

J O H N B R Y A N T

26.2

THE INCREDIBLE TRUE STORY
OF THE THREE MEN WHO SHAPED
THE LONDON MARATHON



FOREWORD BY LORD COE

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For Grace and Tess, and all those who
follow in their footsteps

FOREWORD

From its mythical military origins in the small Greek town of Marathon approximately 2,500 years ago, the act of running a marathon has become a universal symbol of achievement and inspiration and organised marathons – especially at Olympic Games and in major cities around the world – have become a pinnacle of personal achievement recognized and respected in countries and cultures around the world.

While major mass participation marathons are landmark events for athletes of all standards attracting global TV coverage and international attention for cities hosting them and their participants the development of the marathon as one of sport's greatest attractions remains less well known – a situation which is skilfully addressed in this new book by former Fleet Street editor, author and sports enthusiast John Bryant.

In the finest traditions of *Chariots of Fire*, Bryant's book vividly recreates one of the most dramatic days and events in sport – the 1908 Olympic Games Marathon in London, an epic contest which, along with the intense rivalries, idealism, controversies and spectacle of the Games shaped the evolution of modern sporting culture.

The book follows the fates of legendary runners Dorando Pietri from Italy and American John Hayes, who took the emerging sport of competitive distance running to the extremes of human endurance, and so helped the marathon distance establish itself for ever in the popular imagination. They, along with the British sprinter Wyndham Halswelle, the embodiment of modern Olympic founder Pierre de Coubertin's vision for sport as central to creating a fair society, helped to establish the unique aura of the Olympic Games as the world's most important sporting, social and cultural event.

Bryant's book is a timely tribute to the early Olympic athletes whose performances captured the imagination of the world and laid the foundations for the Games to flourish, and provides a compelling reminder to all Olympic and Paralympic organisers of the power of the Games to inspire and change lives. This is the central focus of the London 2012 Games, which will build on the bravery, courage and efforts of the athletes and organisers of the 1908 London Olympic Games so well documented in the following pages in ways that will inspire future generations.

Seb Coe
Chairman, London 2012 Games

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The friendship and support of Dave Bedford, the race director of the London Marathon, has been invaluable, and his tireless team and relentless pace setting has kept 26.2 on course.

My lifelong running companion, Olympic Marathon runner Donald Macgregor, is an inspiring researcher and he and Stan Greenberg, one of the world's foremost track and field statisticians, have kept me firmly on track.

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I am most grateful to all those fellow journalists and their newspapers who originally reported such vivid and compelling accounts of the races.

Thanks, too, to the skill and encouragement of John Blake and his team and my editor at John Blake Publishing, Clive Hebard.

Above all, for patience in the face of an obsession with running and writing that brought 26.2 to the finish line. Thanks to my wife Carol and my sons, Matthew and William.

PREFACE

It is with the greatest of pleasure that I write these few words of introduction to this wonderful narrative of the first Marathon run over what has now become the standard distance of 42,195 metres – the metric equivalent of the imperial 26 miles and 385 yards – which was established over a hundred years ago at the 1908 London Olympics. That race also produced the legendary runners Dorando Pietri and Johnny Hayes and added two more heroes to the annals of our sport.

The story of the Marathon Race is emblematic. Today, just the mention of the word Marathon evokes visions of thousands of runners competing in the big city marathons around the world. The Marathon has become one of the most visible manifestations of the sport of athletics and it is, along with road races run over lesser distances, the greatest participation sport in the world.

For millions of runners around the world this distance has also become magical, the symbol of a personal challenge and a sign of individual achievement. Running the Marathon in the company of thousands of other runners, be they elite athletes or fun runners, is now a social phenomenon that is also a wonderful expression of athleticism. Over the years, it has also grown into a major source of funds for a huge range of charitable causes. The Marathon race has become a symbol of peace, charity and of positive social change, providing the stimulus for hundreds of thousands of people to adopt a healthier lifestyle while creating a sense of community for runners around the world at all levels, irrespective of age or ethnicity, social class or ideologies. This is the same ethos that the whole sport of athletics embraces and which is a fundamental principle of the International Association of Athletics Federations.

The IAAF is extremely appreciative of this development and in 2007 created a dedicated Commission to examine ways in which we, as the world governing body of athletics and all areas of road running, can increase our participation in and support of this most dynamic branch of our sport, a sport that owes much of its success to the dedication and commitment of individual race organisers and the vision of the directors of the city marathons.

From the recognition of world records for road races to the introduction of the IAAF Road Race Label, endorsing the world's leading road races, and our ongoing work with AIMS (the Association of International Marathons and Distance Races) on the standardisation of the best measurement practice for road races, we will continue to give all our support to the future growth of road running around the world.

Lamine Diarra
IAAF President

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Copyright

THE GREAT DORANDO

In the spring of 1948, in a London still recovering from the Blitz, a diminutive, middle-aged and slightly balding café owner from Birmingham turned up, and announced to the world: ‘I am the Great Dorando.’

He stepped out of the shadows to haunt the Olympic Games, which were staged defiantly in the austere city that was still patching itself up from the ravages of war; he swanned his way around town cashing in on the Olympic fever that was beginning to build up in the press, and would boast colourfully of the exploits of forty years before.

Dorando told the tale of how, on a scorching hot day in July 1908, he had staggered into the stadium at Shepherd’s Bush looking near to death, and how he stole headlines around the world during one of those endless Edwardian summers before the war to end all wars ripped the world apart. He told how the famously evocative picture of him reeling and collapsing dramatically at the finish of London’s first-ever Marathon had turned him, like Charlie Chaplin, into one of the first internationally recognised celebrities of the twentieth century.

In the London of 1948, he was invited for drinks here, a lunch there. For one crazy moment he was the hero men still spoke of whenever they told of the Marathon.

‘I am,’ he boldly asserted, ‘the man who long ago launched the great marathon craze on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. I am the man who thousands flocked to see when I conquered the finest runner in the Madison Square Garden in New York. I am the man who was given a special Golden Cup by the hands of the Queen of England herself for my pluck, my courage and for Italy.’

By the time he strutted around Britain’s capital, two world wars had wiped the name and the memory of Dorando from the headlines. But here, as a battle-weary world once more turned the thoughts to the bloodless struggle of sport, the legend seemed to rise from the dead.

On 5 August 1948, as the day of the Games loomed closer, four Italians from Dorando Pietri’s hometown of Carpi, near Modena in Italy, along with three reporters, turned up on his doorstep to meet him. The Italians began to talk to Dorando in the lilting strains of the local Carpigian dialect, and as the panic showed in the imposter’s eyes, one of them told how he had seen the real Dorando lowered into his grave in 1942 and inspected the words on his tombstone, announcing that here lay the ‘Champion Runner of the World – Gold Medallist’.

A few days after the hoaxer was unmasked, the *Evening News* in London printed an apology to the real Dorando’s widow, Teresa Dondi, who lived on until 1979 in San Remo. The hoaxer Pietri’s real name was Pietro Palleschi. He was married to an English woman called Lucy Evans, born in Tuscan and in 1948 he was 65 years old. Pictures in the London newspapers taken outside the Temperance Building he ran in Barford Street, Birmingham, show him in a white coat.

It was an amazing story but such was the power of the man who, forty years before, had shaped the future of twentieth-century sport, that, like others from those same Games in 1908, the legend lived on. The Games were important because they defined sporting archetypes that were to endure for the

better part of a century.

As the life of Queen Victoria drifted to a close, a new century was opening: the century of the Edwardians, which swept in an era that was to bring the most profound changes – industrialisation, worldwide conflict and changes on a scale never seen before – changes that would overturn the rules by which we wage wars, run races and live our lives.

As the twentieth century was born, the British were at war with the Boers in South Africa. The theatre of that war was visited by those great chroniclers of Empire and chivalry, Rudyard Kipling and Arthur Conan Doyle. It brought fame to Robert Baden-Powell and sowed the seeds of the Boy Scout ethos that was to influence generations, who would die in far fiercer conflicts to come. And it set the stage for the young Winston Churchill, who witnessed the very rules of war mutate as he galloped through the century from horse to Spitfire.

The real spirit of the age was the way in which so many questioned the patterns of Old World thinking. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Britain was the most powerful nation in the world. A quarter of the world's land mass, and a quarter of the world's population, owed allegiance to the Union Jack. Occasional setbacks such as the British defeat by the guerrilla tactics of an amateur army of Dutch settlers in the Boer War could be taken in their stride, but other nations were confident of taking up the challenge to British supremacy. Increasingly, Germany posed as the new strong man of Europe, and across the Atlantic America was confident that she would soon outstrip Britain as the most powerful nation on earth.

Sport, like every other aspect of life in the new century, was in a state of revolutionary change. Already the hard edge of professionalism was cutting into the character of games codified by the Victorians to help civilise the gentleman amateur. Spectators who could pay their monies at the turnstiles were becoming central to the progress and conduct of team sports, and winning became more important than taking part. The spoils of victory could make you rich, or turn you into the strange new twentieth-century beast – the celebrity.

In 1896, Baron Pierre de Coubertin's dream of resurrecting the ancient Greek Olympics was realised. He had in mind conduct and rules for competitors that embraced fair play yet prepared them to be physically fit for the battlefields of the future. The objective of this French aristocrat was to promote a vision of sport uncorrupted by the real world. De Coubertin saw sport as pure, unsullied by professionalism, nationalism and the drive to win at all costs.

But these were never the values of the ancient Greek Olympics. Rather, they were the romantic and mythological values of the European middle classes, practised by the gentlemen amateurs who prided themselves on playing the game. Despite de Coubertin's idealism, however, the nations of the world refused to play the game on the Olympic track or in the trenches.

On the very eve of those 1908 Games, world leaders met at The Hague to lay down the laws of war. They thought they could civilise war, come to terms with the industrialisation of war machines which now included weapons of mass destruction, bombs, balloons, the aeroplane and poison gas, and prescribe codes of conduct for struggles yet to come. Also there at The Hague in May 1907, the International Olympic Committee was eager to take on board British proposals for the future conduct of the Olympic movement, and following the Games in 1908, the British sporting authorities, appalled by the rows and rivalries that had nearly wrecked the Olympics, commissioned a sixty-page report to defend what the British regarded as the laws of sport.

Conan Doyle, who was knighted for writing a history of the Boer War, was fiercely critical of the way the Boer had used dirty tricks in South Africa. He believed soldiers should stand and battle cleanly in a fair fight and scorned the part-time guerrilla or the invisible sniper.

At the Olympics, which he attended as a reporter for the *Daily Mail*, he was equally critical those who tried to cheat or bully their way to victory. But cheating and bullying, particularly by what the British knew as 'athletics' and the Americans as 'track and field', was to be so fierce that the London Olympic Games of 1908 were to be remembered as 'The Battle of Shepherd's Bush'. The fallout from those Games was to haunt sport for one hundred years and give us the sporting archetypes recognised today.

These were never quaint nostalgic Games. Instead, they brutally foreshadowed the path Olympic sport was to take in the future. The most immediate legacy from 1908 came from the Marathon course that gave birth to the standard marathon distance now accepted worldwide. But the most enduring legacy came in the way sport was to be defined throughout the twentieth century.

That hoaxer who turned up in London in 1948 was an embodiment of the myths and mysteries that surround the 1908 Games. Here was a man trading on somebody else's fame, somebody else's legend. He knew that those Games were still alive in folk memory and, in victory or defeat, what lives on is greatness; we thirst for legends. The Games of 1908 were packed with legends and the hoaxer realised that in Dorando he had the perfect example of one money-spinning legend – the sporting celebrity.

Baron de Coubertin fought in vain to keep the Olympics free from professionalism, nationalism and winning at all costs, but these Games were ferociously competitive and soon descended into international uproar. Too many, it seemed, believed in the great fallacy that sport is first and last about winning. It never is – it's about style and it's about glory. Some of the athletes who lined up for the gun in 1908 realised that truth.

The winners and losers might have caught an echo of that sentiment in the words of the American sports writer and poet Grantland Rice, penned while the scars of the 1908 Olympic Games were still painful and raw:

When the One Great Scorer comes
To write against your name,
He marks – not that you won or lost –
But how you played the Game.

ONCE A WINNER

Wyndham Halswelle peeled off his shirt and twisted it between powerful hands until the sweat splashed dark patches like blood on the parched, dusty track. He smiled at the man screwing his eyes up at a watch.

‘I can win this, even here,’ he said. ‘About the only thing that can stop me is a bullet in the back – can beat them all.’

‘You can,’ said the trooper, ‘but it’s not the Dutchmen you’ve got to worry about, it’s the men who line up alongside you.’

Wyndham Halswelle, young, strong and a soldier, knew all about winning; it had filled his life for as long as he could remember. He searched for the smell of it, the secret of it everywhere. He saw the prospect of winning on the flags of armies, in the stride of an athlete, in the courage of a statesman and in the physical perfection of a warrior.

Halswelle was born on 30 May 1882, at No. 4 Albemarle Street, Piccadilly, in the heart of the great British Empire. He was born into a city that seemed to rule the world, a city full of energy that could inspire great literature and a tumult of ideas. Here was the Westminster that laid down the laws that echoed around the world. But here too, just a few miles to the east, was Whitechapel, home of Jack the Ripper, where a man might tear your life and your dreams apart under the cover of darkness.

Halswelle’s father was an artist and a prosperous one. His mother, Helen, came from a traditional army background. She was fiercely proud of her grandfather, Nathaniel Gordon, a major general in the Indian Army, who carried his scars and his medals with pride.

There was much talk of military tradition, of Scotland and of his father, Keeley Halswelle, who earned his living as a watercolourist and had exhibited in London and Edinburgh. Keeley travelled frequently to Paris and Italy, looking for the light and for inspiration. He was an associate of the Royal Academy and when he died in Paris in April 1891, his estate was valued at around £2 million in today’s terms.

As a child, Wyndham looked up to his mother, that fierce upholder of the family military tradition. Mama always said he would be a soldier. Born in London, he wrapped himself in his Scottish heritage. Occasionally he would play with his older brother, Gordon – christened with the family name that his mother admired so much – but from the age of five, Wyndham lived in a world of his own. He was forever playing soldiers.

On the days when it rained, he would manoeuvre his armies of tin soldiers in the drawing room of the family home in Richmond. Then, whenever the sun shone, he would be out in the garden or the park, marching and drilling his brother and his imaginary troops on the well-kept lawn there. Sometimes he would sport the uniform that his mother had bought for him. He dreamed his dreams and nothing in or out of school so preoccupied him as tales of chivalry and knights fighting in single combat.

As a teenager, Wyndham was strikingly fluid. He moved with an animal grace and the languid loose-limbed lilt of a cricketer. At school, the younger boys were mesmerised, hanging around him and hero-worshipping him a little, drawn by his magnetism and his athleticism. They would do anything for him and would quarrel over who would scrape the mud from his studded boots, who would massage the grease into the soft leather of his running spikes.

The mothers of other boys who visited the school would smile at his easy good looks and his cascading blond hair. By fifteen, he was winning all the foot races at school, but as his schooldays drew to a close, he was excited by the rumblings of the war to come in South Africa, a war that would test and harden the soldiers of the Queen in battle.

Young Wyndham longed to get out of Charterhouse School and into Sandhurst, Britain's Royal military academy, where he could train to be a real soldier. His greatest fear was that the war would break over by Christmas; he ached for the chance to fall in with the others tramping off to the troop ships to the haunting marching tune of 'Goodbye Dolly Gray'. When he signed up for Sandhurst at his mother's insistence, his father struggled with his own disappointment that his talented boy would cut himself off from his artistic side. But Keeley Halswelle understood that most young men were not interested in war, young girls and sport. For Wyndham, the world was just awakening and he was interested in all these things.

Photographs were rare enough at this time, but one captured the young Wyndham caught between school and the military academy, showing his youthful spirits, vaulting with a grin over his sister-in-law Ethel. Another caught him long jumping over a wheelbarrow on those well-trimmed lawns in Richmond.

Halswelle was determined to demonstrate to his father that he could achieve things in the world on his own account, that he too could be a winner. And to do so he did not have to prove himself, either in the artistic studio of his father or in the regiment of his mother. Sport was his canvas: he would win his races and he would remember with a smile the admiring knots of schoolboys cheering his victories and saluting his triumphs.

That summer, as the war in South Africa warmed up, he gave his father a glimpse of the different kind of artist that he himself could be – an artist on the track. At Sandhurst, the admiring schoolboys were now replaced by senior officers who recognised, however fleetingly, that they were being seduced by the magic of a man in motion. For Wyndham Halswelle really could run. Even among first sprinters, men who fancied themselves as quick movers and who were so fancied by others, this was an exceptional man.

A boy like that, the officers would say, needs a trainer, someone to show him how to be a great champion. Such men existed, but mainly across the Atlantic, where the New World's first athletic coaches were already issuing orders to their well-drilled squads and where they reckoned that men like Halswelle lacked the killer instinct. In England, they would say, they churn out good losers but there is no such thing as a good loser – it's kill or be killed. In sport it is always the winning that matters. But for Halswelle running was about far more than just winning, it was an expression of the human body of rhythm and grace, strength and belief. He loved to win, of course, but for him the satisfaction was to do it on a level playing field in an even contest.

Sometimes he would share his philosophy of winning with his friends at Sandhurst. They would smile over a drink and a cigar, and the soldiers would joke that all this talk of fair play would someday be the death of young Halswelle.

A TASTE OF DEFEAT

In spring 1902, Wyndham Halswelle's affair with the running track came to an abrupt end. He and his regiment were packed off to South Africa, where Lord Kitchener was mopping up the war. Here he was to get his first taste of action.

Once again, Wyndham was a six-year-old drilling his tin soldiers on the lawn, taking on the enemy face to face in single combat as he had done in his playground fantasies. Life at the front, though, turned out to be very different. There were huge periods of inactivity while he would kick his heels waiting for the chance to be a hero, but there were other opportunities to play the hero on the playing field or on the running track.

When Halswelle landed in South Africa in 1902, he just caught the end of that strange business, the Boer War. The Boers, who were the off-cuts of Dutch colonialists, were keen to fight for the independence from Britain but they were not so keen to bring the benefits of democracy to those who had descended on this part of the world in search of gold and diamonds – the get-rich-quick merchants. Certainly, they were completely against any idea of extending the franchise to the black population, the indigenous people they found in the land in which they made their home.

As soon as Halswelle moved with his regiment, the Highland Light Infantry, towards the front, he found that the fighting had descended into a messy guerrilla conflict. He was keen to fulfil his dream of getting a taste of the action but his vision of himself was as a soldier, someone who would take on an opponent in a fair fight man to man, face to face. This war was baffling to the young soldier; it was a dirty war.

Wyndham Halswelle had been brought up with a code of chivalry that was remarkable for its lack of realism. Fellow troopers would talk of snipers and the guns that could deliver death without the giveaway trail of smoke emitting from their own British rifles. Given half a chance, they would say these Dutchmen will shoot you in the back.

Life outside the city of Bloemfontein was a mixture of infrequent fighting and unbearably boring boredom. The troops would arrange spontaneous cricket and football matches, picnics, fêtes and parties. They weren't always peaceful either, for there was plenty of drink around. Fights would break out, and gambling, which could land you on a charge, was rife. There was no shortage of women and civilians around the block houses and tented camps. Plenty of men had wives and children back in Britain, but that never stopped them from picking up the women around the camp.

Halswelle shone at cricket and football, though rugby, his chosen game, was not popular among the men. Almost every morning, he would be found running around the camp to keep in shape and a lot of his off-duty hours were spent complaining about the nature of the war and the conduct of the Boers.

His daydreams at Sandhurst invariably had him facing hordes of fanatical natives or the disciplined ranks of crack European troops. There was glory in that daydream. But Halswelle and his fellow officers shared their doubts and sometimes contempt for the Boers, who, though God-fearing, did not

shape up as an acceptable enemy. They were scruffy and had no professional army as such; often they wore no uniform either.

Plenty of men in the regiment knew of Halswelle's reputation as a runner.

'Why don't you take a race here?' they would ask, but Wyndham seemed wary of racing far from the organised meetings he had known back in Britain. He would watch and shake his head at the sight of a few men toeing a line scratched in the dirt, then barging their way to the finish.

This was never quite the way it was at Sandhurst, where the track was marked out with painted white lines on firm grass, measurements were accurate and the starter controlled everything. You ran to orders there, but here the course was a roughly paced-out distance over hard, dusty, uneven ground. Close to the battlefield there was no finishing tape, no fancy running, and nowhere to dig decent holes for your spiked shoes on the starting line. But when the requests to run turned to taunts, Wyndham thought again. Perhaps he might race there, after all.

His appearance on the track was enough to stir groups of soldiers to watch him in action. They knew this tall, muscled, slightly tanned man, whose white vest contrasted with the reddening of his skin, had been a champion; his very appearance could cause a ripple of excitement. It was not that often you got the chance to see a runner of his calibre in action. You could only guess what was likely to happen when a man like this toed the line.

If there is one thing that excites spectators, it is the chance to witness a champion performing, asserting his dominance with power and authority. But they can be excited, perhaps even more so, by the prospect of seeing a champion, a certainty, toppled and humbled by a dark horse. The bookmakers love to see that too, and some of the officers remembered the time back at Sandhurst when even the mighty Halswelle tripped and fell hard on the track.

Gambling always seemed to be in evidence whenever such impromptu race meetings were organised by the regiment in South Africa. 'Evens on the field,' the bookies would murmur, and their murmur would breeze around the camp. Of course, they shouldn't have been there, for betting was strictly prohibited. But when it came to gambling or taking prisoners, you could always find an officer who seemed blind or deaf. It was difficult to stop a trooper from putting a handful of shillings on a runner they fancied, or a race where they seemed certain of the outcome.

Win or lose, this was the chance to see a gifted runner in action. Where, they wondered, did he get that extra ingredient that makes one athlete dominant? Sometimes technical differences make a champion – some wear spiked shoes, others dig starting holes, while cork grips may be strapped to their hands with elastic bands, for there was a theory that sprinters ran faster if they had something to grip onto.

But none of these techniques accounted for Halswelle's superiority. Whenever he lined up for races, he looked preoccupied, aloof almost; slowly and silently he moved to the start. But even here, so far from Sandhurst, one sensed the starter's orders would spark an explosion.

'Strip out, gentlemen, please!' came the booming command. The crowd would hush, waiting to catch a glimpse of the eight or nine figures crouching to strain for the first smoke of the gun that would pitch them forwards like shots from a sniper. For a moment, they would be frozen and the stomachs of the spectators would flutter as they held their breath, waiting to witness the young, fit men fighting to get the better of each other in this trial of strength, speed and will.

Then they'd be off, with some heavy-footed and making fierce noises as they moved, others staying too long in contact with the South African soil between strides. Their facial expressions were quite extraordinary too. Teeth were clenched in ferocious or agonised grimaces. Some looked angry, though they were snarling. Heads would be thrown back or jerked to one side; arms thrashed wildly.

instead of pumping in time with the legs. Energy would be spent recklessly as torsos rocked and twisted. It was like watching men trying to grab a lifeline just out of reach.

But when Halswelle came out of the holes he had scraped at the start, he was a revelation. You could see that he had a gift, that he ran with fire in his belly. Once he took off, he seemed to gain a yard or two just by starting.

It was hard to believe that a man could fly into action so quickly. There was no slow build-up, no hesitancy, no changing of gear. Ruthlessly, smoothly, the legs produced a stride that could cut through the opposition like a sword on the battlefield. The body was steady, the face showed no strain. Arms and legs moved forward with no sideways sway; the head looked as though it were floating, with no rise and no fall – it was all poise, pace and purpose.

Like an arrow snapped from a bowstring, he reached towards a finish that wasn't just a simple piece of rope between two posts but a declaration of his rightful place as a champion. For other runners a race was fun, a gamble, a game – maybe a way to a prize – but to Wyndham Halswelle it was a declaration of his identity.

'By God,' one of the troopers muttered, his eyes shining as he watched him run, 'he's got class. But even as he ran, the gambling men, those who had taken the illicit bets, knew what was to come.

As Halswelle eased ahead, one man clawing his way down the track stretched forwards a hand and clipped his trailing leg. Suddenly, the beauty of the arrow that seemed to be heading straight for the target was thrown off-course. Halswelle tripped, one leg smacked against the other, then he lurched. It was his own speed, his own purity of motion, that brought him crashing down.

He fell heavily, his hands scraped red raw by the sand. His knees, from which the blood dripped, left stains where the blood met the dust of the veldt. Halswelle shook his head in anger: he had been way in front and the other runners knew it, but he had been robbed. It was enough to make him want to throw the whole thing in.

Looking down at him was a trooper shaking his own head in disbelief. The man who hauled Halswelle to his feet that day was a squat, tough-looking member of the regiment with an accent that reeked of the borders between England and Scotland. His name was Jimmy Curran.

'You need to learn a thing or two, sir,' he said, looking down at the fallen man. It was a meeting that was to change both their lives.

TWO WHEELS TO HAPPINESS

Dorando Pietri took his first, wobbly steps in the sleepy village of Mandrio, a 20-minute jog-trip from the town of Carpi, between Verona and Bologna in the north-east of Italy – a maze of cobbled streets huddled around a grand piazza and still, in the days when Pietri was young, half hidden behind the city walls. His father, Desiderio, scraped a living where he could – selling fruit, baking bread, renting a shop here, a market stall there.

Dorando was born on 16 October 1885, the third of four sons. A small, wiry child, he was full of energy – strong as a bull, they used to say – and always hungry. With three sons to feed and another on the way, Desiderio would drag his wife, Maria, and their family from village to village and from town to town, desperately seeking work.

At one point, in search of pay, Desiderio took his family to settle in Carpi, the traditional centre for the making of straw hats, with grasses to plait and softening water flowing through its streams. It was here, in a new century of industrialisation and mass production, that men from Rome would tell you how a machine could make as many hats in a day as a family might fashion in a week. People poured into Carpi in the hope that the hat trade might bring them if not wealth then at least sufficient prosperity to fill the stomachs of their children.

Even then, there was a special, indefinable quality about Dorando. Somehow he sensed that the world ran far beyond the horizons of Carpi. He had learned from his restless older brothers that adventure and perhaps even fortune and fame were to be had out there beyond the town. To the south was Rome while to the north were London and Paris. He would hear snippets of news from there, sometimes strange words, unfamiliar accents, even foreign languages as travellers and businessmen passed through Carpi.

Sometimes, too, visitors would come to the piazza and Dorando would sit open-mouthed in wonder as the first flickering silent movies gave him glimpses of a world beyond even the wonders of Rome and Paris. Here was America, a new land of promise where any dream seemed possible. His father was a labourer while his mother looked after them all by scouring the markets for food, and although Desiderio and Maria had never learned to read without effort, they could add up well enough. They understood enough to know that this new century might offer the chance to make more lire by your wits than by your hands.

They had seen the frustration in the eyes of the two elder brothers, Antonio and Ulpiano. Carpi, it seemed, was always too small for them. The builders and developers were beginning to pull down the city walls, but for Antonio and Ulpiano, the place seemed like a prison and they couldn't wait to leave.

While Dorando's father sold apples and roasted chestnuts close to the market in Carpi, Antonio, who was six years older than Dorando, tried to make his way by working in the hat factory. But he hated it, for it was noisy and it reeked of sulphur, while the constant need to lift heavy parcels was too much like hard work.

‘I feel trapped, it’s like being a slave,’ Antonio would complain restlessly.

~~Ulpiano, four years older than his brother Dorando, had no intention of being a slave. He was restless and ambitious. Even as a boy, those who knew him would say there was something shifty about him.~~

‘He looked like a little fox,’ said a boyhood friend, who’d spent a lifetime making shoes in Carpi. ‘He had the face of someone full of cunning so he went to England – he’d do anything to get out of Italy. Ulpiano was on the make. He learned English, got to know what life was like out there in the world. He was always going to make a fortune, one way or the other.’

Dorando’s mother and father had seen how their elder sons had felt about staying on in Carpi, and they didn’t want Dorando to go the same way. They clung onto him.

‘You’ll never be hungry here at home,’ his mother would say, while his father, also small and wiry, was forever pointing out to him the important men who ran the hotels, the hat factory, even the boys’ sports club La Patria in Carpi.

‘Look,’ he’d say, ‘you can make something of yourself here in Carpi. You don’t have to spend your life selling fruit and bread like me. You’re a little boy now, but you can be a big man. You don’t have to leave. Show them you can do it, right here in Carpi.’

It was as if a torch had been passed into Dorando’s hand, like a gift from father to son; it lit up his life. He looked at those people in Carpi with new eyes and saw the ones who represented something grander than others renting a shop here or a stall there. They were big men and he studied their every move, watched what they represented. As his father’s words stiffened his ambition, Dorando toyed with the idea of perhaps getting an apprenticeship or at least something more ambitious than helping with the shop.

Ultimately, it was his father’s idea. He knew a man called Ferrari, who did watch and clock repairs, and soon Dorando was signed up as his apprentice. But Dorando had seen his brother Antonio wither over a job that kept him imprisoned; now he too found himself hunched for endless hours doing repetitive work.

‘I can’t stand it,’ he admitted, and he made a bid for freedom. But he still harboured the dream of making a mark there in Carpi, and when a wealthy new shop owner moved to the town, he seized his opportunity. The name was Pasquale Melli and he was well known locally as the manufacturer of the famous Nazzani sweets, a company renowned throughout the whole of the Emilia region for the quality of their chocolate.

Melli was a real gentleman with a distinguished and elegant wife. He set himself and his family up in a fine shop just on the edge of the piazza. It was decorated throughout with sumptuous red velvet and with white seats, and there they sold chocolates of a kind never before available in Carpi. One of the specialities was an exquisite chocolate drink, but of course the only people who could afford such delicacies were the gentry. They could pay for home delivery too, because when they ordered blocks of chocolate, sweets and pastries, they wanted the luxuries delivered to their doorstep.

Fourteen-year-old Dorando got a job with Melli, who needed a shop boy. There, he learned how to whisk *zabaglione* and he enjoyed putting the eggs and sugar into his mouth – now there would be no more crusts of bread for him. He busied himself delivering parcels and packages, wore a smart white overall and apron, and congratulated himself on finding his ideal job. He had the freedom to roam the city streets and he could eat as much as any boy might want.

His job would take him to the doors of the great villas that stood around Carpi, where he would meet the men and women who lived inside, smile at them and make the extra effort to try to deliver items on time. Nothing seemed too much for the energetic delivery boy and he took huge pleasure

what he was doing. Often, he had to deliver a package of luxury pastries to the station to be taken on the train for a customer further up the line.

On one occasion, so they say in Carpi, he got to the station to find that the train had already left for Reggio, which was nearly 15 miles away. Dorando actually saw the train slowly pulling out of the station and thought about running back to the shop to tell the owner what had happened, but then he changed his mind, whipped off his apron and set out to run the 15 miles, package in hand. When he arrived at the town centre, he took a handkerchief, dipped it into a horse trough and wiped away his sweat. He smoothed down his hair and presented himself at the door with the package of confectionery.

The door was answered by a maid, who told him to wait to see if there was a repeat order or a message for the shop. Then the master of the house arrived, intrigued by the hand delivery. He scribbled a note, pressed a tip into Dorando's hand and the boy set out for the return journey. Back in Carpi, the shopkeeper was at first amazed and annoyed, but when he heard what had happened, he was to dine out on the tale for years. Signor Melli realised, too, what Dorando's father had always known: this boy was very special.

The seasons changed and Dorando grew stronger. But he didn't grow any taller; he was always small, standing just 5 feet 3 inches tall. For him, the shop and the piazza – Victor Emmanuel Square – seemed to be the centre of all life in Carpi.

In 1903, there was a huge gathering in the piazza. A statue was to be erected to a general, Manfredo Fanti, and to celebrate the event thousands of gymnasts came from all corners of Italy to give a display. Dorando was dazzled by their appearance, their agility and their strength. With all the sudden enthusiasm of a 17-year-old, he decided that sport was the thing: here was a way that he might make his mark.

His brother Ulpiano had already joined the local sports club. He found that waving Indian clubbing, the fashionable aerobic exercise, went down well with the girls. Also at that time, Italy, like the rest of Europe, was in the embrace of a huge cycling boom. Dorando and his friends would read about cycle races and talk to each other about their heroes; he was excited by the thought of bike racing, and so like Ulpiano, he joined La Patria. He was young and strong, so perhaps he too could make a name for himself in Carpi as a cycle racer. Why not?

Some of the more well-to-do boys had bicycles of their own. Dorando would stand and stare at these machines; he would see the sparkling spokes and catch the smell of India rubber and freshly polished paint. He would run his fingers along the enamel of the tubing. Sometimes Signor Melli would give him a few sweets, and instead of eating them himself or sharing them with his young brother Armando, Dorando would use them to bribe one of the boys who had a bike to let him try to ride a cycle.

Even on the rough cobbled streets of Carpi, he learned to ride and he knew that somehow he had to get his hands on a bike. By saving his tips from deliveries, he found that he could hire a bike and take part in the races organised by La Patria in Modena, 20 miles or so from Carpi. It was here that Dorando had his first races and he loved them. His legs were already strong from his work as a messenger boy and he discovered that he was competitive at the sport.

Of course, the roads were rough, the tumbles were frequent and Dorando found that his small and lightweight body meant he was never going to beat some of the more powerful, bigger boys. Nevertheless, he did well enough, even though the bikes were crude and heavy. In one race, his chain broke, but he was not a boy to give up easily; he heaved the bike onto his shoulders and ran his way to the finish.

One afternoon, at the beginning of the autumn of 1904, Dorando stood at the door of the cafe looking out onto the square and watched as a crowd gathered to see a tall skinny man and his helpers walk around the piazza putting chalk marks on the cobbles. The man was Pericle Pagliani, a champion runner from Rome, he was told. 'Here,' the men said, 'is the mighty Pagliani. He's come to give a demonstration of running. He is the champion of all Italy – he can run like the wind.'

Dorando peered through the crowd. All the town had turned out and formed a huge circle, jostling for the best view, while allowing Pagliani enough room to run around his chalk marks. The word went round that he was going to run 10,000 metres.

Pagliani had circled the piazza for the second time when several of the boys thought it would be fun to join in, and within another couple of laps he had a little trail of them puffing, blowing, laughing and jostling, trying to keep up with him. Four laps later, most of the boys, red in the face and gasping for breath, found the pace far tougher than anything they had known during their games on the streets.

But Dorando was running easily. Away from the cumbersome bike he found his legs felt very light. He knew every cobble of this square and as he floated behind Pagliani, the crowd first of all started to laugh, but then the laughter turned to cheering.

As the run went on, Dorando drew up alongside Pagliani and grinned. But the champion gave him little more than a glance, his eyes fixed on his task. Then, as Pagliani's friends yelled that there were only two laps to go, Dorando was still there running. As they passed the cheering, excited crowd, he eased smoothly and easily ahead and crossed the finishing line just before Pagliani.

The champion didn't say a word; he refused to acknowledge Dorando's existence and the errand boy stepped out of the square and went back to the shop. But others smiled at him and slapped him on the back.

'Hey, Dorando,' they shouted, 'you can be a champion too!'

The crowd clapped and cheered for a few moments but already most of them were melting away. They had taken time out from their jobs – from the bars, the factories and the fields – and they seemed to disappear very quickly. Their disappearance may perhaps have had something to do with the fact that Pagliani's helpers were roaming about the square with a bowl and a bucket asking for contributions to his training expenses. It was a deep and sobering shock for Dorando. Here was a man they'd applauded and cheered as the champion of all Italy – and now he was begging for money.

Dorando's father had always drummed into him, 'Never see yourself as a beggar. There's always work even here in Carpi, but never, ever be a beggar.' But here was Pagliani begging for money.

Dorando wished he had money with him so that he could put something in the bowl. Running with Pagliani had been fun and inspiring, and he had tingled with excitement when he heard the cheering of the crowd. The clank of the coins hitting the bottom of the near-empty bucket was to haunt Dorando for the rest of his life.

CONAN DOYLE AND THE MYSTERY OF THE DIRTY WAR

Sometimes it would take six weeks for the letters from Mama to reach the hands of Wyndham Halswelle, but when they eventually came they were long and well worth waiting for. The evocative letters reminded him of England and London itself. Mama's words would bring back the smell of cut grass on the lawn, the gentle rain that kept the great park in Richmond so very green, and strolls beside the River Thames, along the waterfront towards the gardens at Kew. But she would also write to him of serious matters, of war and politics.

The letters would remind Halswelle, too, of what made him a soldier – a word here or a phrase there would transport him right back to playing with those tin soldiers in Richmond or marching proudly in his playroom uniform. Mama would also bring him London's news of the war. She wrote vividly of the relief of the siege of Mafeking in South Africa and the heroism and example of Robert Baden-Powell in Afghanistan.

'Never forget,' she wrote, 'that you and he were at the same school. You played in the same grounds. He's a great hero and a great soldier.'

By the time Halswelle arrived in South Africa in the spring of 1902, the great Boer War had been won, but was not yet finally over. The tide had turned with the arrival of two of Britain's most respected Generals: Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener. Field Marshall Frederick Sleight Roberts, Baron Roberts of Kandahar (known throughout the army as 'Little Bobs'), was virtually hauled out of retirement to turn the course of the difficult war. A tiny man, just over 5 feet tall – 2 inches below the minimum height for enlisted soldiers – with a large, drooping white moustache, he was legendary for marching his army 300 miles across the wastelands of Northern India from Kabul to relieve the besieged garrison at Kandahar. It was the sort of legend to inspire Halswelle – that and the Victoria Cross Little Bobs wore for his bravery during the Indian Mutiny of 1857. Roberts returned to Britain at the beginning of 1901 in triumph. He was met by the Prince of Wales, later to be Edward VII, and paraded through the crowds on the streets of London, cheered as the war's great hero.

His command was taken over by Kitchener – a fine, if ruthless soldier, who had the task of mopping up the guerrilla war being waged by the Boers. There was still plenty of skirmishing, and smouldering resentment fired up the Boers against the imperialism of Britain. Destined to last for another eighteen months, the war was to lay the British open to charges of rape and torture and bring about the establishment of concentration camps.

By the time Halswelle arrived, Kitchener was ordering farms to be burned and food destroyed to reduce the Boers' infrastructure. Barbed wire and blockhouses further limited their manoeuvrability and the raids steadily became less frequent.

With time on their hands, the principal enemy for officers like Halswelle was boredom, and there was an immense amount of debate in the regiment about the charges laid against the British, both by the Boers and by their sympathisers around the world, who wanted to grab every opportunity to attack

the British armed forces. Nothing angered Halswelle more than these charges of dirty tricks.

The British army had taken some heavy defeats before its leaders realised that their tactics were outdated, for the Boers were a fast and highly mobile guerrilla force, using the new smokeless cartridges in their German rifles, which hid their positions. They employed hit-and-run tactics that not only caused losses the British could ill afford, but thoroughly frustrated the Empire's view of a fair fight.

It was a letter from his mother that brought Halswelle the news that Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, was about to leap to the defence of the Empire and fair play. Charges of war crimes, Conan Doyle believed, could not go unchallenged. Always a man who loved a cause, he was angry. 'In view of the persistent slanders to which our politicians and our soldiers have been equally exposed, it becomes a duty which we owe to our national honour to lay the facts before the world,' he said.

Conan Doyle was certainly familiar with the subject of warfare and the Boer War in particular. Just before Christmas 1899, in what was known as the 'Black Week', the British military suffered three staggering defeats at the hands of this army of rag-tag South African farmers. In Britain, there was concern together with an upsurge of patriotism, and on Christmas Eve, Conan Doyle declared to his horrified family that he was going to volunteer for the war.

Although his great reputation came from his Sherlock Holmes stories, Conan Doyle's real love was writing historical fiction: he loved tales of war and heroism, and wrote stories about the Napoleonic wars too. He was in love with the tales of chivalry learned at his mother's knee. Having written about many battles in his historical works, he felt it was his duty to try his own skills as a soldier. However, the army had little use for a forty-year-old, somewhat overweight recruit and rejected him, so when the chance came for him to go to the front as a doctor, he jumped at it.

A friend of his, John Langman, was sending out to South Africa at his own expense a hospital of 50 beds, and he suggested that Conan Doyle should help him choose the team and should supervise the entire operation. The Langman hospital sailed in February 1900, reaching Cape Town on 21 March, and Conan Doyle was to spend his next few months in a wartime hospital devoted to the treatment of typhoid, fevers and other assaults on the intestines.

As soon as he arrived in South Africa, Conan Doyle started to assemble notes for a history of the campaign. The charges that the British had committed atrocities enraged him, and in just one week he wrote a 60,000-word pamphlet rebutting them. Published in January 1902, *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct* sold for six pence per copy in Britain. Thousands of translations were given away in France, Russia, Germany and other countries, and all the profits from the sale of the book were donated to charity.

There was not a trooper in the whole of South Africa who had not read Conan Doyle's sixpenny pamphlet, and for Halswelle, the writer became more than a hero: he was a role model. 'Here is a man,' he would say to his fellow officers, 'who's passionate about fair play in war, sport and life.' It was true that Conan Doyle had always taken pride in being a sportsman – he was an expert in cricket, golf, body-building and even baseball. He made a century at Lords, once took the wicket there of W. G. Grace and was inspired to write a poem about it; he was even invited to referee the first world heavyweight boxing contest between a white and black boxer in America, the so-called 'Fight of the Century' of Independence Day 1910, between Jack Johnson and Jim Jefferies in Reno, Nevada. Following this, he wrote an extravagant West End play about prize fighting and the gambling and dirty tricks surrounding it, entitled *The House of Temperley*.

For Halswelle, Conan Doyle's sixpenny pamphlet gave him all the ammunition he needed in his

battle for fair play. Sometimes he would ride back to camp with a bunch of troopers still breathless from a raid on a Boer farmhouse. On one such raid, they had come across snipers picking off the troopers. The Boers had put up a white flag but the British had been warned constantly about this tactic, for all too often the farmers would feign surrender before opening fire again. There had been a skirmish, and several Boers were killed or ran away; there were two dead children and three dead adults – one a pregnant woman. But several troopers had been wounded and one killed the day before and in their anger, the British troopers burned down the farmhouse and chased the survivors. A man and a woman tried to run away but were shot. Those were Kitchener's orders.

Back at the camp, Halswelle watched the soldiers unwind; their mission achieved, they would drink – but still they were uneasy.

'Kitchener knows what he's doing,' they said, 'this thing could drag on forever if we don't clear it up now.'

'That bloody white flag,' said another, 'why do they do it? And all these stories they put out – the bayoneting, what we do to their women... I read it in the papers. My father wrote to me from London – it's all in the French and German papers; they tell these lies. Conan Doyle, he's right, he's been on the ground here. Have you seen what he's writing? That's a man who knows the truth.'

The lies that so angered Conan Doyle were certainly getting worldwide coverage. Typical was a report in January 1902 from the Boer General, Jan Smuts, later Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa:

Lord Kitchener has begun to carry out a policy in both the Boer republics of unbelievable barbarism and gruesomeness which violates the most elementary principles of the international rules of war. Almost all farmsteads and villages in both republics have been burned down and destroyed. All crops have been destroyed. All livestock which has fallen into the hands of the enemy has been killed or slaughtered. The basic principle behind Lord Kitchener's tactics had been to win, not so much by direct operations against fighting commandos, but rather indirectly by bringing the pressure of war against defenceless women and children.

The truth was that even in Britain, prominent voices were speaking out against the slaughter. David Lloyd George, who later served as the British Prime Minister during World War I, vehemently denounced the carnage during a speech in Parliament on 18 February 1901. He quoted from a letter by a British Officer: 'We move from valley to valley lifting cattle and sheep, burning and looting and turning out women and children to weep in despair beside the ruin of their once beautiful homesteads.'

One Irish Nationalist MP, John Dillon, spoke out angrily against the British policy of shooting Boer prisoners of war. On 26 February 1901, he made public a letter by a British Officer: 'The orders in this district from Lord Kitchener are to burn and destroy all provisions, forage etc. and seize cattle, horses and stock of all sorts wherever found and to leave no food in the houses of the inhabitants, and the word has been passed around privately that no prisoners are to be taken.'

Dillon produced other letters from soldiers in the *Liverpool Courier* and the *Wolverhampton Express and Star* alleging that wounded Boers and prisoners would be shot. His denunciation of the war carried special significance: while British troops robbed the Boers of their national freedom in South Africa, Dillon was implying that the British government also held the people of Southern Ireland under colonial rule against their will.

One crusading English woman, Emily Hobhouse, alerted the world to the horrors of the prisoner camps. 'In some camps,' she reported, 'two and sometimes three different families live in one tent'

Most have to sleep on the ground. These people will never, ever forget what has happened. The children have been the hardest hit. They wither in the terrible heat and as a result of insufficient and improper nourishment. To maintain this kind of camp means nothing less than murdering children.'

To men like Conan Doyle and Halswelle, such charges were outrageous: they were fighting for King and Empire, a cause they believed in, against an enemy who used dubious tactics. 'It's the Boers that started this,' the men would say to Halswelle. 'We take too many prisoners. The trouble with you Halswelle, is that you want to fight like you play cricket. There aren't any bloody umpires out here. They'll get you, if you don't watch it. We don't mind a scrap, but these Boers have got to learn to stand and fight, not cower behind their women and children.'

The men who shared the barracks with Halswelle were merely echoing the views of their leaders. 'The Boers would never stand up to a fair fight,' complained Lord Kitchener, and it was this view that angered so many in the British ranks.

For the success of his sixpenny pamphlet rebutting the charges of war crimes, Arthur Conan Doyle was knighted on 9 August 1902. Intriguingly, he considered refusing the offer because he said he wrote the work out of conviction and not to gain a title. Conan Doyle wrote to his mother, explaining that he was reluctant to take it up, but friends and relatives, and above all his mother, persuaded him that he should accept the knighthood and that it was a suitable way to honour his patriotism.

Back in London, the gossipmongers took a more cynical view, however. They said that the King was an avid Sherlock Holmes' fan and that he'd put Conan Doyle's name on the honours list to encourage him to write more stories. Whatever the reason for the knighthood, His Majesty and many thousands of his subjects must have been delighted when, in 1903, the *Strand Magazine* started serialising *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*.

Back in London, Halswelle's mother was equally delighted. 'There's no finer writer in the land,' she wrote to her son, 'than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.'

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