
Is the war over?

There's a cave deep within the forest on the far hillside, where, in the early 1940s, the French Resistance hid escaped POWs and airmen who'd been shot down.

Haven't bumped into any downed airmen crawling out of the forest yet. But any day now I am expecting to encounter a grey-haired chap in a threadbare blue uniform with a handlebar moustache that beats all-known-records.

He'll limp up to me and whisper, in a voice that can be heard in Brighton: "Is the war over yet? Have we whipped the Huns? Whacked the Bosche? Jerry on the run, eh? Archie bought it – became delirious, started screaming about crumpet and bonking. Had to hit him with a rock. Couldn't be helped. Tasted a bit chewy, I have to say. Not much flesh on him. I say, old boy, you haven't got a Woodbine have you?"

"Thin pickings around here in the woods, you know. Wild mushrooms are not bad in season, don't you know. But you've got to know which ones are good and which ones aren't... Algie selected a red one with white spots – looked pretty, I'll grant you – but it did for him in hours. Green froth coming out of his nostrils at the last. Nothing we could do for him, poor chap. Decided it might be best not to eat him, so we boiled him down and made candles from the fat – portly lad, Algie – and he kept the cave alight for two whole winters.

"We always raised a glass to poor old Algie. 'May your wick never flicker!' we'd shout in unison, as we downed a glass of Albert's elderflower wine.

"Talking of Albert, he came to a bit of a sad end. Went potty about black berries. He distilled blackberries, sloes, elderberries, bilberries... Even tried rabbit's droppings, those small, blackish-brown balls, don't you know? Eau de lapin, he called it. Shit, we called it.

"But what finally did for him was a fixation with deadly nightshade. Someone told him it was known as belladonna and he developed an obsession. You could hear him talking in his sleep, 'Bella Donna, je t'aime. I love you, I really do. I want to drink in your beauty...'. Developed black bags under his eyes, dreaming and daydreaming about his fantasy lover, the beautiful Donna. In the end he picked a few pounds of belladonna berries, triple distilled them and downed them all in one.

"He went rigid as a board, his toenails turned instantly black and, though he was dead as a post, his hair grew an inch all over. Used him as a bridge for years afterwards. Very handy way of getting across the gorge. He never buckled but the hair grew a bit thin with the frequent tramp of flying boots. Finally, one day as I'd just stepped off, his toes and his fingers cracked and he sailed down into the stream below. Bobbed away downstream and we like to think he's ended up in Blighty before us.

“Talking of mushrooms, Chalky became quite a truffle hound. Had a real nose for them. Would find them quicker than the local boars, dig down for them and we’d have a gourmet supper. Unfortunately he developed a bit of a fixation for magic mushrooms and we’d find him sitting under a tree, talking to beetles. ‘Here Wingco,’ he’d say, ‘Let me introduce you to my chum Boris, he’s a flier.’ Boris was a beetle.

“Poor old Chalky. Developed a taste for boar’s droppings – long, black and a bit damp. The droppings, that is. You’d find Chalky with one up each nostril and one in each ear. And by the end, when he’d given up wearing clothes all together, there’d be one winking at you from his fundament. He could waggle it. The dropping, that is. Overdosed in the end on boars’ droppings. Didn’t like to eat him so we buried him and planted marrows on top. A bumper crop the next year! Good old Chalky, he’d have seen the funny side...

“Those black mushrooms were very tasty but, my God, the after-effect. Made you fart like a trooper. Cave was filled with an awful fug. There was a dark mushroom cloud hovering about four feet off the floor. Had to roll the stone away from the far entrance to let some air in. Alfie passed out on one occasion. Mind you he was tall – 6ft 4in – and it appears the mushroom cloud sucked out all the oxygen above it. Alfie fell like a sack of potatoes. Recovered when we got him into the open air. Doesn’t seem too brain-damaged. Well, thinks his mother lives in the cobweb in the corner. She was a bit black and hairy, by all accounts...Welsh.

“Sings *Sospan Fach* to her every night, before he turns in. And does *Land of my Fathers* – all the verses – on Sundays. Chapel, they were, all of them. On her birthday we all gather round and sing ‘Lloyd George knew my father, father knew Lloyd George...’

“You should see us, singing to a spider. An outsider might think we’d all gone stir-crazy but we’re a happy band of brothers. Well, that is, we were. Alfie tried to drop-kick a hand grenade. Thought he was at the Arms Park, winning the game for Wales. Took the pin out, dropped it and just as his foot connected – boophhhh, ker-boom! We were picking bits of Alfie out of our hair for days afterwards. Fed the last of him to his mother sitting in her web. Sent him off with a rousing chorus of ‘Bread of heaven, bread of heaven, feed me til I want no more, want no mooore...’

“He’s up there with all the other great Welsh fly halves, drop-kicking balls between the upstretched wings of angels.

“Truth is, there’s none of us left now. Just me. So thought I’d venture out of the forest and see whether the Stormtroopers were still jackbooting up and down, or whether the garlic-munchers had reclaimed their villages. Looking at you, I’m not sure...”

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