

Jolasveinar

In 1940, a small British force of marines sailed from Greenock to Iceland to occupy the strategically important territory. Upon landing they were guided by local Britons and quickly secured important localities without incident. German citizens were taken into custody and the consulate seized. Iceland maintained its neutrality throughout this “friendly occupation” and the British troops were treated like guests. However, some of Iceland’s more ancient residents were less pleased with their visit...

I remember very well how the whole ghastly business began. It was 1940, Wilfred and I had some time to ourselves between schemes, and had wandered up into the mountains above the village. We had by this point explored most of the geyser sites surrounding nearby Reykjavik and the novelty had long since worn off. It had been Wilf’s suggestion to take to the peaks – though technically they were off limits.

“Ah they’ll have us up here on manoeuvres at some point,” he suggested “we might as well get a head start.”

I required very little convincing; I was bored. We were *all* bored, and time away is so much worse when Christmas comes around.

“Here look at this!” called Wilfred “There’s a cave up here! I’ve heard that some of the local Jerries hid their valuables before we arrived.”

“Looking for buried treasure Corporal?”

“You never know! Bit of seasonal cheer!”

Wilf reached the cave before me – I’m convinced he was genuinely expecting to find a dragon’s horde of gold. What he did find however, was no less unlikely. By the time I caught up to him, he had advanced some way into what seemed to be a fairly substantial cave system.

“What do you make of this?” he motioned.

Here then, was Wilfred’s treasure trove; a pile of toys, mostly broken, some rotten with age and damp. This in itself was curious enough, but next to the toys...

“Bones.” said Wilfred. “Animal I *think*.”

I remember feeling very uneasy and I insisted that we leave immediately. “Okay. No gold.” smiled Wilfred stooping towards the pile of toys “But I’m having this soldier.” He pocketed the tin figurine, and we began the descent to base. I turned once to look at the cave and in that moment it seemed to me to resemble nothing less than a terrible dark mouth, howling in anger.

When we returned to camp, there was some commotion. A group of local women were arguing with Captain Maxwell. Wilfred and I walked over to O’Connell - he had mastered the local dialects better than most.

“What’s up here?” I asked.

“They’re suggesting we move camp. They’ve even told us we can come into the village and stay with them for a few weeks.”

“Sounds good to me!” said Wilfred. “What’s the Cap got to say about it?”

“Oh you know him. He’s convinced it’s a plot by Nazi sympathisers.”

This was understandable, but rather unfair. Since our arrival in May, the Icelanders had been very welcoming, even though we were technically an occupying force! Iceland’s Prime Minister had actually asked the whole country to welcome us as guests and defenders.

“Why do they want us to move?” I asked.

“That’s the bit I can’t figure out yet. They keep pointing up around the mountains and saying ‘*Jolasveinar*’.”

“And what does that mean?” I asked

“Well...” laughed O’Connell “I think it means...*elves!*”

I woke that night to the sound of screaming. I was up and at arms at once. The camp was in chaos. We had been plunged into near darkness, the valley was dimly lit only by a few torches and the embers and remnants of the evenings fires. I could see that several of the tents were down and men seemed to be running to and fro with little order or purpose.

“What’s all this?” I shouted to no one in particular.

“It’s wolves! There’s wolves in the camp!”

I returned immediately to my tent to fetch my torch and I recall briefly wondering how wolves would have extinguished our lights. At that moment,

my tent collapsed upon me. I struggled momentarily in the tarpaulin. And then, something grabbed my foot with great force. Almost instantly there was a searing pain in my leg and light and sound all dipped out of focus. I recall the noise of the tent fabric being torn, and all the while an unearthly growl, which at times sounded perversely like giggling. Mercifully, I blacked out.

I came to in the hospital, my chest and left leg swathed in bandages. I was told I had been mauled by some sort of wild animal. I was unconvinced; there *are* no wolves in Iceland, it had felt like a hand grabbing me. And what of the strange guttural giggling? I said nothing of these things however.

For a short time there was a feeling among the company that dogs had been set into the camp to disrupt activities prior to a German attack. Local folk were questioned, but when such an attack failed to materialise, accusations quickly gave way to a feeling of festive cooperation.

Of Wilfred however, there was no sign.

I was billeted home on sickleave, and so was able to share Christmas with my family. I found myself strangely menaced by the wooden toys Mildred had managed to find for the boys. When I was fit for recall, my regiment had been posted to Egypt.

The events of that long dusk haunted me for many years to come. Eventually, I returned to Iceland, and to the little village – now a little town - where we had been stationed. I asked the people about the word “*Jolasveinar*”, about why we had been asked to move. Had we misunderstood their warning? Indeed we had, for *Jolasveinar* does not mean “elves”, it means “little trolls”.

I was told the legends of Iceland’s “Yuletide Lads”, a motley family of trolls who come down from the mountains to steal food, toys and generally wreak havoc at the turn of each year. Time and tradition have long since softened them into mischevicious elves, but in olden times the *Jolasveinar* were creatures who stole away bad children in the long winter nights.

Later that day, I carefully climbed back up the mountain in search of the cave Wilfred and I had explored. The entrance had been partly blocked by fallen rocks, but I managed to squeeze myself into the cold dark of the cavern. Toys and bones were still piled by the far wall. And there, set quite deliberately apart from all the other toys, was the little tin soldier Wilfred had taken all those years before. Beside it lay his watch, the strap ragged and torn.

I did not tarry in that terrible place and clambered down from the mountains back to the relative safety of the town below.