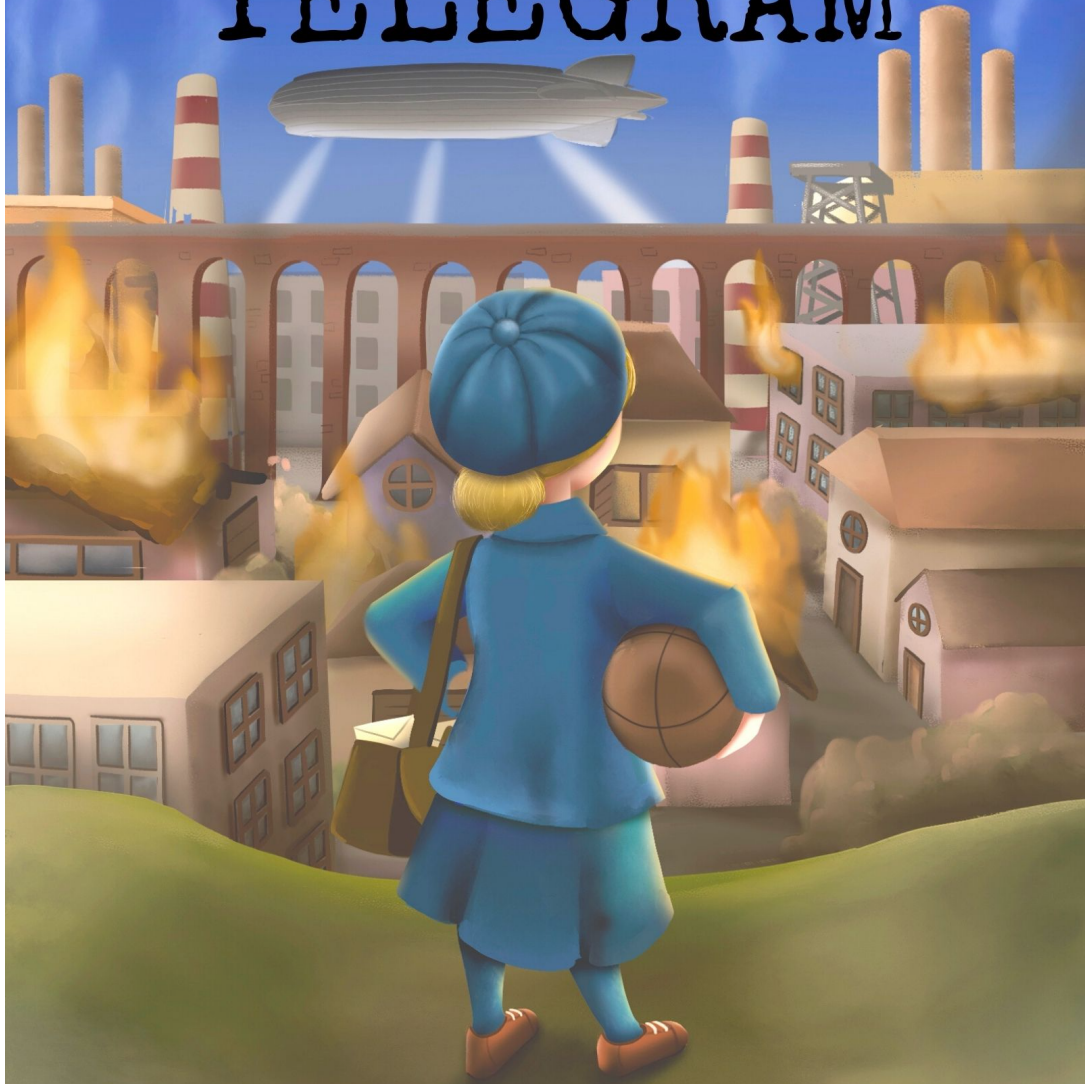




THE TELEGRAM



"They represent the very best of us"

Nic Clare

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Chapter 1

There's a lad lives down our street who came home from the war with a rattle in his chest and a bandage over his eyes.

"The gas got me," he said. "There was no avoiding it. It was silent but not invisible. We could see it coming for us across no-man's-land. A thick green smoke that set heavy over the ground. It rolled towards us like water running down a mill race, seeping into every crevice. The sergeant rang a bell and shouted for us to take cover. GAS GAS! He screamed. A couple of the boys tried to outrun it, but it swallowed them up like a monster from another world. We scrambled for our gas masks to sit it out. Mine had a hole in it, so I breathed it in. It went into my eyes and throat, stinging and burning. It was inevitable. If it's got your name on it, there's nothing you can do."

When I stand at the top of the street, smart in my uniform with the telegram in my hand, I am the same as that green gas, moving slowly, inevitably towards my target. Some try to outrun me. They slam their doors when they see me approach, as if the news will not be true if they don't hear it. Some stand in their front windows watching with their handkerchieves over their mouths, praying that I pass them by. But if the telegram has their name on it, there's nothing they can do.

The telegram in my hand was addressed to number twenty. I could feel the breath of those I had spared on the back of my neck as I passed, and they let out a sigh of relief. Stopping at the front door, I steadied myself. A tin bucket dripped on the wet front step, a scrubbing brush, a donkey stone and a block of soap abandoned in a hurry. She must have sensed that I was coming for her. She must have seen me as she scrubbed at the doorstep and rushed inside to blockade

herself against the news. But there was nothing to be done. I knocked, firm and deliberate, then stood back with the letter in my hand. The net curtains in the front parlour fluttered before the door opened slowly and the strained figure of Mrs Ross looked out. Her flashing, striking blue eyes that once lit up her face, were empty and raw with pain, begging me to say it wasn't so.

“Telegram for Mrs Ross.” I said softly as I held out the envelope. She looked up and down the street, then set her jaw and took it from me. Six sons at the front and this was the third telegram I had delivered to her house. No wonder she couldn't stand the sight of me. I didn't wait for a reply. I didn't offer any condolences, that's not in my gift. My job is to deliver the message. Nothing more, nothing less.

Right from the outbreak of war, I wanted to contribute more. I wasn't doing any good stuck behind the counter at the post office. I had friends working in munitions and for the Red Cross but my parents wouldn't hear of it. Then, with the boys away, they called for girls to take their place delivering the letters. They couldn't object to that, could they? I would still be working for their precious post office and I'd be doing my bit.

“It's not a job for you Martha.” My dad said as he sat behind his desk with my application in his hand. As the postmaster as well as my father, he could decide my fate.

“Why not? I can do it as well as any boy?”

“Are you sure? In all weathers? The wind and the rain and the snow? What if your bicycle gets a puncture, can you fix it? You might deliver dreadful news. Are you prepared for that? For crying mothers or angry fathers? There's a reason for the expression 'don't shoot the messenger.' You'd be in the firing line.”

I hesitated. I hadn't thought it through, but I was prepared for it. No one ever said that war was easy. The girls in the munitions factories filling the shells don't flinch because the work is dangerous. The boys at the front don't run away because they are afraid. "I am prepared for that." I said, raising my chin.

"If I let you sign up for this, you can't give it up if you don't take to it. If you sign up, you commit for the duration of the war."

To find out more about Martha and The Telegram visit www.nicclare.com to buy the book.