

PETER
YELDHAM

Barbed Wire and Roses

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*To my daughter Lyn and my son Perry,
and in loving memory of their mother*

Stephen
1914

It was the last day of August when Stephen said his farewells and left the cloistered quadrangle, pausing only at the main gates for a last nostalgic look. The familiar sight of the green lawn and sprawling university brought a brief moment of regret. The Gothic sandstone building with its famed clock tower was a landmark, both in this city and in his own life. It was a place to which he had aspired, an existence he'd enjoyed all year and would greatly miss. While he felt excited at what lay ahead, he hoped he could keep the promise he'd made himself to return here when it was over.

The winter afternoon was cold and gusty, and billowing sheets of newspaper were among the litter being blown across Camperdown Road. As Stephen ran for an approaching tram he managed to grab a section of the Herald, by good fortune capturing the centre page that contained the major news stories. He paid his fare and settled in the open tram, struggling to fold the paper against the flurrying wind. Today the normally sedate broadsheet was more like a tabloid with its shock headlines: BELGIUM CRUSHED. CIVILIANS SLAIN. HUN ATROCITIES. An editorial expressed outrage at

German brutality. Cartoonists were already following the trend, depicting them as bestial subhuman figures.

Dispatches from European correspondents reported the cities of Liege and Brussels had fallen to German cavalry. There were allegations of nuns being raped; children brutally bayoneted. In Flanders the French and British were in retreat. The battle of Mons was a disaster, where both sides made the bizarre claim of having seen the vision of an angel above the battlefield. Whether fact or fantasy, this Angel of Mons did not save the Allied armies from a humiliating rout that threatened the loss of Paris.

Stephen was stunned by the litany of disasters. Only one column had cheerful tidings: in New York the United States had lost the Davis Cup tennis final to a combined Australian and New Zealand team called Australasia. Meanwhile tucked away in small news paragraphs and deemed of less importance were reports of German shops in Adelaide and the Barossa towns being vandalised. Stained-glass windows in German churches were targets for rocks and hooligan missiles. Music stores were banning Beethoven, while Steinways and all other German pianos had been hastily removed from sight. It was hard to believe, he thought, that the war was just three weeks old.

As his tram reached the city, loudly clanging warnings at the street intersections and forcing motor traffic to give way, Stephen began to hear the stirring sound of a military band. In Martin Place, where he and most other passengers alighted, a huge crowd had already gathered to fill the entire square. It was a spectacular response to the national recruitment day, the start of a campaign to raise a volunteer force of twenty thousand. And when that quota was filled the next objective was to recruit and send another twenty thousand, to meet the offers of assistance so readily pledged to Britain