



The Sentinel – A Story for Armistice Day

Moral: Good things come to those who wait.

Walter Squires couldn't wait to join the regiment. His father had been a soldier, as had his father before him. "We're a military family," said his dad proudly, "and now, young Walter, it's your turn to take the King's shilling. Get yourself down to the recruiting station sharpish and tell the sergeant I sent you. England needs every man to do his duty and I know you're raring to do your bit to put the wind up Kaiser Bill."

Walter nodded eagerly, "The Jerries have had it their own way for too long, Dad. But now the Americans have come in on our side we should soon have this war finished." He sighed, "I just hope it isn't over before I get the chance to see some action."

His father took his pipe out of his mouth and pointed the stem at his son. "Don't you fret, my lad. You'll have your chance." Then he clamped his teeth around its wooden stem and puffed away contentedly as the blue smoke curled up past his walrus moustache. His son jumped up from his chair, slapped his flat cap firmly on his head and whistled for his dog, Raffles. Then, when the eager animal scrambled from its place by the fireside and bounded over to his master, he strode out of the cottage and marched down the street to the recruiting station.

Walter and Raffles had been together since Walter's dad had arrived home one night with a bundle of fur, tail and huge paws that turned out to be a puppy. Alfred Squires was a widower and he was of the opinion that Walter, a mischievous ten-year-old boy, needed something in his life he could learn to take care of and love. Alfred had been invalided out of the army and found it difficult to keep up with the relentless energy of his young, healthy son. "A dog might be just the thing to keep him out of trouble," he thought. And so it had proved.

Raffles was a mixture of several different types of dog but his soft mouth and bouncy good nature said he had a large amount of labrador and golden retriever somewhere in his ancestry. Walter was delighted with Raffles who, in turn, was devoted to his young master and the two went everywhere together. Now, for the first time they were to be parted.

The sergeant at the recruiting station had welcomed Walter with open arms and now Walter was packing his cardboard suitcase ready to travel to Crowchester, the home of the Royal Larkshire Light Infantry. Raffles had no idea where his master was going but he looked at Walter with puzzled brown eyes and a mournful expression

on his face. Walter glanced over at the dog and threw a rolled-up sock at him. Raffles ignored it and continued to stare at Walter. He whined gently and wagged his tail mournfully. "Don't worry, old chap," said Walter. "I'll be back before you know it."

Raffles and Alfred went to the railway station with Walter to wave him off on his journey to Crowchester. Raffles barked excitedly and snapped at the steam as it gushed from the locomotive and onto the platform. Then, as Walter leaned out of the carriage window, he leapt up to try and lick his master's face one last time. Walter laughed and shouted out that he would be back before they knew it. Suddenly, the train lurched forward and soon all Alfred and Raffles could see was Walter's handkerchief fluttering from the window as the train pulled away into the distance. Raffles sat down on the platform and stared after the now vanished train. "Come on boy," Alfred said. "Let's get home and put the kettle on." But the dog refused to budge so Alfred was forced to drag him by his collar out of the station.

As soon as they arrived back inside their cottage, Raffles scratched at the door and barked furiously. "Come away from that door and stop barking," commanded Alfred sternly. "Walter will be home shortly and all the barking in the world won't bring him back any quicker." But it was a long time before the dog would be pacified.

The weeks passed and then, one day, a letter arrived which made Alfred's eyes light up. "Good news, Raffles," he said. "Young Walter is coming home on leave for a few days before they send him to France." The dog thumped his tail hard on the stone floor of the kitchen as if he understood Alfred's words.

When Walter's train steamed into the station, Alfred and Raffles were standing on the platform to meet him. Raffles chased his tail and barked and yelped with excitement and generally made a complete nuisance of himself by knocking over suitcases and crashing into unwary passengers in his eagerness to greet his master. Walter laughed to see his dog so happy and, indeed, as Alfred said, it was about time as Raffles had been in low spirits since the day Walter left.

For the next few days Raffles never left Walter's side but then, on Sunday afternoon, Walter climbed back on the train that was to take him away to war and, once again, Raffles was left barking hopelessly as the train pulled out from the station in a cloud of steam.

Life in the cottage carried on for Alfred and Raffles but the dog was obviously miserable without his master. "Cheer up, boy," Alfred told him. "Your master will be home just as soon as he's put Kaiser Bill's army to flight." But the weeks passed and Walter did not return. Sometimes, the postman would deliver a letter from Walter and, when he did, Alfred would read it to Raffles. Raffles would sit at his feet looking up at him with his head cocked to one side. "You know it's from Walter don't you,

Raffles? But you don't have the faintest notion of what's happening to your master. Well, he's risking his life in the trenches fighting for King and country but, unless there's a bullet with his name on it, he'll come home safely to us." At these words Raffles would bark and wag his tail furiously.

Then, one day, the postman brought another letter. Alfred groaned when he saw it and the colour drained from his face. He slumped down in his chair and opened it with trembling hands. Raffles watched his face expectantly. Alfred read the letter silently and tears began to roll down his cheeks. Raffles nudged him with his nose and whimpered softly. Alfred gulped and the letter slipped from his fingers. "It's from Walter's commanding officer," he muttered. "Walter's missing in action. They think he's dead. Walter's company was ordered to attack the enemy and when they climbed over the top of their trench, the Germans hit them with everything they had. No one survived though they haven't found all of the bodies yet. The commander says Walter was a very brave man and we can be proud of him."

Alfred didn't look proud, he looked like an old man as he hung his head in sorrow and wept for his son. Raffles licked Alfred's hand and then put his head back and howled just as his wolfish ancestors once howled at the moon. It was a sound to chill the heart. But then Raffles went to the front door and scratched at it begging to be let out. Reluctantly, Alfred did so and Raffles raced off down the street.

Hours later, Alfred roused himself from his grief and went searching for the dog. He found him sitting on the platform of the railway station, upright as a sentry on duty, staring at the trains as they came in from Crowchester. Alfred was touched and smiled a sad smile. "You're wasting your time, Raffles," he said gently. "Your master's body lies in France. He won't be coming home again." But the dog refused to return to the cottage until the last train had come and they shut the station for the night. Then, when the stationmaster arrived to open the station early the next morning, he found Raffles waiting. He sent a message to Alfred but neither of them had the heart to prevent the dog from keeping his lonely watch for his master.

The following days and weeks passed slowly for Alfred but, finally, the dreadful war came to an end and the surviving soldiers came home. Alfred knew that thousands of families all over Britain had, like him, lost loved ones in the war and it all seemed such a terrible waste that so many young men had died. Still, even though he knew it was hopeless, he woke early each morning and let Raffles run down to the railway station where the faithful animal spent the day sitting on the platform. When the trains from Crowchester arrived he leapt up and scanned the faces of the alighting passengers then, when the last of them had hurried past, he would whine pitifully and sit down again to wait patiently for the next train.



The stationmaster put out a bowl of water for Raffles and the porters and passengers patted and fussed over him but Raffles hardly seemed to notice their attentions. So they shook their heads sadly and said, "It's a crying shame. He's a faithful hound and he can watch all he likes but he'll never see his master alive in this world again."

Raffles didn't understand what people were saying and he would not have cared even if he could. Nothing, not rain, hail or even snow could make him desert his post or give up hope. Then, one evening, as the stationmaster prepared to meet the seven o'clock train from Crowchester, Raffles began to bark and yelp. He ran to the edge of the platform and howled at the incoming engine. The stationmaster grabbed at him and tried to pull him back. He was very afraid that the dog had finally gone mad and was about to throw himself onto the tracks as the locomotive steamed into the station. Raffles tore free of the stationmaster's grip and hurtled along the platform. A carriage door swung open and a young man stepped out wearing a large white bandage round his head. It was Walter. Raffles leapt up into his arms and nearly caused him to stagger backwards into the carriage again. Raffles licked Walter's face frantically while Walter tried desperately to regain his balance.

The stationmaster ran up to them and rescued Walter from his dog's boisterous welcome. "But ... but we all thought you were dead!" he stuttered in disbelief.

"I nearly was," replied Walter. "A shell exploded next to me and the blast knocked me unconscious. The Germans advanced and found me. They took me prisoner. The explosion made me lose my memory and so I wasn't even able to send a message to say what had happened to me. When the war ended the Germans sent me back to a hospital in England. Then, yesterday, my memory came flooding back so I discharged myself and caught the first train home."

That night, the whole town celebrated Walter's miraculous return from the dead but pride of place at the party went to Raffles, the dog that never gave up hope.



Background

In 1918, on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, a terrible tragedy that had claimed the lives of millions of young people came to an end. After four years of bitter war, an armistice was signed. The 'war to end all wars' was over. It had destroyed communities and brought grief and heartbreak to families all over the world.

Many countries remember their honoured dead and veterans on November 11. However, the purpose of this day is not to celebrate or glorify war, but to remind us of the sacrifice made by others for our freedom. To help us show that we have not forgotten, many people wear poppies on November 11. They were the only flowers that still grew on the devastated fields of Flanders and

northern France after the opposing armies had clashed. They became a symbol of hope to the soldiers who survived the slaughter. John McCrae, a doctor serving with the Canadian Armed Forces during the First World War, saw the poppies and wrote a poem called, 'In Flanders Fields'. In it he said that if the dead were ever forgotten they would be unable to sleep. The poem was one of the first to tell people about the reality of the war.

Some schools use this story to introduce their pupils to the notion of Remembrance Day and the two minutes silence, as well as the reasons why we sell and wear poppies at this time. The Royal British Legion produces over 30 million poppies each year. The money raised from the sale of these poppies goes to support welfare services and relieving distress. More information can be found on the Royal British Legion Web site at <http://www.britishlegion.org.uk/>.

'Taking the King's shilling' refers to the old practice of recruiting soldiers by offering them a shilling to join the army.



Key questions

- Why do we wear poppies on Remembrance Day?
- What is the point of holding a two minutes silence?
- Doesn't Remembrance Day just glorify war?
- Why do you think John McCrae was worried that people would forget those who died in World War One?
- Do you think remembering those who died will stop the world from going to war again?



Prayer (optional)

Please close your eyes and sit quietly while I share these thoughts with you.

Lord, millions of ordinary people have died in wars throughout the ages. War is a terrible thing and only leads to death and destruction. We know that the human spirit is capable of great things so let us devote all our energies to making peace and building a world where people of all races and religions can live happily together. We know we owe it to all those who sacrificed themselves so that we could be free. Never let us forget them but allow us to honour them by turning our backs on war forever. Amen.



Bible links

Lamentations Chapter 3 verses 22-26 (The Lord is good to those who wait for him and seek him)