

The Photograph

The photograph in my hand, I walked along the path. There was something distinctly familiar in the crunch of gravel beneath my boots, particularly as I rounded the corner and the turrets of Croft Castle came into view.

A uniformed man stood at the main door, his hand lifted to shield his eyes from the sunshine.

“Good morning,” I said, handing him the photo. “I don’t suppose you recognise this do you? It’s somewhere I visited many years ago.”

The man looked at the image. “From around here is it?”

“Definitely,” I replied. “My granddad worked here as groundskeeper before fighting in the Great War and we stayed nearby when I was twelve. I’m sure I remember visiting an Iron Age fort, and on another day, we headed to the river.”

“Some fantastic views up there, at the fort I mean, not only of Leominster but of the Welsh Hills too,” he replied. “Now, this photo of yours, it could be the River Lugg.”

“Is that far?”

“No,” he said. “Follow the red markers up the hill past the chestnut trees. Eventually, you’ll find a small wood and on the other side there are some steps.”

“Much appreciated,” I said.

The climb was steep, but at least the markers were easy to follow. It had been thirty years since I’d been here and yet the surroundings didn’t appear to have changed that much. Maybe a few more houses but otherwise Leominster still had that gentle, undulating feel amongst the many shades of green. The highlight, however, was the mesmerising carpet of bluebells in the wood. The scent of wild garlic was also enticing, as was the incessant birdsong; I’d almost forgotten how expectant spring in rural England could be.

The soothing sound of flowing water led me down the steps. I compared the photograph with the opposite bank of the river until at last, I was able to place it back in my pocket. This was it; the widest and shallowest part of the river on the shelf of stones where I’d paddled near the giant oak.

I’d hidden granddad’s cap badge here. He’d served in Gallipoli with the Herefordshire Regiment and Mum had given it to me in a tobacco tin just before we’d emigrated to Australia. It didn’t seem right to take it abroad, so I’d buried it where I felt it belonged.

Boots and socks left on the bank, I headed towards the oak tree on the opposite side of the river. The water was cold though, colder than I remembered and with the sensation draining from my feet, my arms stretched past the overhanging roots.

One final push through the silt and pebbles and the tips of my fingers brushed against the metal of granddad’s tobacco tin. I knelt in the water, only to find that a small, corner fragment was all that was left, the cap badge having disintegrated into the landscape of Leominster.

“Rightly so,” I said, standing up. “Rightly so.”

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