, I guess." He picked up the box, and for the first time, he looked around the living room. "What are your pipes and your kilt doing up there?"

"Young Tracy did it. I told her I didn't appreciate being a museum piece, nor my kit, but there they are. Every so often I brush the dust off them. And myself."

"Museum piece, you? Hardly." Hal gave the first real laugh he had since he'd come in the door. "I don't think of you as old."

"But I am," his grandfather said. "And it's old I pray you'll be as well, long after this war is over."

"Me, too, grandpa." Hal clasped the older man's shoulder as the door closed behind them. "Me, too."

