

# Prologue

## The Forgotten Letter

It fell out of the back of the book I was reading – a book of classic French poetry I hadn't opened for years. Thinking back, it must have been around 1940 when I bought it – or did I have it as a gift? I just can't remember but it must have been over seventy years since it last left my bookshelves. And now a bit of my past had dropped from its pages. I picked up the letter – it was written on a small piece of faded blue notepaper, torn at the edges. The writing was faint. As I read the words, I realised it wasn't really a letter, more a statement or perhaps a message.

It was headed: *On Saying Goodbye*. The writing was small, neat, a man's hand I felt sure! It went on: “*Twenty-four hours from now and all the goodbyes will have been said. Goodbye – what an expression! It is said with such a variety of feelings.*

*“The goodbye you just let fall after a casual meeting in a pub or after a few hours journey on a train. Goodbye has no real meaning then – it’s just the thing to say and people expect it.*

*“Then there's the goodbye you say at the end of a long period at a school, or on a camp when posted. It brings a feeling of sorrow for a few hours as one realises that you are leaving behind friends you've made, associations you will miss; but not for long, for as new associations are formed, the old ones are soon forgotten.”*

As I turned over the page, my mind was searching back into my memory. Could I remember who had written this, what piece

of my past had I turned up after all these years? I felt foolish, old. Surely this must have meant something to me once. I continued reading...

*“Now the real goodbye is different. And the one I say today will be that. It will convey all the meaning of the other goodbyes and much more. The word will be the same but the feeling will be so much deeper. I have no illusions as to whether we will meet again, but in the forming of new associations there is one I shall never forget – I just can't. So to me this goodbye will mean more than the mere act of parting. To quote Lamartine again: ‘Une seule être me manquera et le monde sera dépeuplé’ – One sole person I will miss and the world will seem empty.”*

And that was the finish, no signature, no other clue.

I lay back in my chair. The book fell to the floor. I began thinking, feverishly concentrating on those years at the beginning of the war. I was 18 and working in the centre of London for a firm of paper agents. It wasn't a big office and there were only a few employees. Daily we would make the journey up to town from the suburbs during the Blitz. Each morning some familiar building would be missing – bombed or burned out during the night. Each day the journey became more hazardous, land mines hanging from telegraph lines as you passed in the train, warnings of unexploded bombs.

Gradually the faces formed in my mind of the other people working with me in the office; older men who belonged to the Territorial Army and who were soon called up, those nearing retirement who gradually accepted more work to make up for those who had already gone, and then the younger men who waited each day to volunteer or to be conscripted. It was these young men who joined me for lunch on the Embankment, eating our sandwiches or sometimes taking a beer and a snack in the

nearby pub. I had forgotten them completely over the years, and yet at that time of danger, of apprehension, we used to talk about everything – our desires and our despair, our innermost thoughts and our fears. We were all idealists, our thoughts and hopes for the future so defined.

We thought we knew each other so very well. And as my mind went back to those times, a face was gradually forming in my memory. There was a young man, half-Jewish, dark, intense, an intellectual and a loner, who would attach himself to me. We would read poetry and discuss important things with the wisdom – or dogged ignorance – of youth. Yes, we had had an association, not a love affair but a joining of minds. Inevitably he had been called up into the Army, roughing it with the rest, training on damp, cold campsites. No books there to read, only the rough male company in the NAAFI.

He was right, we never did meet again. I think perhaps I heard them say in the office that he had gone abroad, in the infantry. And then I heard he was missing – after that, nothing. A few weeks later, I left the office and I moved away. Then just last night, as I read this letter, his life touched mine one more time.