

Chapter 1. Homecoming



James Linnel, also known as Lieutenant Commander Viscount Rede, DSO, RN, looked out of the train window as it pulled into Biltham station. After six long years of war away, little seemed to have changed in this small rural station or, from what he had seen from the train, in the market town of Biltham. He had stayed away for the duration, in part because he hadn't relished questioning from his father, the Earl of Biltham, who had commanded a large first class cruiser in the Kaiser's war. James had not achieved the rank of Captain in the Royal Navy. Mainly however because he had preferred to spend his leaves with Yarridge, a young seaman. Their affair was very secret of course but with various subterfuges, they had found a way of expressing their mutual love. James had commanded *HMS Orchid*, a corvette, a small anti-submarine warship. On board, the two kept formal, although Yarridge was James's steward.



Now, in September 1945, with James now twenty-five years old, it was over a year since Yarridge had been killed when *HMS Orchid* had been attacked and strafed by a bold Focke-Wulf 190 while his ship was supporting the D-day landings.

But now he had to put memories and feelings aside and prepare to face his parents. He was now the only surviving child after his older sister had been killed in an air raid on Bilthaven docks twenty miles away while a volunteer ambulance driver.

He heaved his large kit bag from the luggage rack and opened the compartment door. Seeing a naval officer with two and half rings, a porter came up to him. "Let me take that for you, sir," said the porter. As he relieved James of the heavy kit bag, he looked again. "Sorry, my lord. I didn't recognize you straight away. It is Viscount Rede isn't it? I mean, my lord, it's been a long time."

"It has indeed been a long time," answered James. "Six long years."

They walked along the platform as the locomotive, hissing and puffing, pulled its three coaches into motion to continue its journey.

A young man came up to them, dressed as a chauffeur. "Excuse me, my lord, I shall take that. I've the Phantom waiting."

James looked at this young man. Strikingly good looking, and fit, but James didn't recognize him. "The Phantom? Is that still going?"

"It is, my lord. She needs a bit of love and attention now and then but his lordship trusts me with that."

Leaving the station, a Leading Seaman rating saluted James who nearly forgot to return the salute, so much was his focus on this young chauffeur. He reminded him so much of dear Yarridge.

Outside the station the aging Rolls-Royce Phantom II with its bespoke Park Ward bodywork was parked. Seeing this made James feel for the first time that he was back in the orbit of Biltham Hall and his father. He started to feel more nervous of that than he ever had on the Atlantic convoys or even off the coast of Normandy. Or maybe it was the exciting proximity of the chauffeur.



"What's your name?" asked James.

"Milburn, my lord. John Milburn, but in my family I get Jack."

"You weren't in service at the outbreak, were you?" questioned James. "I don't remember you."

"No, my lord. I think you had just left in the summer of '39 when I came to work on the home farm. I couldn't get a job in Bilthaven and me mam wanted me out of the way of the bombs. I was too young for the military and then, being on the farm, I wasn't called up."

"I'm sure you did your bit, Milburn," said James, wishing he could call him Jack. But that simply wasn't done.

Milburn drove the car steadily out of Biltham along roads that seemed to be exactly as James had left them.



Through the gates of Biltham Hall and up the drive. This was not long and the Hall was not a huge stately home but rather a large manor house, built in the mid nineteenth century when the original Tudor hall burnt down. James was perturbed to see the grounds looking rather overgrown. 'Now to face the old man' thought James, as he watched Milburn take the kit bag out of the car.

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James thought Ashwood looked old. But then in his eyes, the butler of Biltham Hall had always looked old.

"Welcome home, my lord. It is good to see you home safe and sound."

"Thank you, Ashwood. It is good to be home and to see you looking so well."

Ashwood turned to Milburn. "Take Viscount Rede's bag to his room."

Hearing Ashwood refer to his courtesy title again reinforced James's apprehension about his heritage. He knew his father set great store by the family history and he would be expected to provide an heir to the earldom which he would inherit in due course. He felt a sense of dread at the weight on his shoulders. He knew that he could never have another love like dear Yarridge. He had tried simply to be Lt. Cdr James Linnel during his service and pretend he did not have this unwanted destiny. But others called him Lieutenant Commander

Viscount Rede. He thought some of his crew, to whom he was devoted, were proud that their little corvette had a real lord in command. He had wanted to stay in the navy and just be ordinary, but Father's health was not good and Mother had begged him to come home and lighten the load of running the Biltham estate.

All these thoughts were going through his head as he followed Milburn up the stairs. He couldn't help noticing the young man's slim hips and a nice, pert behind. 'Stop that, Linnel. Dear Yarridge was a one-off, the pressures of war and all that.'

"Allow me to unpack for you, my lord," said Milburn, as he put the bag down on the floor of James's room. "Benson has cleaned your room for you when we heard you were coming home."

"Benson?"

"She's a lady from the town, my lord. She comes twice a week to help Lady Biltham clean. I do some of the heavier stuff. She is also cook for dinner when required."

"Who cooks when she is not required?"

"That would be me, my lord. Along with her ladyship."

"I'm sorry, Milburn. I thought you were a farm worker. But you seem to be a man of many roles."

"It's some time since I was on the farm. I live in now. I have my own room in the servants' quarters. There's just Mr Ashwood and myself now."

"What else do you do, Milburn?" asked James, anxious to keep Milburn engaged in conversation and find out more about him.

"Whatever his lordship and her ladyship ask of me," answered Milburn. He smiled and James saw how his face lit up. It was a lovely smile. "I do odd jobs, look after the car, do some cooking as I say, and of course I am his lordship's valet."

"You seem a man of many talents, Milburn."

"Thank you, my lord. Would you like me to run you a bath after your long journey?"

"Thank you, Milburn. I should really go and see his lordship, though."

"I understand he knows you're home, my lord, but he will see you at dinner. He always rests in the afternoon."

"How is my father's health these days? In her letters my mother expressed some concern."

"I'm not sure how he was when you left, my lord, but I think you may find he struggles more with his breathing because of the war wound. I am glad that you have come through unscathed, and I am sure your parents are too."

"It was a near miss at times, thank you Milburn. I was lucky. Luckier than many, including some of my own crew."

"But you got some Nazis though, my lord? You got a medal."

"Yes, Milburn, I was lucky. We sank two U-boats and I believe a third one, but it could not be confirmed. I had good officers and men. They all deserved medals."

"Shall I run that bath for you now, my lord?"

James thought 'I am perfectly capable of running a bath' but decided to let Milburn do it. A mixture of feelings; a way of keeping him a little longer but also he had to get back into the role expected of him - Viscount Rede and heir to The Earl of Biltham. "Yes, please, Milburn."

James took off his jacket and tossed it onto the bed. Then he had a thought - the civvies he had in his kit bag would certainly need a wash and iron before being

suitable to wear. He opened his wardrobe to inspect his clothes. He could smell the mothballs, the same when he opened his chest of drawers.

Milburn emerged from his bathroom from where he could hear the sound of running water. He was holding a towel. "Excuse me, my lord. This towel does not seem very fresh. I will change it for you."

"Thank you, Milburn. Talking of fresh, I have some civvies in my kit bag but I have no doubt they're creased by now. Is there an iron I could use?"

"If you will permit me, I will iron your clothes. Perhaps if you could show me those you wish to wear after your bath, I will press those first."

"That's very good, Milburn. Another talent. Does his lordship dress for dinner these days?"

"Not normally, my lord. It's just his lordship and her ladyship. If they have guests they sometimes do."

James emptied his kit bag out onto the bed and selected some more casual clothes for his immediate needs.

Jack Milburn then left, returned briefly with a fresh towel before departing again. James had a soak in the bath. 'I forgot to ask Milburn what time dinner is served' thought James. 'Probably still seven o'clock.' Feeling refreshed, he dressed, hoping his attire would be suitable, and ventured downstairs. He steeled himself to meet his parents. He had written when he could but he felt guilty about not travelling north when he had been on leave. His time with Yarridge had been so precious with the precarious nature of survival in war. The strafing attack had been the closest he had come to death. Not only had Yarridge been stolen from him but the young Sub-lieutenant standing next to him on the bridge had been hit and killed.

He entered the large drawing room and there were Father and Mother. He stepped forward to greet them.

Chapter 2. New challenges

"My dear boy, it's so good to see you again," said The Earl of Biltham.

"It's good to be home again, Father," replied James, shaking hands. He noticed his father's hands trembled. 'That's new'.

"James, darling, welcome home," said Lady Biltham, and giving James a hug. "What kept you away for so long?"

"There was a war, Mother," said James with a smile and sitting down. "I never had more than a few days at a time, and as the ship's captain, there was always work to do. So I never travelled far."

"We were beginning to wonder if you had a lady friend," said Mother. "Of the right sort, of course."

"The right sort?" queried James.

"A good family. The right background," explained Mother.

"No. Mother. I didn't want that kind of entanglement in wartime." 'If they only knew' thought James.

"Well, you did very well to get your own ship so young, dear," said Mother. "Even if it was only a little one. Didn't he, George?" she added to her husband, seeking affirmation.

"Yes, dear. Promotion can be rapid in wartime for obvious reasons. But yes, he did well. You got a couple, didn't you, James?"

"Yes Father. Two submarines for certain, another one I'm sure of but not confirmed. I had a good crew. I knew them all in the end. Good men, all of them."

"How many crew, darling," asked Mother.

"About ninety, but it was very crowded. They originally weren't built for that many."

"My ship had a crew of eight hundred. I was never able to get to know all of them," said George Linnel.

"Yes, Father, your ship was a bit bigger, smiled James. " A First Class cruiser. Now called a battlecruiser. And you were a Captain."

"James, you were captain of your ship, too, weren't you?" said Mother with a puzzled air.

"Mother, the commanding officer of a ship is always the captain. But for smaller ships the captain would not usually hold the rank of Captain, with four sleeve rings, but an officer of lower rank, such as myself."

"How very confusing," said Lady Biltham.

"Beth, I did explain this to you when James wrote to say he had been given his own command," George reminded his wife.

At that point, Milburn entered, now dressed in a Biltham livery uniform, carrying a tray with tea and sandwiches.

"Thank you, Milburn," said Mother. "Just put it there." She indicated the small table.

He placed the tray down. "Benson is here now, your ladyship. Roast pork, potatoes, runner beans and carrots."

"That sounds excellent, Milburn," said Beth.

"Good God!" said James. "What happened to rationing?"

"All from our own farms, James," said George.

"Of course," said James. "It'll make a lovely change from corned beef. There are very limited galley facilities on a corvette."

"Your ship was attacked by an aeroplane, I understand," said George.

"Yes, Father. On more than one occasion. But the deadliest was after D-day. We were actually heading back north and were alone so there was no covering fire from surrounding ships, so we only had our own gunnery to rely on. The Nazi managed a couple of runs and we lost some crew. The ship wasn't badly damaged though."

"Didn't he aim at the bridge?" asked George.

"He did. A young officer was killed right next to me. Nice chap. Sub-lieutenant Wanless. Lost three seamen too, including our AA gunner, Yarridge."

"Next to you?" questioned Beth. "But it could have been you!"

"Yes, Mother. That's what can happen in a war."

"You wrote to the chaps' families, I hope," said George. "That was the hard part."

"Actually, Father, I think the hard part was losing good men. Men I knew and liked. I suppose with a small ship's company it is bound to be more personal."

"Of course, James. I didn't mean to belittle the sense of loss. When shells from SMS *Aachen* hit my ship at Jutland I lost dozens of men. I only knew a few of them personally."

"Yes, dear, but you insisted on writing to all the families, even though you were so badly injured yourself," said Beth.

"It was my duty," said George. "It also gave me a purpose while I was in hospital."

Ashwood appeared, followed by Milburn, crossing the drawing room deferentially. "Dinner is ready now, your lordship."

"Thank you, Ashwood. Milburn, a hand, please."

Milburn went to where the Earl was sitting and helped him to his feet. Then James had the first real indication of his father's poor health as the Earl allowed Milburn to support him as he slowly walked to the dining room. James could hear his father's breathing become more laboured. All thoughts raced through his mind. Father was now seventy-six years old. James did not want the Earldom yet. In fact - given the choice - he didn't want it at all. But it suddenly seemed as though this was going to be thrust upon him sooner than he had expected. Like Father, he had wanted a naval career but Mother's entreaties to return to Biltham Hall had swayed him. Now, however, he could see the cause of Mother's concern.

In the dining room, he saw the table was set out for a formal dinner. 'Do they always do this?' While Milburn was helping Father into his chair, James managed quietly to ask Ashwood about this.

"No, my lord. It is to mark your safe return. May I respectfully suggest you voice some appreciation. His lordship would like that, I'm sure."

"Of course, Ashwood. Thank you for the prompt." It occurred to James he didn't know Ashwood's Christian name. He had always simply been Ashwood. Now was not the time to ask, if ever there was. Too familiar with the staff. A bit like being in command of a ship. He had known his officers' Christian names but the only other one he could remember was dear Yarridge. David Yarridge. During their secret trysts it had been James and David. David had been very good about keeping their secret. But then perhaps he had more to lose. James at least had some protection afforded by social status, even though disclosure would have destroyed that; a family line going back to the Norman conquest and an Earldom dating from Tudor times. All this went through his head as he waited to sit once father was seated.

The meal, served by Ashwood and Milburn, was superb. After a wartime diet in rationed cities and naval rations on board, the luxury of home raised meat and home-grown vegetables was *cordon bleu* to James.

"Thank you, Father, Mother, for putting on this dinner for my return. You have made it a special occasion."

"It's not every day my only son, my only child now, returns from war," said Mother. "Not just unharmed, but having served his country with distinction."

"Did you manage the pudding I asked for, Ashwood?" George asked.

"Yes, my lord. Young Milburn here was more than happy to create Lord Rede's favourite."

"Not apple crumble?" exclaimed James. He turned to look at Milburn. "You've made apple crumble for me?"

"It was my pleasure, my lord," replied Milburn with a smile. "It happens to be my favourite as well."

James saw that Father and Mother were smiling at him, taking their own pleasure in his surprise and delight. For James, a secret further delight was that Milburn had apparently made this for him. "Thank you so much. That is very thoughtful of you, Father and Mother, and for you too, Milburn. I am sure it will be an excellent apple crumble."

So it turned out. James had an extra helping. He hadn't eaten so well for a long time.

After the meal, Father asked Milburn to help him back to the drawing room. Once Lord and Lady Biltham and Viscount Rede were alone again, Father said, "James, open the port and three glasses."

James went to the cabinet and poured three glasses.

"You'll have a glass, Beth?" said Father to his wife.

"Yes, George, I will. I'm rather partial to port, as you know. And we can toast James's return."

"Will you excuse me for a few minutes," said James. "I wish to thank those in the kitchen for such a splendid effort on my behalf."

"Darling, they will be relaxing and eating their own meal," said Mother.

But James felt drawn, if only to have another interaction, however brief, with Milburn. "I won't disturb them for long, Mother." Before there could be a reply, James left for the kitchen.

He could hear voices within as he knocked on the door. He cautiously opened it. Ashwood, Milburn and a middle-aged woman were sitting round the table, eating their meal. James noted it was the same as that which had been served in the dining room. The three immediately got to their feet.

"My Lord?" questioned Ashwood.

"Please sit down," said James. "I won't disturb you for long. I just wanted to thank you for the splendid meal I've just eaten, and I'm happy to see you have the same. It was cooked to perfection. You must be the famous Benson," James added, looking at the woman.

She immediately got up again and bobbed a little curtsey. "Yes, my lord. Joyce Benson."

"Mrs Benson has been invaluable, my lord," explained Ashwood. "After staff left during the war, she has been a godsend. Sadly in unfortunate circumstances for her, as her husband was lost during the withdrawal to Dunkirk. She has a young son to care for."

"Mrs Benson, I am so sorry to hear of your loss. War is very cruel," said James, mentally noting that Ashwood had called the ignominious retreat to Dunkirk simply a withdrawal. "Milburn, I am told the apple crumble was your doing. Thank you. There seems no end to your talents."

"Yes, my lord," said Mrs Benson. "I did the apple but Jack here makes a very good crumble."

'She calls him Jack. I wish I could.' He was standing close to the seated Milburn. James risked a pat on his shoulder. "He does indeed, Mrs Benson. I shall now leave you to enjoy it as much as I did. Thank you, Ashwood."

"My lord," acknowledged Ashwood, rising to his feet again, as did the others while James left.

Back in the drawing room, Mother asked, "Was all in order in the kitchen? You met Benson, I assume?"

"Yes, Mother. Mrs Benson seems very nice. Of course Ashwood is the only one I remember, but he seems to run a tight ship."

"Your health, James," said Father, raising his glass of port. After taking a sip, he spoke again. "I won't beat about the bush, dear boy. You will have noticed that my health is not good. I need you to start taking over the running of the estate and household. The war has not been good for us."

"I don't think it has been good for the bereaved families either, Father." Too late he thought of his sister. "I'm sorry, Father. We are also in that group. Forgive me."

"Not for one moment, James, do I forget those many who have paid the ultimate price for our freedom. But in terms of the estate, there were strict controls on agriculture, taxes went up and up and profits went down and down. We were lucky that unlike some, Biltham Hall was not requisitioned as a hospital or whatever. Too small, I suppose. Many men left the farms to volunteer to fight. Few of the survivors have come back."

"Mother wrote you had the Land Army here," said James.

"Yes, and very good girls they were too. We also have some prisoners of war working on the farms."

"Have or had?" asked James.

"They are still here. In the next few days you will familiarize yourself with all this. But things are changing, James. Society is changing and the old order has gone. We now have this socialist government under Attlee so God only knows what's in store."

"I don't think it will be as bad as some are saying, Father. They seem to have a lot of progressive ideas."

"That's as may be, James. In the meantime, I'm going to have to rely on you. Which brings me to another question. You need to get married, James. The Linnel line cannot die out with you."

James had been expecting yet fearing this topic. "I understand, Father. But it's been a long day and I would rather leave this topic for another day."

"Yes, George. Don't rush him," said Mother. "He must be one of the most eligible bachelors for miles around."

"Yes. Beth. But the pool of suitable young ladies is not that good. Which is why, James, on Saturday, we're going for dinner at Craneshaugh. Their daughter has come out into society and would be a good match. A few years younger than you. Nineteen, I believe. You need to snap her up before someone else does. I'm sure she'd want to be the future Countess Biltham."

"Not tonight, Father, please. Let's just enjoy being here, together." James was filled with secret dread at this prospect. However attractive and charming this young girl might be, he recoiled inwardly at the thought of trying to provide an heir with her. He poured himself another glass of port.