

## *Tides of Honour*

by Genevieve Graham

### Silvertown Explosion

*The factories in which so many women had to work were more than just a little unsafe. In addition to all the regular dangers of a job like this, the chemicals and machinery were prone to catching fire. On Friday January 19, 1917 at 6:52pm, the Silvertown munitions factory in Essex exploded, lighting up about fifty tons of TNT, killing seventy-three people, and injuring more than four hundred more. This was not the largest explosion to happen in a British munitions factory, either. No one was safe. Fortunately, Audrey was living in a barracks a safe distance away, though she felt its effect.*

*I didn't include this chapter in the story because frankly, it seemed impossible to believe. Another explosion? Seemed a little gratuitous. And yet the awful truth is that it really did happen.*

The dining room was on the main floor, down the hall from the front entrance. It was always warm, with a roaring fireplace and a continuous press of hungry patrons. Audrey slid her hand down the bannister as she went, looking forward to the evening's meal.

Suddenly the ground jolted, and a crash shook the building, shattering glass upstairs. Women screamed, and Audrey lost her footing, sliding in a lump down the few remaining stairs.

"Germans!" someone yelled. "Why didn't the alarm go off?"

Audrey got to her feet as a crush of women rumbled down the stairs, clinging to each other, some of them sobbing. One dabbed a dirty cloth against a fresh cut on her cheek. Another *boom* had them ducking then screaming again, and they congregated in the dining hall for its perceived safety. A few hardy souls hopped briefly outside to see what was happening, then reported back.

"The whole city's on fire!" one exclaimed, and the others bobbed their heads.

"Was it the Germans?" seemed to be the most prevalent question. What else could it be?

Sirens filled the air, their rise and fall mixing with screams and cries for help coming from outside. It took another twenty minutes before Mrs Emerson had everyone sitting in the dining room, assuring them that whatever it was, they were safe, and they might as well eat while the stew was hot. She sent out a runner in the meantime, hoping for news.

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When they were finished eating, Mrs Emerson stood before them and asked that they all remain seated.

“Ladies,” she said calmly, pressing her palms toward the floor. “Everyone quiet, please.” She waited for everyone to settle, staring at each chatty woman in turn, like a matron with schoolchildren. When it was quiet, she nodded brusquely. “I have heard from the police, and what I have learned is quite shocking, I’m afraid.”

She held her hands up again at the renewed murmur, and the room went quiet.

“The explosion happened at the Silvertown factory.”

“But we were just there!” someone cried. “It was fine!”

“Nevertheless, that is where the explosion occurred. Police and firemen are at the scene, doing what they can, but there has been massive devastation.”

“Was it bombed? Was it the Germans?”

“They haven’t said anything about that. I don’t think they rightly know,” Mrs Emerson replied quickly, then she pursed her lips. “The fire reached the Gas Works at Blackwall, which caused another explosion.”

“Are we safe?”

“It seems so, since nothing new has happened. But they believe many people have been killed, hundreds of homes have been destroyed or badly damaged, and thousands of other buildings were similarly affected. The city will need to pull together as a unit, help the unfortunate, and help rebuild.” She cleared her throat and her eyes darted briefly around the room. “And the factory is gone, so your jobs are gone as well.”

Half the women bubbled over with objections at that, and the other half simply stared, open-mouthed, trying to digest the truth of it. What would they do without their jobs? Where would they go? But practicality returned, reminding them all that the war was in no danger of ending anytime soon, and with no men around to work, women would always be needed to fill the working roles.

By the time Mrs Emerson’s announcement was over and the dining room cleared, Audrey could finally say she was warm. At the risk of freezing once again, she moved toward the door, wanting to see what everyone

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was calling an orange sky. She wasn't prepared for the magnificence of the scene when she stepped outside. The snow had stopped, as had the wind, and fire had taken their place, filling the night with flames and smoke, casting an orange glow as far as she could see.

Audrey couldn't take her eyes off the sky. Such color! Such beauty! A shiver roared up her spine, reminding her she no longer wore a coat, but she hugged herself tighter, determined to stay just a moment longer. How long had it been since London had seen anything so remotely beautiful? Of course she was sorry for the deaths, for the destruction, but her sense of wonder overwhelmed her. Had anyone ever seen a sight like this before?

An ache started up in her throat, and she hesitated, debating whether or not to give in to the urge to weep. Where had her emotions come from? Was it the shock of the explosion and the understanding that people had died? Perhaps. That would be the proper reaction, the reason so many wept around her. But a deeper thrum vibrated in her heart, awed by the splendour surrounding them all: the harsh, desolate black profiles of shattered buildings embraced by the most pure, joyful glow she could imagine. She felt infinitely tiny in such a spectacle, and the humility of the moment emptied her of all concerns.

If she wept, would it be for the loss or for the beauty? She had no more time to debate, because the tears overflowed before she even knew they were coming.

Somewhere nearby an unsteady window pane gave in, crashing to the ground and startling Audrey. In a panic, she raced upstairs to the shared bedroom, slowing at the doorway to avoid stepping on broken glass and fallen items. While the downstairs of the building seemed relatively untouched, the upstairs was a wreck, and the cold January night was settling into its remains. A couple of other women were already in the room, sorting through the mess, and Audrey's eyes went to her bunk—what she could see of it. Trying to maintain her balance over the shifting floor, she carefully made her way to everything she owned. Her space had suffered no less than anyone else's, and the sight of it brought tears to her eyes.

It was slow work, moving shards of glass aside with her bare hands, but her gloves were buried somewhere within, so she had no choice. She knew everything would be all right—clothes and paper would simply need to be cleaned off—but she needed to *see* it. Ah, there. Two boxes, side by side in their accustomed places, right where they should be. And beside them lay her precious art supplies.

It was a relief to see they were untouched, having been protected by her mattress. She pulled out the first box, checking swiftly on the stash of money within. Her “Canada money,” she called it. Most of the other women

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talked of putting their money in the bank, but Audrey had never liked the idea of locking her money away somewhere she couldn't reach. The truth was that she wanted to see her money, to feel it. Its presence was solid proof that one day soon she would escape this place, with its greys and blacks, its stink of grease and exhaustion, and she'd fly away, take her life to a whole new world. Canada, she had come to believe, was full of color. Just like Danny.

She set the box back, satisfied, then reached for the second as if it were a small animal, frightened by the noise and confusion. As soon as her fingers closed around the basic wooden corners she felt it, that connection she'd forged in her mind of being with Danny. She hugged the box to her chest, closing her eyes, reassured. Then she opened it, staring first at the small portrait she'd done of him, attached to the top of the box, then at her worn collection of letters. She had memorized every one of them.