

## The Helping Hand

by Richard Rewell

The north of England, 1946. The town of Tarbridge is surrounded by moorland. Smoke from its numerous factories give it the appearance of a smouldering ruin. A black scar in the purple heather of the moor. But not quite. Its grey streets have specks of colour. There is still rationing but people are optimistic. They won the war and life will get better. I was happy to be there. To be there for him. And there he was.

No one noticed me emerge from the dingy alleyway. They never do.

I crossed the road, easily avoiding the lumbering green tram and stood next to the scruffy man as he helped a lady pick up the shopping she had dropped.

"Thanks John. Here have an apple," said the woman.

"No love. Go on, get yourself home," replied John.

"Take care love," said the woman walking off.

The scruffy man painfully eased himself upright holding hands in the small of his back and started forward his feet and knees aching.

"Please Sir. Can you help me?" I said.

"The scruffy man looked down at me and smiled, "well I hope so. What's up lad?"

"I'm lost."

"Where do you need to go to?"

"The Station Hotel. My parents are there."

“Right, we’ll catch number six tram,” said the scruffy man as he fumbled in his overcoat pocket and pulled out some coins which he studied the added, “yes, not a problem lad. And what good luck, here’s one now.”

I had to help John up into the tram, lead him to a seat to the accompaniment of at least three different people wishing him well.

“No, no. you sit down,” he said.

“No please you sit down.”

John chuckled, I smiled and John sat.

John Walter Dickinson had been a member of the Tarbridge Pals regiment during the first world war. He had been a hero. Mentioned in dispatches for saving three wounded friends caught up in barbed wire during the battle of the Somme. John had experienced the horror of the trenches having been up to his knees for three months in water in the awful winter of 1915. Returning home after the war the world flu epidemic killed his wife and two children. He also lost his home and business. But not his humanity. He became Tarbridge’s gentleman of the road. Today he’d be called a tramp. He slept rough. Refusing all handouts. He was sixty years old.

“This is it lad,” said John as the tram stopped outside the station.

“Talking to yourself John?” asked the tram driver.

“You what Tommy?” replied John as he stepped down onto the pavement and the tram pulled away.

“Thank you, John,” I said.

“That’s alright. Better go it’s beginning to rain,” and with that, John sped towards a derelict building across the road while I entered the Station Hotel’s lobby where no one noticed me. They never do.

Next morning a man got up from the manky mattress he had slept on the previous night. He felt good. In fact, he felt marvellous.

“What’s happened to me?” he screamed, as a joyous John stared at the face looking back at him from the remains of an old mirror, “I look about twenty-five!”

Well some people need a second chance, don’t they?

