

War Diary

Private Henry Ryzak

July 1, 1915

Volume 1

Diary Text: 9 Pages

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A sledgehammer fist connected solidly with my jaw, snapping my head to the side and sending me reeling as I tried to keep my feet under me. I met with little success. I landed hard, my shoulder taking the brunt of the fall. I lay there on the hardwood, trying to scrape my raw egg thoughts up off the floor. I blinked and shook my head, trying to clear the muddle.

A mountainous shadow fell across me, cast by the dim, yellow electric lights.

Huh—those are new. When did Frank get electricity?

I looked up at the colossus looming over me, taking in his ham sized fists and his ridiculously large forearms.

Can't let those reach me. Could outrun him—he doesn't look that fast—but I didn't cheat!

AND he still has my money...

I decided to take the adage “keep your friends close and your enemies closer” literally. In one quick movement I heaved myself off the floor and launched myself into Goliath's midsection, grabbing him around his waist. At the same time, I hooked my foot around the back of his legs and pushed hard. The man toppled, landing with a room-shaking thud that rattled Frank's new chandeliers. The back of Goliath's head bounced on the floor and he paused, groaning, just before lowering it back down slowly.

I used the ensuing three seconds to grab a nearby wooden chair and dropped it on the man, pinning his shoulders and chest to the floor. I straddled the chair, planting a foot on each of his

wrists to keep his hands where I could see them. One of them still held a fistful of cash—*my* cash.

I waited.

Another three seconds and the big Swede opened his eyes.

“I didn’t cheat,” I said slowly. He said nothing. He cast me a look that I could only interpret as a desire to kill me. “I did not cheat.” I repeated more quietly, but more firmly.

“I can’t give you all my money,” he bellowed. The chair underneath me heaved and resettled on the floor as Goliath tried to get up. He let out a breath as he settled back again.

“Then you shouldn’t have bet it,” I said, planting my booted feet more solidly on his wrists.

The man still looked like he wanted to kill me—if not for thinking I cheated at cards then at least to get his money back. “Now give me the money—I won it fair and square.”

“No. I need it to get my lumber to town.”

“Fine,” I said, folding my arms along the backrest of the chair and resting my chin on them. “I can do this all night.”

The Swede growled and, despite the limited mobility of his wrists, he managed to loose the bills he clutched in his large hand, spewing them on the floor beside him.

“Take it then!” he roared.

“Thanks, I will,” I said. I stood up off the chair, pushing my step just a bit to make sure I cleared the chair—and the reach of the man’s hands. The chair wouldn’t hold him after my weight was off it. I snatched up the pile of bills on my way.

I straightened the bills in my hand as the Swede sat up, pushing the chair off him with a clatter. He glared at me, looking sullen but slightly less like he wanted to murder me in my sleep. He sighed heavily and shook his head. If I had thought it possible, I would have wondered if the brute was about to cry. I considered that a moment.

I scraped a few bills off the top of the pile in my fist and dropped them on the floor beside the human mountain.

“This should get you down river. You can still get your lumber to town and make your sale.”

The man looked up at me in surprise then looked down at the floor where the money lay. He slowly reached to pick it up.

“Frank,” I said, turning to the barkeeper, “sorry for the trouble.” I gestured to the overturned card table and tossed a few bills onto the bar. Frank ducked his head in a silent “thanks”.

I retrieved my jacket from one of the barstools and walked out of the bar. I stepped out into the cool night, my boots sounding too loud on the newly paved main street as I started the long trek home.

Don’t be too hasty in your assumptions: I’m not a *nice* guy. I didn’t care enough about the Swede or his problems to help him. I didn’t even care about the damage we’d done to Frank’s bar. The money I left the Swede was to buy me time to get out of the bar in one piece and I only

left Frank some money so he would allow me into his fine establishment the next time I needed a drink.

That's it.

Besides, I hadn't set out to start a bar fight that night—few of the fights I had been in had been started intentionally, despite what might be heard on the gossip mill in town or held as general small-town popular opinion. Really, I simply tended to get caught up in events beyond my control—frequently. That evening's fight was merely the culmination of many factors that were seemingly “ganging up” on me that day. In fact, the whole year was rapidly heading downhill—I was only waiting to reach the bottom figuring that would come soon. After all, it couldn't get much worse.

The economy was bad and had taken another blow when England had declared war against Germany the year before. Men went off to fight for Britain, abandoning jobs and families to enlist. Government contracts had been cancelled and the railway was laying off men—men like me. It wasn't my fault I'd lost my job and no matter how much my father badgered me, I couldn't find another—there simply wasn't any work. So I was stuck helping my father on the farm. I needed the money I'd won just as much as the Swede did. I had no intention of staying on the farm any longer than I had to.

That particular day was the July First holiday. Planting was done and after spending many days in the field working alongside my father and brother, I felt I had earned some R and R. My father hadn't seen it that way. He said it was a day to celebrate with family—and my mother insisted I go to the church social with them.

So I went to the church picnic with my father, mother, and older brother. I knew my mother had ulterior motives for suggesting that particular outing: it was a perfect venue for scouting out eligible young women and doing a little match-making. Lately, she had been talking non-stop about my brother and I getting married. She said I, in particular, was in need of a good wife to settle me down.

Settling down was the last thing I needed to do—moving on was the first.

I played along for her sake—and for the food. The church ladies always served up their finest at those sort of things. The chicken soup they had for lunch was good, not to mention the pies. The pies were painstakingly deliberate in their quality—an all-out effort on the part of the ladies to distinguish themselves and draw the young men’s attentions. There was a lot of talk about which young lady had made which pie... a LOT of talk about pies. An unnecessary amount of talk about pies.

Despite some of the men trying to coax me into joining the afternoon baseball game, I eschewed playing ball in favour of drinking a beer in the shade. I didn’t mind playing ball—I had played before and I had a good swing and even better aim when I was pitching—but the beer was more enticing and, truly, I wasn’t keen on being surveyed, appraised, and deliberated on by the ladies, young and old alike, as though I were some prize horse up for bidding.

I did stay for the supper following the game—cold fried chicken and biscuits went rather well with another beer. However, I had no interest in the dance that followed, during which all of the ladies would be doing their level best to draw the men into dancing and conversation. I sat on a bench along one side of the church hall as the music began, watching the couples pair up while I sat quietly, working out my best escape plan.

My brother dropped down beside me. “Aren’t you going to ask anyone to dance?”

I scanned the room. One or two of the girls garnered a second look from me, and several more were looking back at me, but there was something so...suffocating about them. Not *them* exactly, but the *idea* of them that smacked of reliving the same life I had watched my parents live every day for my 20-odd years of life.

Since when had settling down ever made anyone happy?

“Nope,” I replied, shaking my head, “That’s not for me.”

“Well, more for me then,” my brother said with a grin and he launched himself off the bench and over to a dark-haired girl with a slight figure. Within thirty seconds he was dancing with the girl—an admittedly tolerable looking woman to be sure.

I got up off the bench, flipped my jacket over my shoulder, and left.

I had no particular intention of ending up in the local “watering hole” when I walked out of the church. I simply arrived there out of long habit and familiarity. The evening did not feel particularly portentous. Sometimes I wonder if I would have done things differently had I known that evening would set off a chain of events that would change my life. Would I have stayed to dance and found some nice girl with whom I could settle down? Would I have intervened in Will’s conversations of the evening, fending off our doom?

Likely not.

“Well, hullo, Henry!” Frank called from behind the bar when he caught sight of me. “If it isn’t my best customer. Surprised to see you in here on the holiday. What’ll it be tonight?”

“Anything cheap and cold,” I said as I went up to the bar. Frank poured me whatever he had on tap and slid a mug of the dark brew over to me. I tossed a coin onto the bar and it immediately disappeared into Frank’s pocket.

I sat down on a bar stool and turned to watch the poker game presently in play at a nearby table. A giant of a man held sway there with three other men seated around the table, all of them with cards in hand. Given the Giant’s heavy boots, unshaven face, and multiple layers of muscles, I had no choice but to assume he was a lumber man.

“Hah!” he yelled suddenly, slapping his cards down on the table for the others to see. A smile split his face open like a jack-o’-lantern. The others at the table jumped in their seats and cringed back from the wide swing of the Giant’s arms as he raked the pot toward him, still grinning.

I studied the man as he shuffled the deck. He glanced up and saw me watching him. We regarded one another for a couple of seconds.

“I am Tove,” he called over to me with a heavy Swedish accent. “What is your name?” he asked as he deftly dealt the cards to the others at the table.

“Henry,” I replied, taking a sip of my beer. I wasn’t entirely certain why I had answered him. Perhaps it was the way he announced himself: as though he were the only one in the room.

“You look strong. What is your work?” Tove asked.

“I used to work on the railway. Now I help on my father’s farm.”

“Ahhh—a settler’s son!” Tove said, nodding as though this bit of information told him all he needed to know about me. The idea rankled me somehow. “I like settlers. I make much money from you.”

“What work do you do?” I asked.

“I am cutting logs and taking them to the towns,” he replied with another nod. “Business is good. Much money, *ja*. From people like your papa who need houses for their families.”

“Hmmm...” was all I said.

“Henry,” the Swede said with a grin, “come. Join the game. I could use more of your money!” He laughed a booming laugh.

That was all I needed to hear.

As with the entirety of the evening, I didn’t have any particular intention of joining the card game, and yet, as it happened, I found myself being dealt in.

Much to my mother’s chagrin, I was not new to cards and gambling—nor to drinking, for that matter. I had done all of those things often enough to do them well and all at the same time—I was a good multitasker. That night, however, I had a mission: recover the money the Swede had taken from my fellow settlers and put it back in the hands of hard-working farmers—farmers like me. It just seemed the right thing to do. Frank kept up a steady supply of beer and I went to work.

Gory details aside, I truly had not cheated the man—I hadn’t needed to. The Swede was easy to “read”. He pulled on his beard when he was uncertain, he grinned without control when he felt

he had a winning hand, and he sighed when he picked up an unfavourable card. I knew exactly when to press my luck, bluff, or fold.

And yet, as easy as the Swede was to read, I never saw his fist coming from across the table....

The cool night air roused my stuporous brain as I stepped out of the bar, looked up at the stars, and took a breath of the bracing air to clear my head. It was a long walk home and the drinks I'd had over the course of the day were coming back to bite me, muffling my thoughts and making my head buzz. I pulled my jacket close against the chill in the air and started my lengthy trek home.

By the time I walked onto the farmyard, I was tired, cold, and may have been just a little unsteady on my feet. I found my bed in the dark, not wanting to light a lamp and risk waking my brother who was sleeping across the room. I dropped onto my bed without taking off my boots.

I was out as I fell.

June 15, 1913

John proposed to me today. It was the worst day of my life.

I shan't write about it. I do not need to describe it for memory's sake because I am certain I will never forget this torturous day.

My life is ruined!

Prodigious rot! The words of a young, incapable, and very weak-willed girl if ever there were any. I am embarrassed to read what I once was.

If I had known anything about the world and the path which I would have to take through it, I would never have had the audacity to write such self-involved melodrama. Nor, for that matter, would I have lent much credence to the perceived devastation of the day's happenings. While that episode did go on to chart a very determined and somewhat exacting course for me, it merited no such title and the events of that day would ultimately resolve into a mere vexing complication—a festering splinter that could not be retrieved.

No, I did not wish to marry John and yet, I had agreed to it, bowing to the will of both our fathers in exchange for a small bid to see what I was made of. It would prove to be their undoing.

John had stood before me, flanked by both of our fathers, and asked for my hand in marriage as had been planned some time prior. Words spoken in a tone of one selling an old mare and asking if the prospective purchaser wished to buy the horse or not? There was no talk of love nor was there a ring in the offering to symbolize it because love was not at the heart of the matter.

Practicality, not love, was the currency of the plan put forward by John's father and mine.

Our farm had seen a disastrous beginning. Papa had moved Mum and a then one-year-old daughter from England to Canada in pursuit of the government's advertised free land. Papa had been an excellent business man in England, dealing in farm equipment and felt he would surely be able to make a viable business out of a farm in a country where there was nothing but land to supply product without limit. Unfortunately, that was not the entirety of the farming business as my father soon discovered. He would never have "proved up" on his land in time to collect the title had it not been for the help of Abe, a very experienced farmer. My father simply didn't have the understanding, experience, or frankly the stamina to do the work required.

Abe, however, had all of those things in spades. He had brought his own wife and young son over from the Ukraine based on the same promise of free land. I was certain that, given his vast farming experience, Abe would surely have done well in establishing his own farm. Sadly, his wife had become ill shortly after their arrival in Canada. Abe could not possibly look after his sick wife and their small son while trying to clear enough field to prove up on a parcel of land. He had been forced, instead, to seek work as a farm hand and my father had eagerly hired him on. It was a most suitable arrangement at the time, with Abe helping Papa with the farm and Mum helping Abe's wife and looking after both the toddlers in the bargain. Abe's wife had later passed away, but by that time, Abe had become settled in his new life. His young son was just entering his teen years and Abe saw fit to have him join in the farm work to teach him the trade.

Things came to a boil, however, when I overheard Papa talking to Abe about the future of the farm and the security of Abe and John should something happen to Papa. After all, Abe had said, he had as much invested in the farm as my father did. That was when talk turned to a union between John and me and that was when I determined I would not become chattel to be

auctioned off along with the farm. So I formed my own plan: I would become a Nurse with my own income and buy out John's part of the farm.

Making certain my father did not hear of it, I applied to and was accepted into the College of Nursing in the spring of 1913. I was very proud as the school had been established only recently and they were quite selective in their applicants. There was just one difficulty: I needed the signature of my father on the enrollment form—witnessed by the minister who had recommended me for the program. There was no way around it. I would have to ask Papa's permission to go to Nursing school.

There was, of course, the anticipated heated debate when I approached my father. I told him about my acceptance into the Nursing program one evening after supper as he sat behind the weighty wooden desk in his study, going over the accounting books.

“You *what?!?*” Papa had sputtered. In the light of the oil lamp, he looked down at the enrollment form I had set before him. His dark eyes lifted to mine. He pinned me with a look that was not unlike the expression someone might wear if they were to catch a thief as he is carrying away all of one's prized possessions.

I winced and took a half-step back.

“I want to be a Nurse with my own money and a career,” I put forward, my voice trembling slightly as I tried to reason with the unreasonable.

“Nursing?! Absolutely not! That is a business just shy of—of *acting!*” Papa barked, his face red. “My daughter will never fall into that—that...*'profession'*,” Papa spat. “Besides, you are

not cut out for the rigors of physical labour nor do you have the capacity to order about unruly patients.”

“Nursing is not what it used to be,” I objected, feeling the heat begin in my cheeks. “It is becoming a very acceptable profession with decent education and training. This program is in an actual hospital school with practice overseen in the attached hospital. You cannot support me forever and being able to earn my own way will keep me from being a burden on you.”

“You would never be a burden on us—the farm title is in your name. Everything will go to you after I die.”

“Everything except the half Abe wants set aside for John,” I said in my best *I-know-what-you’re-not-telling-me* tone. “I overheard you talking.”

Papa’s mouth pressed into a line and he let out a slow, loud breath like the steam of a train.

“You still don’t need to worry about your security. Abe and I have negotiated what I feel to be a rather equitable arrangement for all concerned.”

“And just what would that be?” I asked.

“You will marry John and secure your future. In exchange, John will own half the farm—something he deserves after all the years he and Abe have helped work the land. Everyone will get what they ought.”

“Everyone but me!” I objected. “I don’t want to marry John!”

“And why not? You will have no better offers. You’ve turned down practically every boy in town!” Papa said. I turned away briefly, recalling a particular afternoon when one of the boys

had, within the time of our very first conversation, indicated he could certainly see himself marrying me. Ridiculous. How on earth would he know that after exactly eighty-seven minutes of fractured conversation on our front porch? I recalled that, in recounting the episode to Mum, I had voiced my opinion of the local boys quite strongly, calling them “hicks” or “low-brows” or something of that ilk.

“Please, Papa, not John. I can’t extract more than monosyllabic words from him and he hardly ever goes to church! And surely you cannot approve of his frequenting the poolhall! I’ve seen him come home in the middle of the night drunk and barely able to walk! We’ve all seen him the next day—slow-witted and lazy, unable to move about let alone do a lick of actual work. Abe covers for him all the time, but I know perfectly well he gambles all of Abe’s wages away! That’s why they haven’t gotten their own farm by now. All that and he’s mean too!”

“Now what makes you say that?”

“I’ve seen him whip the horses and once he kicked one of the dogs. I wouldn’t know what to do with myself if he came home in such a state and behaved like that in my house.”

“Now Abbi,” Papa said in a tone he used when he was working very hard to be patient with me and explain things in a way I might understand. “I know you’re the anxious sort and not inclined to look at things rationally. Sharing the farm with Abe and John is the only fair and reasonable thing to do after all the years they’ve worked it with us. The only way to ensure your security here is for you to marry John and stay on the farm with him—and that is exactly what you will do.” His tone lowered at the end and I felt a chill sweep over me.

“But, Papa, if I have my own income, perhaps I can buy out John’s share of the farm. I can give the money directly to Abe or even purchase land and give it to them so John can’t gamble it away. Although,” I said, considering, “John could likely find a way to gamble off his father’s farm given his penchant for hard living...Regardless, I wouldn’t have to marry John.”

Papa shook his head and cast me his patented *my-poor-misguided-daughter* look. “And who would help you run the farm?” Papa asked, setting his hands on his desk top, fingers laced. I hated that. It always signaled Papa was about to end the argument by giving me a pat on my head and sending me off to find mother and a cookie.

“I could run the farm myself,” I had insisted, but the tremor in my voice betrayed my lack of confidence.

“You need a man to do the work of farming,” Papa replied in an *I-know-you-know-this-as-well-as-I-do* tone.

I made a face and looked down. It wasn’t true. I had not been idle in my years growing up on the farm. I had listened while I served the men coffee at the dinner table. I had watched and learned, gaining an understanding of the complexities that went into a good crop versus the mistakes that went into a bad crop. I could probably do tolerably well at managing a farm. What I couldn’t do, however, was lift an eighty-pound bag of seed or toss about bales of hay...

“Look,” Papa began in a *please-do-try-to-be-reasonable* tone. “You don’t need to worry about John. John will settle down after he’s married. A man changes when he has a wife and children and a farm of his own to run. You will see.”

“You cannot promise me that.”

“Perhaps not, but what I can promise you is that you will not be going into Nursing,” Papa replied, pushing the enrollment form back across the desk toward me. He sat back in his great leather desk chair, laying his hands on the armrests and studied me. He never blinked.

Nor did I.

I looked at the paper on the desk but all I could see was John’s lecherous grin when I had passed him in the yard that morning, his eyes roving up and down me. I thought he might at any moment lick his lips like a cat stalking a mouse. The image drove me to desperation. I felt the heat rise up into my chest and then into my face. Papa blanched and it inspired only just enough confidence in me to continue on. My insides trembling, I leaned on the desk with one hand and slid the paper back in front of my father with the other.

“And I can promise you,” I began, forcing my voice louder as I went on, “that if you do not sign this, I will become a scullery maid or a nanny or, or, *anything* in order to support myself, move out on my own, and leave John with the entirety of the farm. I would rather do without it than marry John.” It was a most audacious bluff and unlike anything I had ever done before. My knees were quivering like the string of a bow after the launch of the arrow. I couldn’t breathe as I waited for Papa’s response.

“Unacceptable,” Papa blurted. “I won’t have you throw away a farm I’ve worked so hard for! You wouldn’t do that!”

I said nothing. I straightened, folding my arms, and locked icy glares with Papa. It took some doing to keep from squirming under his glare. He looked down at the paper in front of him then up at me, his expression changing as he thought. He looked at me as though he had just roped

the calf he had been chasing down. An uncomfortable, rather prickly sensation chased around in my gut. I forced myself to stand still.

“I’ll offer you another deal,” my father said, his jaw set tight. “I do not believe you possess the fortitude or perseverance to withstand such labours. I will sign this enrollment form and you will go get this Nursing nonsense out of your head. I doubt you will last the first term. When you have failed—and fail you will—you will come back to marry John without so much as a question or complaint. By then, John will have grown up a little and settled down, you will have learned a valuable lesson regarding the limits of your abilities and where exactly it is that you belong—and everyone will be back here at the end of all things, nicely content and the farm in hand.”

I considered the deal.

“The offer won’t get any better from here,” Papa said, his tone dropping.

“And what if I complete the course?”

“IF you manage to survive the training, you are free to proceed with your career until the age of twenty-one. At that time, you will return to the farm and marry John.”

“And if I can earn enough money to buy out John’s half of the farm before I turn twenty-one??”

“Well, that’s something you can discuss with John, although I doubt he will take the offer—it’s the farming income he wants. Besides, I think that scenario is highly unlikely. Do we have a bargain?”

“We do,” I said with a sigh.

Papa cast me an apologetic frown. “You do see the sense to it, Abbi, don’t you? If you marry John, you will have a good life on your own land—something I’ve worked so hard to give you. That must appeal to some part of you.”

“I understand that is how it looks to you.”

Papa signed the enrollment papers and I signed the agreement to marry John and share the farm with him on my return.

Yes, practicality dictated a union between John and me to guarantee my support and the continuation of the farm as a single entity. In return, I was allowed to go to Nursing school. Thus, John’s marriage proposal was simply the first half of an agreement which would later be finalized. The second part of the agreement was outlined in a document stipulating that John would own half of the farm once the two of us were married. It was signed by all concerned parties, the drafting of a cage to which I was consigned.

I did not then fully comprehend John’s thoughts on the matter. Indeed, we had barely exchanged a few sentences outside of talk about farm issues or polite talk following the church service on the rare occasions he attended. However, I would much later go on to learn John’s view in a very clear and tangible way.