

Challenging Fates

Adam P Kirby

2012

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Challenging Fates

Adam P Kirby

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Adam P. Kirby

Acknowledgements and Dedication

I would like to thank and acknowledge the help, kindness and dedication of Mike Johnson and Daryl Hocking in assisting me in the completion of this work.

Dedicated to the memory of all the victims of war, persecution and tyranny during the twentieth century.

Abstract

Challenging Fates is a novel set at the time of the First World War which proposes an alternative history of the period. It approaches this in two ways. The chronology begins with the actual events of the outbreak of World War I, but proceeds to construct an alternative meta-narrative, seeking to create a seamless division between reality and fiction. This becomes the background against which the lives of members of four families from England, France, Germany and Russia are played out. Thus a series of micro-narratives is created, which help to explore some of the political, cultural and social aspects of early twentieth century Europe, while also carrying the reader into the lives, circumstances and decisions of the characters.

The reader is introduced to a Quaker mill owning family from Huddersfield, in the north of England. Their eldest son, Stephen is an army officer, who becomes involved in politics and government as an aide to the Russian politician, Alexander Kerensky, who himself, must make his own decisions between family and politics. In Germany we meet Karl von Allenstein from a traditional Junker family, who has fallen in love with a French girl during his tour of duty in occupied France. As he tries to reintegrate into German society he becomes aware of the growing and insidious power of extreme right wing group and must decide what action to take. A young patriotic Jew, called Philippe, is the chief protagonist in the French part of the narrative. He becomes entangled in an anti-Semitic plot to rescue and revitalise France along Fascist lines. As the plot comes to its climax, Stephen, Karl and Philippe play their parts within the one narrative, while Russia struggles to find its way between constitutional liberalism and socialist revolution. The book ends with an invitation into a new, but uncertain chapter in history.

Challenging Fates

Exegesis

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Initial Concept

A wounded man struggles into a woodland hut and collapses on a rug. The woman of the house finds him and he explains that his sword and shield have been shattered and he is running from the kinsmen of a girl he tried to help. When he tells this story to the woman's husband, the latter realises this stranger is being chased by his own kinsmen and that therefore they are enemies. However the rules of his society demand that he gives the stranger hospitality for the night, but they must fight in the morning. The stranger has no weapon and is therefore doomed, but his father told him that when he needed a weapon, it would be provided. The woman drags her husband and tells the story of how a mysterious man came long ago and plunged a sword into the ash tree which grows in her hut. Only the bravest of men can pull it out and none have been able to do so, but now the person for whom it was prepared has appeared. The wounded stranger draws the sword and so can face his adversary. The man and the sword have fulfilled a predetermined destiny. Thus opens Wagner's musical drama, *Die Walkure*, written in 1852-6. (Röder, B., 2001, p.15).

Wagner of course did not invent the concept of destiny, fate or doom. It is deeply embedded in European and other cultures: the Greeks are well known for seeking the wisdom of various oracles to find out the likely outcomes of war or other political machinations. A sense of national destiny has often been used by governments

to create national myths to which populations are expected to harness their wills. Hitler used this device effectively to persuade many Germans that through National Socialism Germany could realise its supposed destiny as the leader of European life and history. Similarly, social Darwinism, reinterpreted Darwin's biological theories to suggest that different racial groups are involved in a mutual struggle for survival. This led in turn to a belief in cultural and social superiority based on pre-determined racial characteristics. At the other end of the political spectrum Marxist historical materialism posits the inevitability of the collapse of capitalism and the rise of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Given the power of these ideas in western culture, it is not surprising that when we look at twentieth century history, it is very easy to be sucked into the notion that there was no alternative to the misery of brutality, war and extermination that engulfed Europe and the world in the last century. Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century, the idea that a great European conflagration was inevitable was a commonly held belief. Fyodor Dostoyevsky's entry in his diary of a Writer for August 30th 1880 contains these words.

"... I have a presentiment of sorts that the lots are drawn. Accounts may have to be settled far sooner than one might imagine in one's wildest dreams. The symptoms are terrible. The age-old, un-natural situation of the European states may suffice to set things in motion... No longer can one part of mankind enslave the rest... This unnatural state of affairs and these indissoluble political problems... cannot but lead to a huge, final political war, involving everyone,..." (Quoted in Kerensky, A., 1965, p.ix).

This was not an isolated opinion. Alexander Kerensky notes in his memoirs that "By the early 1890's the possibility of an all-European war was being taken very seriously by all who observed the deteriorating relations between the great powers and their ever-growing military budgets," (Kerensky, A. 1965, p.ix). Field Marshall von Moltke wrote in a similar vein of the "equal preparedness of all countries for war." (Kerensky, A. 1965, p.x). The failure of the 1899 and 1907 Hague peace conferences demonstrated the general unwillingness of the imperial powers to limit the size and development of their armed forces, (Knapton & Derry, 1965, pp.272 & 333). Hence Europe seemed to grind inevitably towards the First World War with its desultory four years of murderous trench warfare, revolution, uneasy peace and then the appalling horrors of Fascism and the Second World War, followed by the stagnation of Cold War rivalry.

Challenging Fates suggests an alternative history. It maintains that if certain events had occurred in different ways and decisions had been made differently, there may have been different outcomes. It takes the nature of European society in 1914 and the declarations of war as its starting point. The narrative involves historical figures from the period, but also grafts in fictional characters.

The existence of certain historico-cultural forces is accepted and the characters are placed in situations that demand that they make choices as to how they will react. Thus, we look not only at the big picture of how national and international politics might have developed, but also examine individual decisions made by the characters and ask to what extent these are pre-determined by the personalities, beliefs and social backgrounds of the participants. Is there free-will at the macro- and the micro-level? Also, to what extent do micro-decisions make a difference on the wider geo-political canvass? For instance, in early 1916, a fictional character, Karl von Allenstein, risks his life to snatch documents from a far-right wing political party (p.199). As the narrative plays out, we see the consequences of his decision in both the personal and political spheres.

September 1914 opened German armies were forcefully advancing towards Paris, while the French and British were falling back, with heavy casualties. Yet, they regrouped along an extended front East and South-east of Paris and took advantage of Germany's over extended advance, winning *the Battle of the Marne*. In Eastern Germany (East Prussia, now northern Poland) the Russians suffered a major defeat in what has come to be called *the Battle of Tannenburg*. This was partly the result of a German strategic decision to redeploy forces from the Western Front to the east, to face the Russian threat.

What if the French and British had lost at the Marne and Germany had occupied Paris, while the Russians held onto their gains in East Prussia precisely because the Germans did the opposite and moved forces from the east to the west in order to take Paris? This is the starting point of a narrative which explores the implications of this historical change in France, Britain, Germany and Russia at the political and social levels, but also at a personal level in the lives of actual and fictional characters.

Plot Outline

Thus, war concludes in the west in September 1914, but continues in the east until much later. Against this background, a narrative is constructed involving protagonists from four families in Britain, France, Germany and Russia. The main Russian figure is Alexander Kerensky, who led Russia briefly before the Bolshevik coup d'état of late 1917. In Britain we are introduced to a Quaker mill owning family from the northern town of Huddersfield. The French family are the Benningsteins, who are French Jews, whose forebears came from East Prussia, which is the same area from which our German protagonists originate.

Part one of the book introduces the major characters and themes and maps out the alternative history: Tsar Nicholas II dies and is replaced by a fledgling constitutional government, eventually led by Kerensky, freeing Russia to begin to find its military and industrial potential. Peace is made, but just as it is being celebrated in St. Petersburg a bomb explodes in a cabinet meeting.

In part two we are reintroduced to Karl von Allenstein, who had been a reluctant German officer in France, where he had fallen in love with a young French Woman called Alicia. Back in Berlin, he begins to work as a journalist, but also becomes aware of extreme right wing groups seeking to take power, which leads to him being injured and having to seek refuge with his parents in East Prussia. Meanwhile, in France a young Jewish French patriot, Philippe Benningstein, emerges from hiding, but becomes embroiled in an anti-Semitic and fascist plot. The anti-Semitic violence, thus unleashed, leads Alicia to contact Karl and he goes to help her. Their love is re-kindled and they marry against the background of her father's illness and Philippe's trial. Finally, we find Karl and Philippe drawn together by events at the same time as Stephen Firth, a leading British protagonist, finds himself taking part in this central part of the narrative. The book ends on an open and future centred note.

Themes

The fictional protagonists are mostly young people in their teens or early to mid-twenties. This choice reflects the fact that the population of Europe at the time was predominantly young, although political power was still largely held by an older elite. The First World War was a consequence of this elitist imperial system, in which the establishment and growth of empire was seen as the primary means to economic

prosperity. Thus young people were caught in a time-warp between an old imperialist ideology and a future of youthful innovation. We find Karl von Allenstein, from a conservative Junker, land owning, background, seeking to push forward a democratic spirit in a new post war Germany. He meets his former team mates in a Berlin café and outlines two roads of technological innovation, which offer them a future. (p.151). On the other hand he encounters the ‘German Workers’ League’ (Deutsche Arbeiterliga) which offers the people prosperity through militaristic nationalism and ethnic purity, looking back to the glory days of Bismarck. Karl is the liberal voice of reason, his friends are Marxist revolutionaries in waiting and the ‘League’ represents neo-imperialism, shorn of its constitutional pretensions. Here is the ‘nexus’ of Europe: an opportunity for choice where the alternatives of history are forged. Similarly, the death of Tsar Nicholas II, (p.52).offers Russia a constitutional future, a middle way between Autocracy and Marxism. Which will it choose?

While the choices our protagonists make may impact upon the big picture of European history, *Challenging Fates* also has the flavour of a *Bildungsroman* or novel of formation, a genre developed in Medieval Europe and used by Goethe, amongst others (Britannic, Micropedia, vol. 2, p.212). In *Challenging Fates* our young protagonists are all grappling with question of what kinds of lives they will build for themselves. As they do so, we see the interplay of their backgrounds, their past choices and their responses to the circumstances of life and the other people around them. For instance, Philippe’s nationalistic fervour took him into the army, and caused him to reject his Semitic traditions. As he seems to have been betrayed by the state, he rediscovers the value of his culture and its spirituality. (p.296). Stephen similarly has rejected his parents’ strict Quaker faith and pacifism and run off to find adventure in the army in the service of empire and civilisation. However, the brutal reality of a European war and then injury in a political bombing lead him to be reconciled with his family, but at the same time, he chooses modernity, rather than embracing his family’s faith or imperialist traditions. His interest in photography and a desire to modernise his family’s manufacturing business, but his final decision not to return to Huddersfield demonstrate his decision to carve out a future free from familial constraints.

So, to conclude this section, the book begins with political and military decisions, which create an alternative history. As the novel proceeds the characters take a variety of decisions, some of which impact on the broad historical situation and show

how they choose to respond to the nexus of history, society, culture and personality in which they live.

Reflections on the Writing Process

As I began the novel, it had no plot or characters, only an initial outline of an idea. Beginning from this idea, I wanted the reader to be both surprised by the turn of events, but also seduced into believing in the possibility of the change. I wished therefore to create a seamless transition from reality to fiction. One device that I employed in this was the use of both actual and fictitious period documents, such as newspaper articles and parliamentary papers. (pp.24-27).

The very first piece of writing was a description of a victory parade in Paris witnessed by a little girl. The intention is that the reader should at first imagine that this is an army returning home to celebrate its victory, whereas in fact it is the Germans who are marching down the Champs Elysées. The events that have led to this are only revealed later.

I created Philippe, a lover of horses, at this stage, but with no preconceptions of what he would do in the story and he was then left for a long time, before he re-emerged. The only thing known about Philippe was that he was a Jewish French patriot. This seemed an appropriate way of entering the world of twentieth century anti-Semitic, but militarised Europe: a place where war was still an acceptable face of public policy.

It was very valuable in building up the characters and their contexts to spend some time in England and then a few days travelling, mainly by train, through France, Germany and Russia, staying briefly in Paris, Berlin, St. Petersburg and Moscow. I spent a lot of time walking the streets of these cities and imagining where my characters would have lived and walked. In Paris, amongst other things, I discovered the Jewish quarter, took a boat down the River Seine and walked down the Champs Elysées. As I wrote later, I could envisage my characters in those places, which reinforces the importance of concrete experience in the creative process of forging the fictional world. Similarly, I sat in a large wooded park called the Tiergarten in Berlin, and invented a young man called Karl von Allenstein. (The name was taken from maps of East Prussia, which today is part of Poland). It was a warm spring day. The trees were in leaf and I was enjoying the experience, so because of my enjoyment of the Tiergarten, I

made it a special place for him, which led him back to think of his experience of another park, the Bois de Boulogne, in Paris, where he had fallen in love with Alicia. In this way, a major part of the narrative developed from that simple sensual experience. This is not an uncommon experience for writers. Hewson (2012, p.102-3) relates how he developed his character, Gianni Peroni in *The Villa of Mysteries*, as he visited a small town in Tuscany.

I found fascinating aspect of the writing process to be the way in which the characters and story took on a life of their own, making the story develop in quite unexpected ways. It is easy to think that the author has total freedom to manipulate characters as he wishes. This is not the case. As characters are created, they begin to express their own liberty. A striking example of this was Karl's Aunt Meta, who quite unexpectedly begins to talk quite personally to her nephew about her fears that her husband may be having an affair. (pp.255-6). I had not intended to have such a conversation, in fact it was a bit annoying, as it slightly delayed the development of the story. However, what I have realised in reflecting on this process is that by setting the narrative up in a certain way, one is in fact creating unforeseen dynamics. As these play out naturally in the real world, and have unexpected consequences, so in the novel the same dynamic occurs. I had treated Aunt Meta as a cipher; a useful fiction to further the story and paint in some of the cultural background and a little humour, but she refused to be treated like that. She asserted her right to a real piece of the action. This was an interesting example of how the writer is not a completely independent actor, but must maintain the integrity of the characters he or she creates. It also relates to the nexus of history: personal and political decisions have unintended consequences – Karl's fate in Paris could not have been foreseen in the Berlin bierkeller, when he stole the documents. Hence, we can say that this organic approach to writing both suits the nature of history as a self-discovering narrative and theme of choice and its consequences embedded in the novel.

This issue of character relates also to the importance of ensuring that the story maintains inner coherence. This relates to the personalities and backgrounds of the characters; they cannot engage in aberrant behaviour, unless this, in turn, is intentionally written into the narrative. It is also necessary to ensure that the twists and turns of the plot justify and explain each other. Karl's desire to find out about the *Deutsche Arbeiterliga* relates to what the reader has already been told about his studies and interest in politics and society and something of a desire to make the world a better

place, illustrated also by his interest in coaching the boys' football team. The work is an organic whole, one strand grows from another.

As I proceeded with writing stories in different cultural contexts, it occurred to me that it would be both interesting and appropriate to make each of the stories in the book characteristic of some aspects of the literature of each country. As a result Karl has a serious, introspective personality, something of a *Steppen Wolf* character (Hesse, 1928), given to internal dialogue, conscious of his privileged and bourgeois origins, but

determined not to use them to his advantage. When the action moves to France we find ourselves in the world of romance, but a love which is both passionate and doomed due to the circumstances surrounding it. The Russian context seeks to reflect the world of Russia's great story-tellers, trying to evoke the world of the Russian peasant and the revolutionary, alongside the sophistication of noble and gentrified society. When we turn to Britain, we are in a northern English world of mill owner, factory worker and chapel. This is the world of J.B. Priestly or Mrs Gaskell, where the contradictory nature of society is both accepted and challenged. The Firth family reflects these divergent strands of British society and literature.

A few other aspects of the writing process are worthy of mention. At an early stage the point of view emerged quite naturally as primarily seeking to be third person objective, but only very rarely do we hear the omniscience of a god's eye view. The objective is to establish a historical narrative, all be it an alternate one and it must be believable, hence the early emphasis on using historical documents. On the micro-level, we walk with our characters into their situations and sit in their heads, as they reflect on the world and their lives. Only in the story of Philippe, do we begin to hear a subjective voice. He questions his own identity and it is shown that he does not actually know his true origins. Did he in fact desert? Was he a spy?

The desire for apparent historicity is also reflected in the 'voice'. The aim is to hear the post-Edwardian milieu in the interaction of the characters. To the modern ear, this may sometimes sound long-winded and stilted. In the military situations, the sharp contrast between the officers and men is brought out in the language, as is the contrast between the firmly middle class Mrs Firth and the working class people who surround her. Especially in the case of her illegitimate son, Albert, the aim is for the reader to hear a working class man, who is proud of his heritage and resists being 'gentrified'.

Overall the ‘voice’ is intended not to be of the authoritative historian looking from outside, but of a history formed as its participants act and speak.

The desire for historical authenticity and depth has also been served by the creation of some scenes that seem not to advance the narrative. They are side shoots, which may or may not be taken up later, but they serve to broaden and deepen the milieu of the narrative. On page 78 we find Prime Minister Herbert Asquith and Winston Churchill having lunch in 10 Downing Street. This exchange does little to further the action, but deepens our knowledge of the characters and the historical environment. It has been retained as a product of the organic writing approach.

Thus the novel developed as an organic entity from its initial idea, seeking to explore characters who reflect aspects of the societies in which they moved. The story is creative fiction, but is a re-visioning of actual history in new directions, based on aspects of each society’s nature and history.

Discussion of Genre

It is in the nature of creativity is that it refuses to be tied up neatly and placed in a box. So it is in the discussion of genre and creative fiction. There are many cases when an author’s work may be consigned quite happily to a particular genre: Agatha Christie mainly wrote detective fiction. On the other hand Colleen McCullough’s *Thorn Birds* (1978) straddles the boundaries between historical-fiction, family saga and historical romance or it could even be seen as a study in the social and psychological power of religion.

Challenging Fates, similarly, refuses simple classification. It is set in a particular time, so maybe it is historical fiction? Yet, as we have seen, it re-casts the history of its period according to an alternative narrative, so maybe it belongs to that sub-genre of science fiction known as ‘alternate history’. Yet it shares none of the characteristics of science fiction as its substance is anchored in the life of a particular era, although the events may have changed. It also deals with the lives of real and fictional families, although only over a short period, so to what extent is it a family saga? Then there are echoes of the action thriller and the romance. So, what is it?

We shall look first at historical fiction. Whereas all fiction is an exercise in mimesis, historical fiction is a very particular mimetic activity, focusing on the recreating of a certain epoch in the mind of the reader. In the modern period it is

generally traced to Scott's Waverly novels, which reject romanticism, seeking authentic realism (de Groot, 2010, p. 26). The fusing of history with fiction creates an inescapable tension, but also the effect of this development was to move the novel away from being perceived as the province of *silly feminine romanticism* towards being something worthy of a serious minded person. Hence the realism of Dickens and Hugo is tied to the development of historical fiction. The Marxist, Georg Lukacs also sees a link with the understanding of history as process and development and the growth of nineteenth century capitalism (Ibid, p.25). The historical novel, then, depicts the activities of generally fictional characters playing their parts in a dynamic process of becoming, rather than just against static backdrops of otherness. Moreover the reader is called into the narrative to respond not to fictional situations, but to find his or her own place within the process of history, to ask "what would I have done, if I had been there?"

The writer's task is to place the reader within the 'otherness' of the past in such way that it becomes a 'present' experience. For Tolstoy this was through maintaining "the integrity of history and truth while creating a compelling narrative." (Ibid, p.39). For Flaubert, it was all important to create the impression of historicity, while subordinating it to the characters (Ibid, p.40-1). The characters carry the reader into the 'otherness.'

In the twentieth century, Herbert Butterfield wrote of a "symbiotic" relationship between serious historical study and historical fiction, "communicating the unknowability of the past to the contemporary reader." (Ibid. pp.48-9). This moves us towards the postmodern position, which rejects overarching theories and suggests that time may encompass many different histories. Hence the historical novel, by putting the flesh of human narrative on the bare bones of historical research, may communicate aspects of historical reality, which are unrealized in the hands of the academic historian.

Alternate history offers the reader something different: a changed reality or an alternate historical narrative, based on "plausible causal relationships" (Hellekson, 2000, p.248). "Alternate histories revolve around the basic premise that some event in the past did not occur as we know it did and thus the present has changed" (Ibid). This is also called a "point of divergence" (Ransom, 2010, p.259). In *Man in the High Castle* by Philip K. Dick (1962) the Axis powers won the Second World War and the action takes place in a radically changed North America, largely controlled by Japan

and Germany. Importantly, this version of alternate history is predicated on a change that happened before the beginning of the book.

Hellekson, (2000) calls this kind of narrative a “nexus story” (Ibid, p.252). As she notes, this term, “nexus” is borrowed from Poul Anderson and as one of his characters in *The Shield of Time* (1991) says, “A radical change is only possible at certain critical points in history” (Anderson, p.168). Often nexus stories involve the agency of individuals or may give great attention to strategy, and weapons of war. (Hellekson, 2000, p.253). She also describes two other forms of alternate history: “true alternate history stories” and “parallel worlds stories” (Ibid, pp 253-4). In the former, the narrative takes place many years after the nexus event, while the latter assume the existence of a number of independent time lines, based on the premises of quantum physics. The other critical aspect of alternate history is what Darko Suvin calls “estrangement” (Ibid, p.251). This can be seen as akin to the notion of “otherness”, which we have already noted in relation to historical fiction. In this form of mimesis, the reader must lay down his or her attachment to the previously received narrative and believe in the possibility of an alternative.

So, to which of these related genres does *Challenging Fates* belong? The answer has to be both. It is set in real time and the chronological structure holds the various narratives together as a whole. This chronology also begins with real historical events as the First World War begins to engulf Europe. The use of real historical documents reinforces the reader’s experience of living through real history. Moreover, the introduction of fictional documents is done in such a way as to move the reader seamlessly into an alternate historical narrative. Fictional and real historical characters mingle, as they travel around real places, down real streets. There is also no departure from the cultural environment of early twentieth century Europe. The aim is very much, with Flaubert, to create an impression of historicity, (de Groot, 2010, p.40). Historical characters can be employed to take on altered rolls, as long as they do not betray their historical milieu or our expectations of them as real people. For example, Kerensky does not become a Bolshevik and Blum stands up against Fascism.

To this extent it shares much with historical fiction, for it describes the lives of fictional characters within a recognisable historical milieu. However, where the difference lies is that there is a “nexus point.” The Germans capture Paris, Tsar Nicholas II dies and the Russians are not defeated in East Prussia. These events create an opportunity for a divergent narrative. Yet this is not a novel like *The man in the high*

castle, (Dick, P. K., 1962) or *Fatherland*, (Harris, R., 1992), in which there is a radically altered present. In *Challenging Fates* we do not know what the present will be. What unfolds is the interaction of fictional and real characters in a cause and effect relationship with the macro-narrative of pseudo-historical events. We do not know to what extent, if any, the post 1918 world will be different to our own. It is an open ended history in which the alternative past is forged as we read.

Amy Ransom has investigated some alternate histories which challenge the traditional “diachronic” approach centred around the nexus event. The tradition view sees “History as objective, knowable and which any of us can change.” (Ransom, A., 2010, p.261). Indeed, she says that fans identify with protagonists, just because they do have power to change cause and effect relationships which result from nexus events. (Ibid, p.276). However, Ransom points to alternate histories coming out of French speaking Quebec which explore a “synchronic” approach along the lines of a postmodern relativist historical perspective. Here, there is no authoritative historical narrative that can be known, but a multitude of possible strands that make up a complex web of cause and effect.

Challenging Fates still holds essentially to the diachronic tradition, the initial impulse for it having come from the construction of a nexus event: the victory of Germany at the Marne. Yet, it should also be recognised that the nexus event and its consequences can open up aspects of history, which are lost behind traditional discussions of cause and effect. The failure of the Russian military in 1914 and the radical break with the past engendered by the subsequent Bolshevik victory obscure the many signs of military, economic and societal renaissance following the 1905 revolution. The death of the Tsar, the greatest obstacle to reform and rejuvenation, enables us to ask different questions and find a hitherto rejected history. Similarly, the narrative of anti-Semitic Fascism in France causes the reader to ask questions about French society prior to the forced deportation of French Jews in the 1940’s ostensibly at the hands of the Germans. This form of alternate history therefore does offer the opportunity for “a dialogue with history” (de Groot, 2010, p.48) which may uncover multiple unexplored histories.

Yet there remains one more question relating to genre: to what extent is this a proto-family saga. Traditionally this genre spans the generations of a family as Galsworthy did in *The Forsyte Saga* (1906-34), (MacKay, p.123). Here, on the other hand, we span a continent in a few years, so maybe it is a geographical saga. However

it does introduce us, to varying degrees, to the dynamics of four families. It is this interplay of family dynamics, which is a key essential of the family saga. At the end of the book, lives have been opened up, histories begun and it is hoped that the reader wants to enter further into each family and discover more.

Concluding Remarks

So, *Challenging Fates* is an organically developing, alternative history narrative, with an open ended outcome, which may or may not lead to a changed present. The characters are allowed to grow, mature and find their places within the narrative, forging it as they interact with each other. Yet you may still ask me why I designed this narrative of progressive choice, consequence and further choice as an alternate history. The answer is two-fold. First of all, its genesis was in a challenge to the determinist twentieth century historical narrative: an exploration as to whether an alternative was possible. Secondly, by placing the characters' choices against the background of changed history, their choices are given power. Human choice becomes real and not just predetermined fantasy. Please read on and enjoy the challenging of fates.

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Preface

For some readers the history of the early twentieth century will be familiar territory and you will enjoy finding the 'nexus point' in the narrative and the different aspects of the novel which reflect the era. However, for those not so familiar with the period, I suggest that you just enjoy the narrative and let it draw you into another world and the possibilities of choice.

Challenging Fates

Prologue

1914

Saturday 27th September

Maria pressed her face against the narrow iron bars of the balcony. The noise of bands and marching feet filled the street and she was determined to see it all for herself. The weather couldn't have been better for a victory parade: the autumn sun magnified on their dazzling breast plates of the cavalrymen. And the horsies, oh what beautiful animals! Oh, if only Philippe could see them, thought Maria as she admired the beautifully groomed animals passing only metres before her. Why didn't anyone want to talk about Philippe any longer?

And so many flags flying like sails in the breeze. They look so happy, at least some do. Why are the others pointing down to the road? They look like I feel when Mama tells me off, and the people standing by the road look so sad, not like when Philippe marched out in his own splendid uniform. Maria had asked him why he had to go, because she'd miss him and she wouldn't be able to go riding with him in the park at weekends. He had smiled and crouched down to look straight into her eyes and said it was just for a short time, to make sure everyone was safe. Yet she had known his smile wasn't real and she had thought he might be about to cry, but then he'd picked her up and whirled her round and they'd played "horsies and doggies," just like usual and she'd decided everything must be fine.

"Maria Benningstein! Where are you?"

"Out here, Maman. Come and see the lovely horsies"

"Oh, Maria, you naughty girl, I told you not to go outside today. It is too cold. You'll catch a chill. You're not even wearing your coat."

Maman did worry so much about silly things.

An elegantly dressed woman, with wispy greying hair glided through the sitting room and onto the balcony, picked up her daughter, disappeared through the house and plonked Maria on the kitchen table. Now she knew she was in trouble. She was never told off in the beautifully decorated sitting room, which her mother tended so carefully, but always amidst the rough practicality of the kitchen.

“Will you leave us a moment, Clara!”

The maid curtsied without a word and disappeared. Maria felt there was something about this telling off that was going to be worse than normal.

“Now Maria,” began her mother, “you know we love you very much and I don’t like being angry, but you’re going to have to start doing as you are told or you’re going to get into some really serious trouble.”

“Yes, Maman, I try to be good, but why can’t I watch the horsies?”

“Has she been out watching that damned parade? I told you this morning no-one in this house was to watch. I told you Hannah, we are not going to give them the honour of seeing our shame!”

Maria spun round to see her father’s bulky frame in the doorway.

“And as for you, my daughter, don’t you care what has happened to your brother?”

“But, Papa, what has happened to Philippe? Where is he?” Her desperate eyes looked from one to the other.

“Hannah, haven’t you told her? I said she must be told this morning and you are her mother. It was for you to do it.”

“But Joseph, I just couldn’t. I had to find the right time. You know how much she loved him ...”

“Well, your soft heart has made things even worse. You’ll just have to break the news now and then come to my study. I’ve had a letter from our new masters.”

Hannah lifted Maria from the table and sank onto a kitchen chair, as Joseph’s heavy tread receded down the passage.

“Tell me, Maman, what has happened to Philippe?” Maria stifled a sob. Hannah clasped her daughter in her arms for a long time. Eventually Maria freed herself enough to stare into her mother’s face. “Please Maman.”

Hannah swallowed hard and began.

“Two months ago your brother went away to war against the Germans, who were attacking France. Our soldiers weren’t doing well and we were very frightened for Philipe, but we didn’t tell you because we didn’t want to scare you. Then last night we were told that there was a battle two weeks ago and when the fighting stopped no-one could find him.”

“So maybe he’s just lost.” Maria’s face brightened up. “Philippe was always getting lost when we went for our walks in the forest.”

“Yes, my dear, I hope you’re right, but Papa thinks he’s never coming home and he’s very very angry with everyone. You see, he blames himself for letting Philippe join the army.

“But, Philippe’s not dead. I know he isn’t. You must believe it and Papa must too and then he’ll come back. You must. You must.”

“Oh, my love, I don’t know if I can. I don’t know anything anymore!”
Maria slipped to the floor and hid her face in her mother’s skirt as she rocked back and forth on the hard chair, tears pouring down her cheeks onto the mat of Maria’s straight black hair.

Eventually, Maria rose, kissed her mother, and straightening her back said quietly, “*Je vais prier pour Philippe*” and left the kitchen.

Part One

Tuesday 4th August

Barbara Firth was approaching fifteen and had been at Greenhead High School for Girls for four years when the summer term came to an end in July 1914. Her report was really quite good. Mum had given him a kiss and even his father had responded with a gruff, “well done, but I want to see an ‘A’ for maths next time. You need a good head for figures if you want to help run t’mill one day.”

Barbara did not know if she did want to be supervising the production of fine worsted cloth for the rest of her life, but she enjoyed spending time at her father’s side. Her eldest brother, Stephen, seemed to have a far more exciting life in the army. On his recent leave he had shown them photographs of India. Barbara was ten years younger than Stephen and took every opportunity to tell her school friends about the latest exploits of Captain Firth of the 2nd King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry. Even Stuart, her parents’ middle child, had escaped by winning a scholarship to St. John’s College, Cambridge.

Term had ended nearly two weeks ago and the summer was going great so far. The whole family had spent the Huddersfield holiday week at Scarborough. They’d played cricket and tennis on the beach and swum nearly every day. Stuart played tennis for Cambridge University and had given Barbara lots of tips. She’d also been able to wear her comfortable summer clothes and only had to dress up in the evenings and on Sundays.

As Barbara walked home, the summer seemed to stretch out like a divine oasis before the return to school in September. Life was just great. She’d just won a friendly doubles tournament at the courts in Greenhead Park. Maybe, one day, she’d make the Yorkshire Ladies Tennis Open.

She turned into Trinity Street, whistling “Rule Britannia” as a tram clattered past, followed by several carriages, a couple of horses and the occasional motor car. In the distance she could see a group of people gathered on the pavement outside the newsagent’s shop. As she neared them, she saw Mrs Burstall from the draper’s, with her son, Willy.

“‘ave you ‘eard?” shouted Willy as he ran up to Barbara, “we’re at war! We’ll show them Huns they can’t just go attackin’ little countries an’ get away wi’ it. We’ll show ‘em, shan’t we Mam?”

“Come ‘ere Willy Burstall afore I give thee a thick ear. Don’t you go shouting about war like it’s just a game. And poor Barbara ‘ere ‘as got a brother in t’army. Her Mam and Dad’ll be worried sick.”

“What’s going on, Mrs Burstall?” said Barbara, as she joined the crowd.

“Oh, Miss Firth, it’s terrible. ‘aven’t you ‘eard? Germany’s declared war on France and they’ve gone and invaded poor little Belgium, an’ if they don’t get out pretty sharpish, we’ll be at war wi’ Germany. Oh it’s terrible, them Germans and their Kaiser have been spoiling for a fight for years and now there’s gonna be a terrible war.”

Barbara’s mind flashed back to a strange incident that morning. She’d raced into the sitting room and found her parents deep in conversation with the newspaper open between them. They had stopped talking immediately and asked her what she wanted. Having been given immediate permission to go and play tennis, she had raced straight out of the house. There had been none of the usual awkward questions - When? Where? With whom? or instructions about getting back in time to wash and change for dinner. Now it made sense. They must have been talking about the war. Barbara had heard about some Austrian Duke being shot in an unpronounceable European city, but she had not bothered very much in a summer of sunshine and tennis.

She gazed at the headline in the Bradford Telegraph, “Prime Minister’s Ultimatum to Germany: Withdraw from Belgium or it’s War!”

“Wow!! Thank you, Mrs Birstall. I best get home.”

The House of Commons, London, 5th August

A statement from Prime Minister Herbert Asquith ...

“Our Ambassador at Berlin received his passports at seven o'clock last evening, and since eleven o'clock last night a state of war has existed between Germany and ourselves.”

Army Order Issued by Emperor William II, 19th August

“It is my Royal and Imperial command that you concentrate your energies, for the immediate present, upon one single purpose, and that is that you address all your

skill and all the valour of my soldiers to exterminate first the treacherous English and walk over [their] contemptible little army.”

**Telegram from General Von Moltke, German Commander-in-chief,
Western Front to Field Marshall Von Hindenburg, Berlin, 21st August**

“Received Imperial edict - stop – Intelligence reports more British troop disembarkations at Dunkirk and Calais – stop - Need more troops to push west and encircle Paris – stop - Suggest rapid re-deployment of 1st, 17th and 21st infantry divisions and 2nd and 4th artillery divisions from Eastern Front to north-west France - stop – immediate encirclement of Paris critical for victory – stop – will engage British force on French-Belgian frontier - stop - victory expected –stop”

**German Imperial High Command, Berlin; Staff Order to General
Pritwitz Commander-in-Chief, Eastern Front, 22nd August**

“In view of the critical need for troops on the western front for the achievement of imminent victory you are required to dispatch the 1st, 17th and 21st infantry divisions, plus your 2nd and 4th artillery divisions by train to Berlin immediately on receipt of this order. Inform their respective commanders of their redeployment to the western front to effect the encirclement and capture of Paris. You are to adopt defensive positions in East Prussia against the Russian threat until the third and fifth armies are available to execute the invasion and defeat of Russia.”

The House of Lords, London, 25th August

A statement by Lord Kitchener, Secretary of State for War ...

“The Expeditionary Force has taken the field on the French North-West frontier, and advanced to the neighbourhood of Mons in Belgium. Our troops have already been for thirty-six hours in contact with a superior force of German invaders. During that time they have maintained the traditions of British soldiers, and have behaved with the utmost gallantry. The movements which they have been called upon to execute have been those which demand the greatest steadiness in the soldiers and skill in their commanders. Sir John French telegraphed to me at midnight as follows— ‘In spite of hard marching and fighting, the British Force is in the best of spirits’. I replied— ‘Congratulate troops on their splendid work. We are all proud of them’. As your

Lordships are aware, European fighting causes greater casualties than occur in the campaigns in which we are generally engaged in other parts of the world. The nation will, I am sure, be fully prepared to meet whatever losses and sacrifices we may have to make in this war. Sir John French, without having been able to verify the numbers, estimates the loss, since the commencement of active operations, at rather more than 2,000 men ...”

The Bradford Telegraph, 30th August

“...Despite gallant efforts on 26th August on the Belgian frontier, our brave troops were outnumbered by superior German forces and have been forced to join a general French retreat to the south. Our correspondent understands that the field commander-in-chief of our forces initially recommended retiring to the coast, but his views were over-ridden by Lord Kitchener, the Secretary of State for War. Subsequently, heavy casualties have been incurred as the result of an escalating German advance onto French soil. The French have also suffered severe casualties, abandoning defences at the rivers Aisne and Meuse. All forces are now expected to re-group and make a last stand for the defence of Paris on an extended front in the region of the River Marne. May God grant us victory.”

Field Despatch from Sir John French to the British Minister for War, 14th September

“... Therefore, despite brave and gallant efforts the expeditionary force found itself in a desperate position, having lost French support on both flanks and was forced to retire north and west to avoid encirclement. The French will undoubtedly have to abandon Paris and re-group their army to the South if they wish to fight on. The British Expeditionary force will fight a retreating action and proceed to Calais and Boulogne for transport across the channel. Urgent evacuation of all forces from the European mainland is requested ...”

Message from General Von Moltke to General Joffre

“His Imperial Majesty, Kaiser Wilhelm II offers the French Republic an armistice on the following terms:

- The immediate and unconditional surrender of Paris to the Imperial German Army.
- A cessation of all military activity by the French army within 24 hours of the signature of this agreement.
- The turnover of all weapons held by French troops to designated members of the Imperial German Army.

General Joffre, the French Commander-in-chief, cast his eye over the dispatches from the field once again. No-where could he find a glimmer of hope. Each of his armies had collapsed in disarray and now Moltke stood in reach of the gates of Paris. He stared out of the window across the River Seine. He could garrison the capital. He could order his troops to fight from street to street and house to house, but what would that achieve? Only more French deaths. No, as in 1870 France would succumb, let her conquerors have their day and await her opportunity for vengeance ... it would come!

He ordered his staff car and, head bowed, attended by his adjutant, made for the Elysée Palace to brief President Poincaré on the situation. His men stood and saluted in silence as he left the office.

An hour later another car bearing a white flag left *La Porte de Pantin* bound for Meaux. The sound of artillery fire was getting closer by the hour. With each reverberating blast, Parisian children hugged their mothers and the glorious excitement of war, celebrated so recently, seemed a vague and distant dream.

Joffre's headquarters was a hive of activity. Plans and papers were being hurriedly boxed and taken down stairs to be loaded onto trucks and wagons and taken to various secret locations around Paris and beyond. Joffre sat in his private office surrounded by his four most trusted commanders.

“*Mes amies. La France est tombé.* We have fought hard. The blood of more than six hundred thousand valiant Frenchmen now stains our sacred soil. The land of *Fraternité, Egalité et Liberté* has once more been brought low by the iron boot of Prussia. I remember by father's tears at Sedan, when the flower of French youth was cut down by *Les batardes de Berlin*. I saw my father tear up the ignominious treaty of

1871 and burn it with the flag of Bismarck's new German Empire. I swore one day to avenge that defeat, to rub their noses in the burnt fragments of that flag. I thought that day had come. I thought *La Republique Francaise* was strong enough to beat those barbarians from across the Rhine. I thought the day of *Charlemagne* had come, but it was not yet to be.

"But the time shall come ... I shall not see it! Maybe you will not see it, but it shall come and *La France* will one day fulfil her destiny as the leader of a free Europe. As *Rousseau* said 'Liberty is everywhere in chains,' but never doubt it, *mons frères*, *La France* will rise again to lead Europe to her *liberté*, as she did in the glorious days of *l'Emperor Napoleon*. *Vive La France*."

"*Vive La France*," echoed the other commanders, rising to their feet in salute to their beloved general.

Joffre did not respond. An awkward silence descended on the room as each of the four generals resumed their places.

A faint growl rumbled in the old man's throat.

"Gentlemen, this is not the time for patriotic demonstrations of your fervour. We have work to do. We cannot sit by and hope for the future. The people are weak. They will grumble at their occupiers, but they will choose the easy road. They will be happy to tend their vineyards, make their cheese and drink their wine. They will be happy to make friends with the enemy as long as he lets them have these liberties, and this he will do. They know, just as we do, that all the people really want is 'bread and circuses'. They do not care for *La France*, her dignity, her divine mission. They need leadership – *a Caesar, a Napoleon* – then we will rise and be great again. Today, we will sow the seeds of that future. We must be swift, for the time is short and our jailors are already at our gates. In each of these envelopes are your secret orders. You must execute them and destroy all trace that they ever existed.

Joffre slid four slim foolscap envelopes across the table. "*Bonne chance, mes enfants! Bonne chance!* Now go! It has been a privilege serving with you. You are the future of France."

"*Mais, Mon General. Vous êtes la future de La France!* You will lead us again!

Joffre jumped to his feet, reached the double doors of the conference room in two strides and flung them open.

C'est finit! Allez! Allez mes enfants. Allez!

The generals dutifully picked up their envelopes, saluted, filed out of the room and through an outer office frozen in its own maelstrom of frantic preparation for surrender.

Joffre closed the doors gently, turned and walked to the window. The sun was sparkling on the Seine. Ornate buildings marched in Parisian splendour down the boulevards. Away in the distance, the Eiffel Tour, that celebration of French engineering pride, forced its finger of phallic certainty into a near cloudless sky. It was a day of peace, of celebration, of beauty. A day when little children should be giving posies of flowers to their mothers and be swept off their feet to sit on their father's shoulders. Young couples should be boating happily down the river or walking arm in arm in the Tuileries Gardens. Yet, in reality the pavements were already shrouded in autumn leaves: trees exchanging the gaiety of summer for the sullen stoicism of winter. A north-easterly wind rattled the window panes.

Joffre sat down at his desk, took out two pieces of his famous yellow stationery and wrote a few lines on each. He folded them and signalled to a young corporal standing at attention by the door. The boy marched importantly up to the General's desk, saluted and waited.

"Corporal, what is your name?"

"Lesaffre, Mon General."

"Mmm. A good name. From La Vendee?"

"Yes, Sir.

"I thought so. Now, Lesaffre, you are about to carry out what maybe the most important duties of your whole life. Take this order to the stables and give it to the officer in charge."

He gave the boy the first of the pieces of yellow paper. The other lay perfectly positioned in the middle of his desk. He stared at it and drummed with his fingers on the rich mahogany surface.

"Is that all sir?"

"No boy!" His head jerked up. "Take this to my adjutant in the office at the end of the hall, but ... go to the stables first."

He picked up the paper, hesitated for a moment and then thrust it into the boy's hands.

"Now, *allez!* At the double!"

"*Merci, Mon General.*"

The boy saluted, executed a smart about turn and was gone.

Lieutenant Karl von Allenstein sat astride his dappled mare in the cold autumn wind. He had received his call up papers in the last week of July and was in one of the first artillery battalions to enter Belgium. He had hated the idea of war, but even he was carried along by the apparent ease of victory; Liege, Mons, Le Cateau – if they kept going like this, soon Paris would be in their hands. As the campaign continued, his men were caught up by an increasing feeling of exhaustion and desperation. The supply trains were falling behind, food was less easy to come by, but the faster they went, the sooner they would reach Paris and then, they were assured, it would all be over.

In the closing hours of the Battle of the Marne, he received an urgent order to report to his commanding officer and, on the strength of his excellent French, was transferred to the Intelligence Service. He would now be one of the first German officers to have the honour of entering Paris. General von Moltke sat astride his own black stallion only a few metres to his right. Karl was to ride forward, receive the signed surrender document from the French, check the document and pass it to von Moltke.

The General sat as still as a stone, infantry and cavalry ranged behind him.. Sharp shooters flanked the defile on both sides. Who could know if the Parisians would surrender with their army? The solid wooden gate trembled in the wind and began to open. Karl readied himself. The crack between the gates slowly widened to reveal a single French General seated on a white stallion, holding the Tricolour in his left, gauntleted hand. The flag wriggled in the wind, seeking its own victory. The General, flanked by an infantry guard with shouldered arms, began to move forward. He was in no hurry. Once outside the gates, he stopped and gradually lowered the flag until it dipped slightly below the horizontal. General von Moltke recognised Joffre, nodded almost imperceptibly and saluted. This was the sort of General the Prussian could admire. There was a pause and Joffre made to return the honour. The sun struck something shiny in his hand. A shot rang out and the general slumped forward and slid to the ground, as a small silver pistol falling from his hand. The German general steadied his horse, returned his hand to his side and bowed his head for a few seconds. Nobody moved to help General Joffre.

Karl was stunned, anchored to the spot. He hardly noticed a hitherto unseen French cavalry officer riding out from behind the gates under a white flag. Then he heard his name being called.

“Lieutenant von Allenstein! von Allenstein, do your duty!”

He rode forward and took a leather folder from the young man, opened it and read the elegant, but simple document. He passed it to von Moltke, assuring him that the wording was as agreed and the German soldiers passed through the gates, disarming their French counterparts as they went.

Far to the north of Paris, a dispirited British Expeditionary Force was making its escape.

“Awe Serge, me feet ‘re killin’ me. I think I got that there trench foot or some’at.”

“Shut y’ trap, Stafford, or you’ll slow us all up. We’ve all got foot rot. We’re as ‘ungry as hell. We all stink. And we’re all gonna get the ‘ell out of ‘ere before Huns catch us up, so keep on marching. Just be glad you’re not in t’rear guard ‘olding t’enemy at bay. God ‘elp ‘em blokes. ... You ‘eard Captain Firth. We gotta keep goin’ till we reach a French village called Hallencourt and find some transport from there on t’coast. Then Royal Navy’ll come an’ pick us up and we can go home and sleep tight in us beds.”

“Eh! I bet you’re looking forward to that Serge, from what I ‘ear Mrs Crossland’s quite a bit of ‘ot stuff.”

“Well, Stafford, I suggest you keep such thoughts to yourself, unless you want a very hot boot up your back side.

“Now, men you’re doin’ just great. Keep it up an’ we’ll take a breather over t’ next ridge.

“How’s leg, Beavers?”

“It’s right sore Sir, but I reckon if I put most o’ my weight on t’other, I can make it till tonight.”

“Well done man.”

Sergeant Crossland continued to move through his platoon, giving encouragement as he went. He’d been with the Yorkshire Light Infantry from his teens and since making sergeant, had helped many a young lad through the rigours of combat. Yet, this time was something else. He felt sick. He’d never lost so many men.

They had a good rate of fire and at Mons they'd held their own, knocking the Germans down 'like nine pins', but they just kept on coming – hoards of them, line upon line. Le Cateaux had been a desperate shambles. They'd stopped retreating at the River Marne and at first had had some success, but then they realised the German retreat was just tactical and once within range of the big guns, they didn't have a chance. Many of the men had been pinned down by numerous machine gun emplacements and died where they lay. Crossland had scuttled around the battlefield, helping as many men to get out as he could. Now they were making a mad dash for the coast while the Germans were concentrating on Paris.

“Captain Firth.”

“Yes, Major Hargreaves, Sir.”

“Where are your men?”

“Most of them are resting up at the town hall and in the square. One platoon is still on the road with Sergeant Crossland and the artillery're trying to hold off the Germans.”

“Hm! God help them! Anyway, Crossland's a good man. He saved a whole company in Rajasthan. Should have been an officer, but refused promotion three times. Loves his men. Backbone of the British army. Right, now, you requisition every horse and cart and any trucks you can find, plus enough fuel to get them the hundred or so miles to the coast. Frenchies have been pretty good so far. Treat them with respect and they'll come through for us. Local Seigneur's given us all his hay wagons and three carriages that look like they were used by Napoleon himself! How's your French?”

“A bit rusty, Sir, but I reckon I can get by.”

“Good man! Go to it.”

“Yes Sir.”

By dawn the remains of the Light Infantry had been loaded into a motley collection of horse drawn wagons and the occasional diesel truck. There was a cold autumn wind, but the rain was still holding off. The men had been fortified with French baguettes, cheese, salami and red wine. Major Hargreaves gave the command to move and the cavalcade rumbled off towards the coast. The sound of gunfire was still some way off, but not far enough for anyone to feel particularly confident of the future.

Bradford Telegraph, 22nd September

Splendid Naval Effort Saves Yorkshire's Valiant Heroes.

Together with thousands of our brave boys, the 2nd King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry sailed last night in good order from Boulogne in northern France at the end of an exhausting campaign. Despite the apparent ignominy of defeat, it has been reported even in the German press that our troops put up a spirited defence against overwhelming odds. Indeed Kaiser Wilhelm II was so worried by the deployment of our forces that he called on the German army to concentrate their efforts on its destruction. It has been reliably reported that the fire power of British infantry men was so fast that the Germans thought they were using machine guns. The King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry was particularly commended by General Sir John French at the Battle of Mons.

Our ships crossed the Channel with few losses due to the skilful seamanship of the Royal Navy in blockading the German Grand Fleet in Wilhelmshaven and the Baltic ports.

Despite some criticism of the joint decision of Lord Kitchener and Sir John French to withdraw from France, this newspaper gives its full support to the government in its continued prosecution of this great struggle for justice against an infamous aggressor.

It is reported from the War Office that casualty lists are being finalised and relatives are being notified as soon as practically possible.

"Mum, Mum! Look at the paper! Stephen's coming home." Gaspd Barbara, as she burst into his sitting room. She'd run all the way home from school and felt like throwing up. She stopped short. Her mother was sitting on the sofa with a lady dressed in black from head to toe.

"Barbara, go and tell Becky to bring some tea and cakes to the sitting room. Then change into a black dress and come back and sit with us. Oh, and we need enough for three."

"Yes, Mother."

Barbara backed out of the room quietly and went to the kitchen, where she found that their maid was already boiling the kettle and setting up the tea tray.

Having delivered his message, Barbara sat down at the kitchen table.

“What’s up, Becky?” she said in a hushed tone.

“All I know, Miss Barbara, is Mrs Henderson got a telegram from t’ war office today. Someone said both ‘er boys ‘ve copped it, but I don’t know for sure.”

“Thanks, I’ve gotta get changed. Oh by the way, what’s left of Stephen’s regiment’s escaped from France.”

“Oh, I hope Jimmy Sugden’s with ‘em.”

After Mrs Henderson had left, Mrs Firth had sat down with her daughter and read the front page of the newspaper that Barbara had brought in. She sniffed and took Barbara’s hands in hers.

“You look very dignified, dear ... Thank you. You’re a credit to the family. I know you’d rather be out with your friends. Barbara, your father and I love you all very much. I know you might think we’re a bit strict sometimes and we don’t let you have everything and do everything that other girls like you do, but it’s just because we love you and want you to grow up in the best way you can.”

“Yes, mother, I know.”

“I want to talk to you about the war. You know our attitude to it.”

“I know, but the Germans have done some terrible things.”

“So they say, but we have to be careful what we believe. Sometimes people tell stories in a way they think other people want to hear them. They might not be the complete truth.”

“You mean propaganda.”

“Yes, dear. I know it must be hard for you at school sometimes, with all this jingoistic nonsense around. We don’t know how long it will last, but you’ll have to be strong. The Meeting has written an anti-war pledge. Now it’s only adults who are expected to sign, but you’re old enough to understand and join us and I want you to think about it. I can’t bear to think of so many more of our fine young men lost in this meaningless way and then there’s Stephen. I want us all to do what we can to get him back and then maybe I can persuade him to leave that stupid army.”

“You know I want the war to end and Stephen home just as much as you, but they do think they’re fighting for a righteous cause.”

“Do they? ... That’s just what’s so sad.”

Mrs Firth heaved a sigh. “Will you at least consider it?” She looked solemnly into her daughter’s eyes.”

Barbara smiled and nodded. ‘Of course I will, Mother. You know I take what you think very seriously. I love you and Father too.’

“Right, well that’s enough of that for now.” Mrs Firth let go of her daughter’s hands and stood up, smoothing her dress. “I’m sure you’ve got homework to do and we’ll have dinner at seven ... And you can clean those grubby fingernails. I’ll check later.”

Thursday 25th September

The next two days had gone very slowly. Mother and Father had said very little at meal times and the daily devotions seemed particularly mournful. On the third morning after Mrs Henderson’s visit, Barbara was just about to ask if she could leave the breakfast table, when the door bell sounded, followed by a heavy knock. Mother’s left hand went to her mouth. Father sprang to her side, his hand on her shoulder. Barbara didn’t dare move. There was a knock at the door’ but before anyone could speak, Becky was in the room.

“A telegram, Ma’am ... Sir.”

She curtsied briefly and was gone.

The yellow rectangle of paper lay on the breakfast table. Mrs Firth picked it up tenderly and passed it to her husband whose paw-like hand made it look insignificant and almost worthless. He went over to the desk under the window and retrieved a letter knife.

“You do it. I don’t think I can,” said Wilfred Firth to his wife, handing her the telegram and knife.

“We’ll do it together, dear. Pull up your chair.”

Barbara felt like an outside observer of a historic moment of family intimacy. Her father dragged his heavy oak dining chair to the corner of the table and sat down. Mother picked up the knife, slit the edges of the telegram and handed it to her husband, who gently opened it out and laid it on the table.

“Recovering in hospital Southampton – stop – Mild injuries – stop – Will write when can use right hand – stop – Don’t worry –stop- Love Stephen-stop”

“Oh, the Lord be praised. He’s safe. Oh what a relief. Oh, I can hardly believe it, with all the bad news and poor suffering families. Oh Wilfred, he’s alive.” A rare smile took hold of Helen Firth’s face and Barbara thought for a moment they were going to kiss, but then propriety took over again.

“’tis a mercy, my dear. There’s no mistake.” Wilfred squeezed his wife’s arm, looked across into her face and smiled solemnly, shaking his head gently from side to side.

“Well, it’s wonderful news, but we mustn’t be seen to gloat over our good fortune and it’s getting late. You two had better be off. You better take Barbara to school in that car of yours or she’ll be getting the strap.”

Mr Firth nodded with a grunt and squeezed his wife’s arm.

“Come on girl. Get y’bag.”

Barbara wanted to hug her parents, but Mother was still seated at the table and Father had gone. She had to content himself with placing a kiss on her cheek.

“I can’t wait to tell Miss Robinson. She’s asked me for news three days running.”

Barbara raced out of the breakfast room, down the front steps and round to the stables and garage, where the family’s demure little Austin Seven was kept, with her father already at the wheel.

“Come on girl, anyone’d think you wanted that strap. Start her up and ‘op in and we’ll be gettin’ you to school.

Barbara swung the starting handle with all her might and the little car chugged into action. There was still something exciting about it, even after three months. Not many girls could arrive at school in the family car.

Bradford Telegraph, 30th September

Closed Session of Parliament amid claims of attack on press freedom

Our correspondent at Westminster reports that tomorrow’s joint session of Parliament will take place in conditions of the utmost secrecy. The Commons and Lords voted separately to impose reporting restrictions in response to a government request which it says is necessary for a thorough debate on the war situation. This will be the first time since the glorious revolution of 1688 that such a policy has been pursued. While most of the Tory Members of Parliament voted in favour of the measure, many Liberal

members refused their support. The Labour Party considered boycotting the meeting, but has decided that in the interests of the working men of Britain, Labour members will attend. See today's editorial for further discussion of this meeting and its implications for freedom of speech.

Hansard:

Report of the Special Joint Sitting of Parliament, 1st October

Address from the throne by His Majesty King George V

My noble Lords and honourable members of this our court of Parliament duly assembled at Westminster. It is not our policy as monarch of these dominions of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland and of our Empire to exercise our authority directly, as sovereign, but through our government and the representatives of our people gathered here in Parliament. Yet, as we are all aware, we now face the most serious and dangerous situation faced by the British people since the days of Napoleon. Then, it was a French military adventurer, who came to dominate the life of Europe and to threaten the prosperity and liberty of the British nation. Now it is a German emperor, in the person of my cousin, Kaiser Wilhelm II who has sent his armies sweeping through France and as I speak, his generals are forcing the French to accept an ignominious defeat. Despite the brave and valiant campaign fought by our Expeditionary Force, the invader has proved unstoppable in the western theatre of operations.

However, my government wishes to express most urgently to these two houses of Parliament here assembled, that Britain does not consider itself to have been defeated by the armies of Germany. We intend to fight on. Our army in France suffered some 36,542 casualties, leaving a fighting strength of over 120,000 seasoned army personnel. In addition, the patriotic fervour of the British people, since the declaration of war, has resulted in the voluntary enlistment of over 800,000 fit and able bodied men. In addition our dominions are preparing to send detachments to aid their mother country in her dire need. We continue to stand as the mother of the free, against the German tyrants.

My government therefore proposes to prosecute the war in the following ways

...

Firstly, we have received a personal letter from our cousin Tsar Nicholas II of Russia, requesting military aid in the form of equipment, expertise and personnel as soon as may be possible.

Secondly the Royal Navy will continue, with the aid of the Russian Imperial Baltic Fleet and the majority of the French Fleet, to blockade the German Imperial Grand Fleet within the ports of northern Germany and the Baltic Sea.

Thirdly, my government understands that the administrations of the French North African Colonies have refused to accept the armistice between Germany and France and will not accept any subsequent peace treaty negotiated between the French and German governments. My government therefore intends to offer all necessary assistance to the French administrations in North Africa, using the Anglo-French Protectorate of Egypt from which to launch our initial response.

It is my government's belief that rapid deployment of our forces in Eastern Europe, under the protection of the Royal Navy offers excellent opportunities to bring decisive pressure to bear on Germany, so that her apparent victory on the western front may prove to be short lived. We therefore recommend our government's proposals to our noble and honourable Houses of Parliament that once again our subjects may live in peace and security.

Response from the Prime Minister, Mr Asquith

Your Majesties, Princes, Noble Lords and Honourable members, you have heard the gracious words of His Royal Highness in support of this government's policy at this dark hour in the history of this Realm and Empire. I thank Your Majesties for coming here today at the behest of your government and ministers. We now humbly ask that you would take your leave of us, so that our combined houses may table motions of support and debate the policies that have been brought before us today.

Monday 5th October

Barbara had had a particularly painful day at school. During her chemistry theory class she'd been caught doodling in the back of her exercise book, instead of taking down Miss Featherstone's dictation. The latter seemed to have become more than usually keen on inflicting punishment since the outbreak of war. Then during hockey, she'd suffered a vicious tackle by Wendy Schofield, by far the biggest girl in the 5th form, whose brother was in the army. A severely bruised shin was the result. Despite it all, she was happy as she stood at the school gate, waving to her father. He had promised to pick her up and take her to the mill to look at some patterns for women's suit lengths. The war had brought a more businesslike approach to women's clothing and he was beginning to value his daughter's sense of colour and style. She threw her weighty satchel into the back of the car, clambered into the front seat and gave him a peck on the cheek.

Mrs Firth was at that moment clambering down from their trap, at front door of Thornhill House. "Now, Tom, give the horse a good rub down and some bran mash and oats. She's done a sterling job this afternoon."

"That I will Ma'am. She's a good young filly and no mistake. D'you want a hand up them steps?"

"Thank you, I'll manage."

It had been a busy afternoon delivering charity baskets to some of the families in the slums at the bottom end of town. It was her Thursday duty. She lifted her skirts and ascended the stone steps to find the door was slightly ajar, pushing it open with a sigh.

"Barbara Firth! If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times, shut the door properly," she muttered to herself, as she unpinned her hat and pulled off her coat, hanging them neatly in the hall cupboard.

"Barbara!" she shouted picking up the evening paper and going into the sitting room.

"Hello, Mother. Sorry if I don't get up. I'm all in."

Helen steadied herself against the doorframe, dropped her bag and rushed to kneel at her son's side, her heart pounding in a trauma of relief. Stephen bent forward to let her take him in her arms and press her face into his tunic.

“Oh, may the Lord be praised. How on earth did you get here? Did the army give you leave?”

“Well, the hospital wanted to move me to a convalescent hostel, but I said I’d come up here. The train journey was a bit more of a struggle than I expected.”

“Never mind dear, you’re here now, but I do wish you’d telegraphed from London.”

“It was all I could do to get across London and onto the train.”

“Yes, of course, dear, of course. We just don’t realise what it must be like.”

“Anyway, after a few of Mrs Benholmly’s meals, I’ll be as right as rain. I can’t wait for dinner tonight. I’ll have an hour or so on the bed and then I’ll change ...”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort! You’re at home now and I’m in charge of your recovery. You’ll have dinner in your room.”

“But I don’t want to worry father.”

“Pretending won’t do anyone any good. ‘He who speaks the truth from his heart will never be shaken’. I’ll get your bed aired and the fire lit. Becky can do it. Father shouldn’t be late. He took the car this morning.

“The car? Father’s bought a car? Whatever made him splash out on a car?”

“You can ask him later, but he’s like a child with a new toy. Now, you just rest there by the fire ... I don’t know what’s happened to that sister of yours ... Oh, how could I forget, Father was collecting her from school and taking her up to the mill. He’s trying to interest her in the business.”

There was the sound of running footsteps in the hall and Becky burst breathlessly into the lounge.

“Mrs Firth! Master Stephen! There’s been a terrible accident up at the mill. Mr Firth’s been ‘urt. Mr Broomfield’s just been on his horse. He’s gone for Dr. Sykes. He didn’t even get off his ‘orse. He just shouted to us. I were in t’coal ’ouse.”

“Oh Lord, what can have happened. They were only looking at patterns. Becky, tell your father to harness the trap again. We’ll take Grace. She’ll manage the hills all right. I can’t be driving him back in that death trap of a motorcar. You stay here Stephen and ...”

Stephen was out of the chair before she could finish.

“There’s no way you’re going up there alone. I’ll get some blankets from Mrs Benholmly. Mother, put on a warm coat and hat. Becky, did Mr Broomfield say if any of the men were hurt?”

“I don’t know, Sir.”

“All right, go to it!”

“Stephen, you can’t. You need rest,” protested Mrs Firth.

“Mother! I can and I will. He’s my father.”

They were at the bottom of the front steps together with Mrs Benholmly carrying two holdalls bulging with blankets by the time Tom brought the trap round. Stephen hauled himself up onto the front seat, but made no move to take the reins from the old cab driver. Mrs Firth and her housekeeper sat facing the back. It was a steady climb from Edgerton up to Lindley and then up Plover Road to Wellington Mills. The four storied, austere edifice stood unusually quiet in the gathering dusk. The street lamps had already been lit.

As they entered the mill yard they could see Dr. Sykes dog cart by the steps. His coachman, Peters, was busy filling his pipe. They tethered Grace, gave her a nose bag and Mrs Firth led the way into the inner sanctum of *Firth’s Fine Worsteds*.

A knot of workers stood in the entrance hall with Mr Broomfield, who detached himself as soon as he saw the family.

“Oh, it’s terrible. We ‘ad them belts seen to only six month ago. I were just takin’ ‘im and Miss Firth through to t’ sample room when it came whipping out ...”

“Where’s my husband. You can explain later.”

“In t’ main weaving shed, Ma’am. Dr. Sykes said as not to move ‘im too much for t’present or it might do more ‘arm than good.”

“Was anyone else hurt?”

“Ai, there’s two o’ t’ girls knocked senseless and old Mr Padworth might have broke ‘is leg. They’re all in ‘ere. Oh, if I could ‘ave me life over I’d ‘ave had new belts fitted and not made ‘em last.”

The door was open. They found Barbara kneeling on the wooden boards, cradling her father’s head in her hands. Dr Sykes was inspecting his eyes by the light of a paraffin lamp. Two gas jets flickered on the walls.

“Good evening, Dr Sykes. How is my husband? And tell me the truth.”

“Good evening Mrs Firth ... Captain Stephen. Well I don’t know what they’ve told you, but I understand that one of the main drive belts broke, picked him up and flung him across the shed. It’s a wonder it didn’t catch Miss Barbara. He’s got several broken bones, but what most concerns me is that he’s still out cold.”

“We should take him to the offices. There’s electric light and you can use the board room table.”

“Yes, I’ve sent for something flat to carry him on. I don’t know the state of his neck and back, so we’ll have to be very careful.”

“Here’s some blankets, Doctor. They’ll help keep ‘im warm, and t’others.”

“Thank you, Mrs Benholmly. A practical women in a ghastly situation. You were in the South African War Medical Service I believe ...”

“Doctor, this should do. We found it round t’ back.” Mr Broomfield led four men into the room, carrying what had once been a door. Both ends had rotted away, but it looked sturdy enough even for Wilfred Firth.

Barbara was frozen to the spot. She had seen her father’s body cut from her side, felt the wide curling leather drive belt slice past her and throw him against the end wall of the weaving shed. She had shrieked in horror and fled to his side. One moment they were talking, the next his face was grey and lost. She was his only link to life itself.

They eased her away and Stephen, Dr. Sykes and Mr Broomfield carefully lifted his dead weight onto the old door. Four mill hands took a corner each, while Barbara steadied her father’s head at Dr. Sykes’ instruction. At a funereal pace they made their way through the weaving shed watched by the workers: men, cloth caps rolled in their hands, women pulling their woollen shawls around their shoulders.

“You men, help bring the others. They all deserve the same treatment,” said Mrs Firth to a group standing at the engine room door.

She then hurried to her husband’s side taking a limp hand in hers. Stephen struggled behind, sweating.

Once in the board room, the doctor set to work. He stripped the torso and listened to the chest. “Mmm, probably a collapsed lung. He’ll need oxygen. The ambulance should be here soon. He should be in hospital. Breathing’s getting weaker. Get those blankets round him again and put some coal on the fire. Where’s that damn ambulance?”

“Father, Father ... you’ve gotta keep going. You never give up. Come on wake-up.” Barbara desperately squeezed her father’s shoulders.

“Wilfred Firth, wake up!” Mother’s commanding voice filled the room. Your family needs you, the business needs you, I need you!”

Stephen had slumped into a chair by the door. He felt very cold. The sounds of battle and of water, whooshing and gurgling were all around him. His mother's voice roused him and the room swam into view. He struggled out of the chair to his father's side.

"Dad, Father, you can't go now. Come back. We need you to fight. You've got to do it. Dad! Please Dad!"

The doctor listened to Wilfred's chest again and pulled back his eyelids.

"There's nothing I can do. We're losing him. Hey, girl, go and tell someone to see where that ambulance is."

Barbara couldn't move.

Her father's body arched. A gurgling sound issued from his throat. His eyes opened slightly and his lips quivered.

"Mother, look he's coming round. He's trying to talk. He's saying something."

The body relaxed as he exhaled his last breath, his eyes staring blankly at the desperate faces pressing around the table.

Helen Firth gasped, gripped his hand tighter than ever and bent over placing a firm kiss on his forehead.

"Thank you, Wilfrid. I love you. I really do."

Barbara just stared. It couldn't be. There was no way he could be gone. No way at all. How could God be so cruel?

Friday 9th October

What Maria had not realised, that day when she had watched the forbidden parade, was that the French soldiers had been forced to take part. Line, upon line of them walked through the famous Paris boulevards, heads lowered, shoulders hunched. German soldiers on each side ensured that no-one stepped out of line or threatened the orderly expression of triumph.

Fifty representatives from each regiment had been chosen and the commanding officer was forced to carry the regimental colours before his men, in an attitude of surrender. Some men had refused and were threatened with the firing squad until General Maginot, despite the obvious shame, issued orders that all regiments must comply.

The rest of the men had been confined to barracks under armed guard. That is, those who had not been demobilised already. The German military authorities were acting quickly and efficiently to demobilise the French army. Already, thousands of men had been stripped of their arms and uniforms and returned home, but Philippe was not amongst them.

M. Benningstein took himself to the Military headquarters and information office every day to inspect the casualty lists. Maria and Hannah knew it took at least fifty minutes for him to reach his goal. He would spend about 30 minutes looking at the lists and making fruitless visits to various departments. On his return he stopped for a coffee at one of the cafés on Rue Laterre before returning to their new, rather cramped flat. The new military authorities had commandeered their old apartment on the Champs Elysée as officers' quarters and given them only had two weeks to pack up and find a new place to live. The Germans were also paying well, so rents had risen. It wasn't fair. Maria had loved her room in the old apartment. It had looked down on the broad thoroughfare and she had loved watching its varied traffic: different sizes and breeds of horsies and a huge variety of carts and carriages, and then there were the motor cars with their shiny chrome sparkling in the sunshine. All Maria could see from the new flat was a narrow cobbled lane. She sometimes watched the people going by, but she got bored quite easily. There were no richly dressed ladies and gentlemen in this part of the city. Everyone looked poor.

Papa didn't want to make the daily visits, but Mama insisted, so he made the journey just to please her. Anyway, his trips would soon stop as nearly all the soldiers had been accounted for and some days there were no new lists. All Philippe's comrades in arms would say was that in their final attack before the retreat, Philippe had led a charge towards a gun emplacement and no-one had seen him after that.

Maria watched for her father's arrival. She wanted to give him the picture of a little bunch of flowers she had painted after breakfast to try and cheer him up. Unexpectedly the postman appeared for the second time that morning. He must have found another letter for them. Before she had reached her bedroom door, she heard a shriek from downstairs. "*Maria, ma petite, Maria! Viens ici.*"

Maria jumped down the stairs five at time and found Mama with a small blue envelope in her shaking hands. "*C'est Philippe. C'est ton frère. Il n'est pas mort.*"

Maria took the thin envelope from her mother and held it like it was a precious jewel. She turned it over. There was no return address. Tears were rolling gently down Mama's face. "Open it," she mouthed.

Maria slid a finger gently under the envelop flap and eased it open. The gum gave way without a fight. She carefully removed a single sheet of note paper folded in half and gave it to her mother. The writing was curly and Maria didn't think she could manage that kind of grown up writing yet. Mama placed it on the hall table and read without saying a word.

*Chere Mama, Papa et Ma Petite Maria,
J'espere que vous avez de bonnes santés. Je vais bien.
Je travail pour La France.
J'espere vous visiter, a bientôt.
C'est necessaire que personne ne sais pas que J'ai ecrit ce letter ci.
Je vous aim beaucoup.
Philippe*

Mother stood for a long time looking at the letter. She then blew her nose, dabbed her eyes and straightened up.

"Philippe's alive, Maria. He's alive."

"But where is he? Why doesn't he come home?"

"I don't know, *ma petite*, but he is alive. It is enough for now."

Maria heard the sound of a heavy tread on the steps outside the front door. She turned and saw the silhouette of her father beyond the dark red glass in the door.

"That is the last time I will go. It is useless and it's destroying me. I can't bear it anymore. Our wonderful Philippe is gone. I should never have let him go. I have killed my own son."

He barely acknowledged his wife and daughter and made to go upstairs to their living quarters.

"But Joseph," cried Hannah. "Philippe is alive."

"My dear, we cannot continue to live like this. It is too terrible. I have spoken to officers who were in the fighting at the end. It was desperate. The Germans had brought up fresh artillery divisions from the east, and so many of our brave boys died. They say it was sheer slaughter. We didn't have a chance."

“But Joseph, God has given him back to us. *Regardez!*” She held out the letter. Her smile and shining eyes transformed her often austere face in a way that Maria had not seen for months. Her old dear Mama was back.

Joseph took the letter solemnly, opened it and stared at the short message. His brow furrowed and he pushed up his bottom lip as he often did when in deep concentration.

“But what does it mean? Why doesn’t he come home? What can he be doing? The war is over. The peace, such as it is, has been made. France has been humiliated, but we must live with it. We must get on with our lives and learn to live in this new world. This has always been our way. What’s our dear son doing, that he should treat us like this?”

“Joseph, we can’t know now, but Philippe’ll come back and tell us, and one day we’ll be a family again.”

Joseph took his wife tenderly in his big arms and planted a kiss on her head. They stood for a long time enjoying a warmth they had not enjoyed since the outbreak of war.

Maria sat on the hall chair, her feet dangling in the air, thinking of the day when Philippe would return and swirl her round in his arms and take her horse riding like before. It wouldn’t be long now.

Joseph and Maria separated, still holding hands. “I must go and tell Rabbi Weil, so he can include Philippe in the Sabbath prayer. Oh, he’s alive, my son is alive, our house will live on, oh God is good. We must celebrate. We must say *Hallel*.”

“Oh Joseph, you cannot tell the Rabbi, or anyone. I know it’s hard, but we must keep this news hidden in our hearts. I don’t know how I can do it. I want to run and tell my sisters and the Hershall family and so many others, but for the sake of Philippe we cannot. You can say a full *Hallel* at dinner tonight, and tomorrow at *Shabbat* we will pray for Philippe, but only we will know what our prayers mean. You mustn’t tell the Rabbi. It may be dangerous for Philippe.

Joseph’s shoulders slumped and he sighed deeply.

“You are right, *ma chérie*, may he come back soon and then we shall have such a celebration as our synagogue has not seen since before the war. Oh God is good. God is good.”

Joseph let go of his wife's hands, hung his overcoat and hat on the hall pegs and ran up the stairs. By the time he reached his study, he was singing his favourite hymn from Philippe's *bar mizvah*.

Hannah chuckled to herself. Oh my Joseph, what am I to do with you? You live so much in your emotions. We must be careful.

"*Viens!* Maria, let's help Clara with lunch."

As the day drew to a close a troop ship was steaming her perilous way through the Baltic Sea. First Officer Fisher approached the starboard lookout.

"Eee Sir, t'aint 'alf brass monkey weather."

"Well you just keep those glasses on that patch of fog out there, Atkins, and forget about primate genitalia and we might just avoid ending up in the drink, which I can tell you is a darn sight colder than we are up here."

"Yes Sir. I'll keep us safe from the bosh, Sir. Any chance of a mug o' cha, Sir?"

"Not up here, but I'll get Barrowclough to relieve you in half an hour and you can get something to warm you up in the mess."

"Thank you, Sir."

"Carry on"

"Yes, Sir."

Fisher returned to the bridge, where Commander Reid was on duty at the helm.

"I don't like it at all Sir. It's too quiet and too darn muddy out there."

"Well, you heard the Captain, this weather gives us the best chance we've got to slip through. It's calm as a mill pond and with no lights we might just make it. And we better just get used to it. If this run's successful, then we'll be back again and again until the Kaiser's beaten or we've all just had enough."

"It's the *Unterseebooten* that worry me the most. They seem to be popping up everywhere and we haven't got a clue where to look. The Aboukir, Cressy and Hogue didn't have a chance. Sitting ducks, they were."

"Umm, if you ask me, those old tubs shouldn't even have put to sea. The brass hats upstairs are just out of touch. We've been fighting out in the colonies for too long; forgotten what a European war's all about. By the way, you didn't hear that from me. As they say 'ours just to do and die.' Anyway, how is it you came by such good German. Not a spy, I suppose?"

“Well, I wouldn’t be telling you if I were. No, I was seconded to the Embassy in Berlin. Military attaché 1905 to 1911 under old *Bismarck*.”

“*Bismarck*?”

“Oh, Sir John Hardington. Reckoned he was some cousin to the Kaiser. Never seemed to be able to prove it, but loved the Germans and all their military stuff ... Quite a nice old boy, really. He’d have hated all this bloody business.”

“I remember. Came to Founders’ Day and waffled on for hours about Anglo-German familial unity or some such tosh.”

“That’s right, and do you remember the French master, Monsieur Briand, tearing up his programme and walking off the stage?”

“I do indeed. Didn’t last much longer after that did he?”

“No, the poor old goat, you had to be tough to teach a rabble like us.”

“Anyway, Fisher, coming back to this U-boat business, from what I’ve heard they’re mostly going after the merchantmen. Leaving us alone. Trying to cut off old Blighty economically and as far as I can tell we’ve kept this little show pretty quiet for the moment. Next time it might be different.”

“I think you might be right with that. Relatives don’t seem to be saying a thing about us helping the Ruskies. I haven’t heard a word on the old bush telegraph.”

“What do you mean? Why should your lot know any more than the rest of them back home.”

“Oh, we’ve got bits and pieces of family scattered the length and breadth of Europe and they all write letters to each other, incessantly. It’s a proper spy ring! All the news somehow gets to my great aunt in Turin and she writes reams to my maternal grandmother in Shrewsbury, who’s my maternal grandmother. As long as the Italians stay neutral, we’ll know all the gossip.”

“Well I never, you’re a dark horse.”

There was a clatter of boots on the steel deck.”

“Sir, Sir, there’s some‘at off starboard bow. Can’t see clearly, but I don’t think it’s one of ours.”

Fisher grabbed his own binoculars and followed Atkins.

“By God, it’s the Friedrich der Grosse, and no mistake. Our armour’ll be no match for her 12 inch guns.” By the time he reached the bridge, Reid was already on the blower to the Captain.

“Take the wheel Fisher and hold her on 125 degrees. I’m going to alert the gunnery officer. It looks like we’re close enough to reach, even with our guns.”

As Fisher clasped the wheel the sky was lit up by several brilliant flashes of light followed seconds later by a deep booming. His friend had already launched himself down the gangway, half running, half sliding towards the gun deck.

A shell flew past the bridge window, exploding harmlessly in the sea some few hundred yards from the ship. Minutes later the captain appeared, buttoning his tunic.

“That was too close to call ... I’ll take the wheel. You go down and tell the gunners to fire at will. Then go below and find Major Hargreaves. Tell him to get his men ready to abandon ship. They know the drill; life jackets, no packs or heavy equipment ... Go man! ... And tell the radio room to break silence and radio the Admiral of the Fleet our position and that we’re under attack.”

Captain Faulkner was known for his cool head under fire, but there was little even he could do against the Friedrich der Grosse. The Hungerford’s six inch guns spluttered into action. A lucky hit on a gun turret was about their only hope. Despite the fog each ship was now clearly visible to the other.

The cruiser lurched as an explosion ripped through her side. Fisher’s body landed with those who had been manning the starboard forward gun emplacement and was soon engulfed in flames. The ship began to list and the evacuation call was sounded. Men streamed up onto the deck. Boats were launched. The desperate battle continued, but the outcome was not in doubt. Two more shells hit the Hungerford, and with a huge explosion in the aft section the bow began to rise out of the water. Men clawed at the stairs, fell in tangled heaps, and suffocated each other as they tried to escape from the torrents of water pouring into the hold. Minutes later the once proud vessel slid beneath the water in a gurgling mass of waves. The men in the boats that had managed to launch pulled desperately at their oars to escape the sucking power of the ship. The murky fog rolled in once more and the light of death was gone.

Bradford Telegraph, 15th October

Our correspondent with the New British Expeditionary Force has reliably informed us that 50,000 British troops have been successfully landed at Königsberg, captured a week ago from the Germans by the victorious Russian Imperial army. Despite the sad loss of three troop ships and two supply vessels, the vast majority of

troops and supplies have been landed successfully and the deployment of men to the Eastern Front is already taking place in advance of the expected German thrust to regain lost territory. Troops have been issued with extra winter clothing against the cold conditions. Patriotic ladies of our nation and Empire are being called upon to make and donate warm clothing to enable our troops to fight effectively in these harsh conditions.

Russian General Rennenkampf revealed yesterday in a rare press release that General Samsonov's army was facing defeat in and around the area of Tannenburg in late August until the unexpected redeployment of German troops and artillery enabled his own army to capture the lightly defended port of Königsberg.

Further Russian mobilisation has also strengthened the defence the Russo-German frontier until a full offensive can be organised. Despite heavy casualties on both sides, Russian penetration into Upper Silesia continues to gather pace.

It is also understood, that due to army successes and despite the opposition of the Tsarina, Tsar Nicholas has moved his headquarters closer to the front line in order to improve communications.

In the dining room at number ten Downing Street, London, duck à l'orange, followed by apple pie, cream and custard had left a sense of quiet satisfaction. The ladies had withdrawn to allow the men to enjoy their brandy and cigars.

"Well, Prime Minister the cat's well and truly out of the bag now."

"Yes, First Sea Lord, it is and I hope our navy is up to the challenge. You've got to keep the German High Seas Fleet divided between Wilhelmshaven and the Baltic or we're all sunk, to coin a phrase! At present we have two to one supremacy in the North Sea, thanks to the French, but if the Germans can unite their fleet, we'll be facing superior fire power, so I hope you are making the position absolutely clear to the Admiralty, Winston. They can be a set of stuffy, hide bound prigs."

"We are all aware of just what a desperate game we are playing, but if you don't trust me to do my job, I'll resign."

"Now come on of course I trust you. No need for histrionics. And the public had to know what was happening. The Labour party is against the whole business and they are in the pockets of the trades unions. If we don't keep the working men of Britain with us, we're lost."

"Is the press still with us, Home Secretary?"

“As of this morning, yes, except for the Daily Worker, and it’s been temporarily closed down, but we need to tread carefully and give out just enough information to keep the papers happy and the people on our side.”

“Good. Now gentlemen, as you know we have made certain proposals to the Russians regarding internal constitutional reform and the future of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw. We have so far had some encouraging responses from some members of the Russian Cabinet. The proposals have been laid before His Majesty the Tsar and he has shown his willingness to consider them. Our representatives have explained in the strongest terms that if Poland were to be offered independence at the end of hostilities, with allied guarantees of non-interference in their affairs by any of the surrounding powers, then our ability to assist on the Eastern Front would be greatly enhanced.”

“And can we prevent the involvement of the Tsarina and her meddling monk in these matters?”

“This, Mr Lloyd George, remains one of the imponderables of our situation. The commitment of Her Majesty the Tsarina to tsarist autocracy is well known and her religious foibles remain dangerous. Should her interference become a critical issue, then we will have to make the Tsar more aware that our aid is not only offered through allied sympathy, but will be contingent on political reform. We are treading lightly for the present. A heavy hand may send him running into the arms of his wife for moral support in the face of a western threat. Remember, in many ways he is as lost in Slavic ignorance as any of his subjects.

“I think that is all I can say for now, Gentlemen. As soon as I have an official response, I will call an emergency meeting of the war cabinet. Answers in the House of Commons will remain somewhat vague at present.”

Monday 19th October

Despite the onset of autumn, the late afternoon sun still illuminated the New British Expeditionary Force Headquarters in Königsburg. A knock at the door startled its commander as he sat musing silently at his desk.

“Come!”

“Sir, this Russian radio message has just been intercepted. Colonel Hargreaves said you should be informed.”

“Quite right. Thank you, Wilson.”

“Sir.”

General Sir John French hunted for his glasses and strode over to the window. When will these Ruskies start encoding their messages. It’s no wonder they’re in such a mess.

“My God! Wilson, Wilson!”

The General was in the outer office before his adjutant could reach the door.

“Get me that that government choppie, Sir Francis Archibald, on the blower right away. Put the call straight through to my office once you’ve got him.”

Sir John executed a neat about turn and returned noisily to his office, slamming the door behind him. He hadn’t been in favour of this Eastern Front madness and now there was every chance it would come to nothing.

The telephone rang and he snatched it from its cradle. “Yes, Sir Francis. You need to send a message to London. The Tsar’s decided to fly back secretly to St. Petersburg to consult the Tsarina about our Poland proposals. She’ll scupper the whole thing. Damn the woman!”

“...intercepted radio message. Clear as a bell. Now let London know. If we don’t get the support of the Poles, my little army’s as good as dead. London needs to know.”

Bradford Telegraph and Argus, 22nd October

Shock News From Eastern Front: Tsar dies in Plane Crash

The Russian nation is in shock today after the news that Tsar Nicholas II died two days ago in an aeroplane crash while making an urgent journey to St. Petersburg. It appears that the pilot and two aids were also killed. It is reported that the Tsarina collapsed on hearing the news. Our correspondent at the front has described widespread emotional scenes amongst the Russian troops as the news was announced. Speculation is rife that the Tsar’s death may not have been an accident, but an assassination carried out by Nihilists or Bolsheviks. In response to the news, the German army announced a two hour unilateral ceasefire as a mark of respect. Bombardment of British and Russian positions, however, continues to increase tonight, as the Germans relocate more troops from the Western Front.

Saturday 24th October

“Alexandrov Levinovich, you cannot believe that this is a time for waiting. The people’s oppressor is dead. The wheel of the dialectic is turning. Now is the time to act. We’ve got to move decisively to overthrow the forces of capitalist oppression. We must end this imperialist war and bring socialist reality to the Russian people. Have you not read the words of Lenin? The workers at the Putilov have already formed a workers’ soviet and you know what they are singing in the streets.

“Oh, Ivan, you are just like father, and where’s Lenin when he’s wanted? ... Bloody Switzerland!”

“Lenin will come back when he hears the workers have risen. He’ll find a way. We’ve got to be decisive. It’s the moment of history.”

“Moment of foolishness, more like. Your Bolsheviks are finished. You saw what happened in July. The strike failed, if you remember? The people were out in the streets shouting the name of the Tsar, not Lenin.”

“Maybe it’s revisionists like you that are destroying the cause.”

“Ivan! I am no revisionist. I will die for the revolution when it comes. I’m just not sure, my brother that it’s going to happen now. You’ve seen what’s happened. In less than ten years the capitalists have begun to transform both Petersburg and Moscow. The peasants flocked to take up the new jobs. Despite their living conditions they have a new hope. They dream of earning enough money to go back one day and buy an acre of land and a cow. That is all. No! We need to let the war go on and allow the industrial system to mature here in Russia. Let the capitalists and liberal politicians hang themselves. Quietly, secretly, let us sow socialism into the hearts of the people and then, as the historical dialectic predicts, the time will come to rise and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat.”

“You wait Alexei. You wait and die in your waiting. The railway workers are meeting tonight and I’ll be on the barricades in the morning.”

The door opened and Maria Androvna bustled into the cramped flat. She dumped her bag down on the kitchen table, while Alexei helped her with her snow encrusted coat.

“You two are home early. Not skipping your lectures again I hope.”

“No, Mama. We had no lectures today – out of respect for the Tsar and the royal family.”

Ivan stood silently by the door.

“I want you both to come with me to Mass to pray for the soul of his majesty and the safety of the royal family.”

“Yes, Mama, we’ll go on Sunday and pray as we always do ... and pray for Papa too.”

“No, I want you to come tonight. There’s a special Mass. I met Illelia Matronova, you know, Levi’s mother, at the market. She told me. Ivan, you boil the samovar. We’ll have some tea and get warmed up. Then have dinner later. I got some fish in the market. It’s really fresh. If there’s one thing that can be said for the cold weather, at least it keeps everything fresh. You can’t beat fresh fish, as your father always used to say. Now come on Ivan, anyone would think you were frozen to the spot.

“But, Mama, I’ve got to...”

“Nonsense! You can do your studies later. You’re not so keen to study when Irina comes around. Come on look sharp. Alexei, put these vegetables away.

He gratefully picked up the bag, as Ivan silently filled the Samovar and put it on the stove. He thought his sides would split at any moment. The brave revolutionary reduced to domesticity with a word from Mama!

Memorandum: Alexander Feodorovich Kerensky to General Sukomlinov, Minister of War.

I and my socialist colleagues in His Majesty’s Duma wish most sincerely to express our sympathies with Empress and the royal family upon the death of our revered sovereign. Given events taking place in Petrograd, in the provinces and at both fronts, we require an urgent meeting with you, to review the situation for the sake of the future of Russia.

Bradford telegraph, October 25th, 1914

Russia today mourned the tragic passing of their revered Father, Tsar Nicholas II. As his casket was drawn on a gun carriage through the streets of St. Petersburg for the traditional funeral Mass at the Cathedral of St. Peter and St. Paul, tens of Thousands of Russians stood in silent veneration, their heads uncovered, despite the cold.

In another development, after several days of silence, the office of the Russian Prime Minister has announced that Tsarina Alexandra has assumed the role of Regent until Tsarevich Alexei reaches the age of twenty-one.

Wednesday 4th November

Alexander Kerensky and General Sukomlinov sat opposite each other in a dingy back office in the Duma building.

“... General, the people will not stand for it. The Socialist block in the Duma has expressed its support for the war, but that support will be lost and there will be open revolt, both in industry and in the army if the Tsarina is allowed to have her way. The Duma will not go quietly and if it is dissolved for the remainder of the war, who knows what more radical assemblies will take over as voice of the people.”

“Beware, Alexander Fyodorovich, the forces of reaction are forming strongly behind Her Royal Highness. The St. Petersburg Royal Guard has already taken control of key ministries and two Cossack regiments have been called down from the Finland to strengthen security around the capital. These are dangerous times, even for conservatives such as me. Look to your history books. At times when the royal succession has looked weak, Russia has always turned to the safety of repression. And there are many who will support it.”

“But surely you have some influence. You know the situation at the front. You know the troops will only fight for Mother Russia if they have confidence in the government. This is not the 18th Century. We are no-longer a nation of serfs. Will we Russians continue to repeat the mistakes of the 1880s? Something must be done!”

“But you saw the outpouring of sympathy for the Tsarina and her family, the crying in the streets. The masses have spoken. Will you deny all it. None of the Royal Princes felt able to take on the role of Imperial Regent. They thought to make her a figurehead. They had no idea that she saw herself as a latter-day Catherine the Great. Her actions were so swift and unexpected.”

“Can’t anything be done? My sources at the front tell me that some of the units are already forming secret soviets. The army will not listen to the illiterate peasant mothers of Russia. They are growing in revolutionary consciousness by the day. She will lose the nation for the sake of divine autocracy. Muscovy itself will be lost.”

"I hear you, but if I talk to my friends, can you deliver?"

"If we act quickly, I have no doubt of it." This is no time for equivocation; you know they're organizing at the Putilov works."

"I didn't, but thank you for the information."

"It's given in good faith."

"And received in the same measure."

Silence hung heavily between the two men. Snow had been falling all day and there was no fire.

"I was there in 1905," continued the general. "We thought we had the people on our side: a patriotic war led by the 'Little Father'. It was all a myth."

"As it is today."

"Yes, but this is Russia, Holy Mother Russia, where truth is the first casualty of history. Look around you. Who remembers the serfs who built this city?"

"You sound almost like a liberal."

"Well, maybe there's more to me than meets the eye. What do these labels mean in the end anyway. We're all men, all Russians. We all want the same thing: a future for our children. In the end that's what the Tsarina is fighting for."

"But what kind of a future? If the Duma goes, I might as well throw in my lot with the Bolsheviks. Maybe it's the only way. Follow Chernyshevsky and 'call Russia to the axe.' We've had a hundred years since we vanquished Napoleon: revolution's first son and betrayer. A hundred years of liberal and socialist thought. And where are we?"

"Being dragged back into a feudal past by a mystical empress and a mad peasant monk."

"Yes, so you see it."

"Yes, of course I see it man, but what in God's name can I do about it? I'm even taking a risk meeting you here. That dog, Myasoedov's got his secret police everywhere. You know he's in the cabinet now?"

"All the more urgency to act. There are many in the Duma will support us, even amongst the Monarchists. And there are the Semenovtsy and Ulan regiments: they have enough young officers to support the constitution."

"But they're on their way to the front. I signed the papers this morning."

"Well, un-sign them. Countersign them. Send them secret orders. What about the army Commander-in-chief? Grand Duke Nicholae is no fool. And Rennenkampf

and Samsonov. And as for the British, they'll never stand for all this. Then there are our new found 'friends' in the east. What will they think? Act man! While you still have a chance. While you still have some power. By this time next week you might be on a train to the east yourself or worse,."

"Calm yourself, Alexander. You're not at the podium now. I can promise nothing, but will see what can be arranged."

"If we have no support when we vote to refuse the decree, then it will be an evil day for Russia. Once the axe begins to fall, who knows where the blood will flow?"

"I suggest you leave first. I will wait. The watchers may leave once they know you've gone."

"Mm, the lamb to the slaughter." Kerensky's right hand was shaking as he picked up his fur hat and pulled on his heavy coat.

"Thank you, General. I hope we may meet again."

Once outside, Kerensky hailed a cab. It was already slippery. Not long and the winter sleighs would be out.

"Seven Zanevskiy Prospekt."

Saturday 7th November

Barbara adjusted her black woollen dress, pulling down the waistband and smoothing the pleats in the skirt, inspecting herself in the hall mirror as she made for the breakfast room. She wore school uniform during the week, but was determined to wear full mourning at the weekends. Dad was worth it.

Delicious smells of breakfast wafted up from the kitchen. The door opened and out came Becky bearing a tray of dirty plates and bowls. Barbara held the door open for her. The girl muttered a quick thank you and disappeared below stairs.

Mother, dressed in black taffeta, was deep in conversation with Stephen, still in his dressing gown and night shirt.

"I really do think you need more time to let your body heal. You know what Dr Sykes said."

"Yes, Yes, but I've got to try and get going sometime. That bedroom's killing me, and the army'll be wanting me back before long. They'll not have me lying in bed all hours of the day."

“Well, we’ll soon see about that. The army hasn’t had to face Helen Firth yet, has it? I’ve had Mrs Benholmly set a fire in your room. We’ll see how you are at lunchtime and maybe you can come down for the afternoon.”

“Hey, Steve, you must be a whole lot better, making it down for breakfast. You’ll be ready to join the boys at the front before we know it.” Barbara knew she’d said the wrong thing as soon as the words were out of his mouth. A rumble came from mother’s throat.

“You’ve taken your time young lady. I was just about to send out search parties. There’s still probably enough breakfast on the side, but I’ll not have Mrs Benholmly bothered. You can fill up on toast and make sure you’re ready for Mr Strangeways at ten. Have you done your practice?”

“Yes, Mother, you know I have. You heard me yesterday. And, yes, before you ask, I have got a clean dress for Sunday.”

“Good. Just as well,” she sighed... Oh, I’m sorry, I don’t want to nag. Your father wouldn’t want it. I just want everything to be done well and I want the best for you two.. You know people do notice the little things. We’re hardly just an ordinary family in this town and now I’ve got to take on the mill as well. Sometimes I feel it’s too much. Oh dear, I’m going to start crying again if I go on like this ... and there’s so much to do.”

“Mother, you should slow down. You’ll be ill,” ventured Stephen.

“Me, ill? Talk about the pot calling the kettle black! That’s fine coming from you, isn’t it? And how dare you? Soldier or not you’ll do what you’re told in my house ... and you’ve no idea what I have to do to keep a place like this running. I haven’t even talked with Mrs Benholmly about the weekend menus, never mind next week’s. You went against our wishes when you joined up. We respected you for your decision, but don’t come back here and think you can start ordering us all about. And if you won’t let me look after you properly, maybe you should get back to your beloved killing machine.”

“Mother!” Barbara glared across the table.

“And don’t you start! Get your breakfast this minute and I want you to do at least half an hour’s practice before your lesson.”

With that, Mrs Firth threw her napkin down on the table, rose and stalked noisily from the room.

The two siblings looked at each other in silence.

“Grief.” Said Stephen. “I’ve found myself getting angry for no reason, when I’ve lost men. You know, you come to care for them like family and then when they’ve gone there’s a gap and you’re just supposed to get on with things as they were before, like nothing’s happened.”

“And this is Father.”

“Exactly.”

“You better get back to bed.”

“I will, actually. The worst thing is she’s quite right. I’m shattered. And you better get some grub and start tickling those ivories.”

Barbara settled down to a lukewarm breakfast, fitted in enough piano practice to satisfy old Strangeways and then spent the rest of the morning wrestling with her Latin translation homework.

Lunch was a quiet affair. Helen apologised to Barbara for losing control of herself. Barbara said it was all right. She understood. She read from *John’s Gospel* and Mother prayed.

The next day Mrs Firth let Barbara drive her to chapel in the trap. People continued to look at them awkwardly and ask in hushed tones how they were doing. Stephen stayed at home. The good news was that the two mill girls were getting better. Mrs Firth promised to visit them during the week, which she duly did on the following Tuesday, taking some food parcels and their pay packets with her too. The union representative had already been assured that all medical expenses would be taken care of. There would also be an enquiry into the accident, but that wasn’t due to start until December. The war was slowing everything down.

Two days later Stephen received a letter from his regiment asking for information on his condition. Dr Sykes called the next day and said he would write personally, saying that he didn’t think Stephen would be ready for active service for at least another three months. He was suffering from a severe pulmonary infection which required long term bed rest: more grist to mother’s mill. On a positive note, the week saw a rapprochement between Mother and Stephen. It was not that he wanted to get back to the war. Heaven forbid! He confided to Barbara that in his ten years in the service, he hadn’t seen anything like it. He refused to say any more, but his general demeanour spoke volumes.

Friday 13th November

After breakfast Mrs Firth went to Stephen's room to show him a letter she had received from the war office.

Mr Wilfred Firth
Firth Mills Ltd.
Plover Road
Oaks
Huddersfield
County Yorkshire

Dear Sir

As you will be aware, our nation is facing a severe military challenge. We are looking to all His Majesty's subjects to rise to the occasion and offer suitable service to meet the hour.

Our military services require high quality uniforms to protect them and enable them to carry out their duties efficiently and in accordance with the best traditions of our troops. As a producer of high quality woollen cloth, we would like to ask you to tender for the provision of such military uniforms as are required by both officers and men according to their requisite regiments. A general list of requirements is enclosed.

We look forward to your response, reminding you to be cognizant of the War Supplies Act 1912, which specifically outlaws any effort to profit unreasonably from a military conflict.

Yours faithfully

Donald Jefferies

Under-Secretary of State for War Procurement

Stephen rubbed his chin thoughtfully on the back of his hand. "I would imagine Father would have just thrown it in the fire."

"Well you know our attitude to war in general and to this one in particular."

"The whole town knows it and we're none too popular. Barbara's had some nasty run-ins at school with one or two of the more ignorant girls.

"She hasn't said."

"She wouldn't. You know Barbara."

"I know. She's been a real brick since your father died."

Stephen looked directly into his mother's face. "Have you told her? She needs to know. She's hurting as well, Mother."

"Yes, I'll talk to her, dear. I'm not such a bad mother you know."

"Now, I'm not saying you are. You just need to show Barbara that soft caring side a bit more. She's a great girl and she'll do this family proud one day."

"I'm sure you're right dear." Helen smiled and took the letter from her son. "Let's get back to the matter at hand. We need to steer a middle course. We've got to be seen to support the men and families of the town at the same time as not supporting the war per se. It's a difficult one."

Stephen sighed deeply, winced and rubbed his chest.

"Am I tiring you too much, dear?"

Helen folded the letter and made to rise, but Stephen placed his hand on his mother's forearm. "No, I'm fine. Just thinking. How about if we make high quality uniforms for both officers and men, but do it as near to cost price as we can. That way you're keeping to your ideals and serving the needs of the troops. We'll also need to keep our usual business going or we'll go bust and that'll not help anyone."

"I've always said that head is wasted on the army!" A faint, but slightly mischievous smile crept onto Helen's face. "I'll talk to Mr Broomfield about it tomorrow. It won't be easy. His idea of a female emancipation is letting his wife out of the kitchen to go to church on Sunday. But since I hold the purse strings, he'll just have to listen, won't he?"

Stephen chuckled loudly and was about to speak when his body was convulsed by a paroxysm of coughing. He emptied the contents of his mouth into the spittoon at the side of the bed and lay back. Mrs Firth felt his forehead and set her mouth firmly.

"I've tired you. I'll send Becky up to see to the fire and then she'll bring your dinner later. You're not to come down."

Stephen smiled. "Thank you, Mother." He was so pleased she was beginning to open up. The last weeks had been really tough. They were all struggling to adjust. He'd collapsed up at the mill, the night father died, but had insisted on following the funeral cortege, with a biting October wind cutting through his dress uniform. Mother had sent him to bed immediately they returned and had nearly managed to keep him there ever since. Dr Sykes called every other day.

Stephen was bored out of his mind, but he had to admit mother was right: he had to listen to what his body was saying. He rested back on the pillows. There was a knock at the door. In came Becky. She curtsied.

“How y’ doin’ Master Stephen?”

“I’ll be right, lass. D’y mind reading t’paper to me for a while. I can’t seem to concentrate on it.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I can’t be doin’ that right now. Mrs Benholmly just sent me up to mend t’ fire. My life won’t be worth living if I’m not straight back.”

“Oh well, maybe some other time. A fellow gets pretty bored on his own up here.”

“I’ll see what I can do, but I don’t get much free time and I doubt if your mother’ll be wanting me up here socialising. You know what they say about bored army officers.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Sure, you don’t!”

Becky finished the fire, gave Stephen a smile and a wink, curtsied and left the room.

Stephen had never been a man of books and the stack of improving literature on his bedside table did not look very inviting. He picked up Farer’s *Life of St. Paul*, but was soon asleep.

Mother hadn’t asked Barbara about her attitude to the war since that day in the sitting room, but she knew that she had to decide, especially since Father’s death. Despite her youth, she felt a new mantle of responsibility descending on her shoulders and with the gung-ho behaviour of nearly all the girls at school, you just couldn’t avoid the issues. She always enjoyed Friday nights. It was like a lull in the hectic carousel of life. The week was finished and the weekend was still to begin. Dinner was relaxed, no formal dressing. She’d excused herself and gone to his bedroom on the pretence of homework pressure.

Pushing up the sash window, she breathed in the sharp cold air. She never quite understood it, but there was something really special about the night air, particularly on a night like this. A slightly misshapen moon showed through the bare branches of the trees. Barbara pulled herself up onto the window sill, twisted her body round and stared up at the myriad of stars. It was magical. No, it was divine. If there was anything of

God to be found in this world, it was here. Where are you, Dad? You shouldn't have gone, you know. I'm not blaming you, and I know it wasn't exactly your fault, but we had so much to do together. I wanted to get to know you, really properly. You'd only just told me you'd teach me about the car. I was looking forward to it. And then you went and we never got to say goodbye. It wasn't fair.

She listened, expecting nothing, but hoping for something. All she could hear was Stephen's coughing from across the landing. She'd go in and see him in a few minutes. But this was too good to miss. Nobody could take it from her, not teachers, not Mother, not society with all its expectations, not even the war. Everything stood still before the enormity of creation. Copernicus, Galileo, Da Vinci. She guessed they'd all bathed in moments like these. And death, was it just a way of carrying on in another form, new life in Christ, *the old shall pass away, the new shall come*, like you said Father, like they say at the Meeting or is it the end? You know, Father, I love you, but I can't just trust you for this. I have to know myself.

Barbara felt her questions disappearing into a void. Life was so complicated. The summer seemed so far away. Tennis had been her life. You knew where you were with it. Everyone played by the rules.

She shivered, slipped off the window sill and pulled the sash down firmly. The fire was burning low and the coal scuttle was empty. She could easily go and get some more. Mother wouldn't let her just ring for some - that was laziness for a young lady like her. Yet if she went down, she might bump into her and then there'd probably be some little job to do, which would 'only take him five minutes', but in reality would eat up another chunk of a valuable Friday night. She picked up her shawl from where she'd thrown it on the bed and drew it around her shoulders.

She opened her door quietly. The gramophone was playing downstairs. She turned off her light, went down the passage to Stephen's room, knocked and opened the door.

"Yes, you can take my plate and things. I can't eat any more."

"Yes, Sir, Captain Firth!" replied Barbara with a mock salute.

"Oh, sorry, Barb. I thought you were Becky, but now I see I couldn't have been more mistaken. She's a real looker, isn't she."

"And I'm not, I suppose! And you keep your mitts off Becky. She's sweet on Jimmy Sugden ... you know, youngest son of Alf Sugden, the blacksmith in Marsh."

“Didn’t he join the Royal Lines., just last year. I hope he’s made it. I heard they had a horrible time at Le Cateau. That was a shambles, a real shambles.”

Barbara suddenly looked very serious. “I want to know all about it, Steve. You’ve suddenly changed and I know it’s more than this infection you’ve got. Something’s really stirred you up.”

Stephen stared into the fire. “I don’t rightly know how much I can say. I’m still under King’s Regs. We mustn’t undermine morale, however ghastly it is. War is war. All I can say is ... I’ve never seen anything like it before and it’s making me think. I can’t imagine what’s going to happen. No-one has much faith in the Russians. A friend of mine was a military attaché in St. Petersburg. He couldn’t believe what he saw. But they’re giving the Austrians a hard time by all accounts. All I can say is I hope to God it’s over soon.”

“That doesn’t give me much to go on.”

“Well, read the papers and read between the lines. Look there’s the Telegraph. It’s pretty jingoistic, but it’s a start. If you want something more objective, go to the library in town and ask to see the Manchester Guardian. That won’t pull any punches, but be careful. Keep your views to yourself for the moment. Look, why don’t you just read to me for a bit. I can’t seem to focus properly. My eyes get tired.”

“Ok. Here goes. Reminds me of Mother reading us bedtime stories.”

“Well, if you ask me, that newspaper’s pretty close to all out fiction and fairy tales.”

“British troop build-up continues around Königsberg in readiness for imminent German push. Our brave lads of the 2nd King’s Own Yorkshire Rifles and the Royal North Riding First Infantry are continuing to dig in and form an impregnable defence of the city. It is expected that with the support of our Russian allies we shall repel the Germans and then be in a strong position to launch an all out strike towards Berlin.”

“Balderdash! The German artillery’ll make mince-meat of us! Don’t read that trash off the front page. It’s not worth a fig. Try pages three or four. They might have hidden a bit of real news in there.”

Barbara laid the paper out on the bed and scoured the inside pages.

“Hey, this might be something ... Our correspondent in St. Petersburg reports a build up of Cossack Guards regiments in the city. Despite the urgent military situation in East Prussia, crack guards regiments have been seen arriving into St. Petersburg by train over the last three days. These units have taken up positions around key

government departments and munitions factories. The army command has refused to give any information on these developments. Indeed, with the Tsarina-Regent having now moved the court and government to the ancient capital of Moscow, it is almost impossible to establish a coherent picture of Russian policy. Telegraph and telephone contact with Moscow is patchy. Our correspondent surmises that these developments may suggest government precautions against revolutionary activity centred on the large factories which exist in the city of Petrograd.”

“Now that is interesting and I reckon there’s much more here than meets the eye,” commented Stephen.

“Here’s something else ... Our correspondent on the East Prussian front reports rumours that the Russian Commander-in-Chief, Grand Duke Nicholae has moved his command headquarters up to the German Polish border in order to co-ordinate command more effectively. This has forced Generals Samsonov and Rennenkampf, commanders of the first and second Russian armies, to move up and join their own troops in the field. Sources inside the Russian field command report considerable annoyance amongst senior officers at these developments. However, the decisions to implement these changes seem to have come from the higher reaches of the army command and were therefore impossible to ignore. British military sources have also told us that the slower than expected German build-up has enabled the NBEF to be raised above the 200,000 level. The success of the Russian offensive in Silesia, especially with the victory at Lemberg, has freed more Russian troops to support General Samsonov’s Second Army. The continued use of un-coded radio messages by Russian units shows the redeployment of a number of key regiments to the North.”

There was a knock at the door and in came Mrs Firth. Ah, there you are Barbara. Homework didn’t keep your attention too long?”

“I did ...

“Never mind, I’m glad to see you spending time with your brother. Maybe it’ll help him keep to his bed. Anyway, I think it’s time you let him get some sleep. It’s past nine. And I wanted to hear you go over those exercises before your lesson tomorrow. Now fold up that paper and bring it with you. I’d like a look before I turn in.”

“But Mother, we were just ...”

“You’ve got all weekend. Now it’s time for some shut eye. I’ll let you turn off the light by your bed. Goodnight, and I’ll send breakfast up. I don’t want to see you down stairs in the morning.”

She fussed around the bed for a few moments, gave Stephen a peck on his forehead and ushered Barbara from the room, but not before her daughter had given the thumbs up to her brother. Stephen winked back.

Saturday 14th November

Once Saturday morning music was over and her bedroom had been inspected, Barbara managed to escape and took the tram into town. The first thing she did was to buy a scrap book and a pot of glue from Wheatley-Dyson's. Then she made for the library, where she found Saturday's Manchester Guardian and started reading.

It was heavy going compared to the Telegraph. The main front page article dealt with the granting of war loans to Russia. Barbara found herself lost in a discussion about whether this assistance was tied to the purchase of British armaments. Other news focused on the potential effects of the war on the transatlantic raw cotton trade and the danger to "imperial privilege", whatever that was. She turned the pages. Maybe she was getting out of her depth. Then she saw it, at the bottom of page five, 'Kerensky to be Tried for Treason in his Absence.'

Barbara had no idea who this person might be, except that he sounded Russian. She read on. 'Our Moscow correspondent has become privy to exclusive details of arrest warrants prepared in Moscow on the Tsarina-Regent's specific instructions for the detention and trial of Alexander Kerensky and other key leaders of parties in Russia's legislative assembly or Duma. It is believed that the leaders of all the parties in the Duma have been threatened in this way, including conservative supporters of the Romanovs. A group of bishops and senior nobles which sought an audience with her Royal Highness yesterday has been imprisoned in the Kremlin. Troops have been dispatched from Moscow to Petrograd and other cities to which the deputies might have fled. Our correspondent was himself detained for several hours by security police, but managed to escape in the confusion following the arrest of a group of industrial workers. He has now been given sanctuary at the British Embassy.

"Wow!" Said Barbara, forgetting where she was.

"Shush girl, you're in a library, not a circus!"

"Sorry, Miss." It was old Merryweather, her sewing mistress.

Barbara folded the newspaper, replaced it on the rack, belted down the stairs and into the street..

She ran up to the top of town, caught the first tram up Trinity Street into Marsh and jumped off at Jepson's, the paper shop.

"Aye up, you're in a bit of a lather, young lady."

"Have you got the Manchester Guardian, Mrs Jepson? It's very important."

"Well, I never. Don't think I've ever seen a young lady such as you, wanting to read t'Guardian in such an 'urry. I reckon we can find y' one. And 'ow's that Mother o' yours? Must be right shook up. Do give 'er our condolences. And to you too. It's a bad business. 'ere y'are. That'll be three pence, half penny."

Barbara fished four pennies out of his pocket, received her change and made to leave.

"I must say, you're turning into a fine young lady. I wish my Emily would take some interest in the world. Now don't forget to tell your mother we're all thinking on 'er."

"I won't. Thank you Mrs Jepson."

Barbara let the shop door bang noisily behind him and fled down Thornhill Road, to Edgerton and Home. She couldn't wait to show the paper to Steve, but on arrival was greeted with the sight of Dr. Sykes descending the front steps. What now? The doctor got into his car and chugged off down the drive.

Barbara took the steps two at a time and found mother in the hall.

"What's the matter now?"

Mrs Firth was clutching a handkerchief and supporting herself against the hall cupboard.

"Oh, you're too young to be dealing with all this. Oh, this war. This terrible war."

"Try me mother. What's the matter? Is it Stephen? What's happened?"

Barbara took her by the arm, led her into the sitting room and sat her down on the sofa. She was surprised that she didn't resist. The tears just flowed gently down her face. She tried to stop them, but it was impossible. Eventually she blew her nose and looked straight into her daughter's face.

"Stephen started coughing blood this morning. Doctor Sykes says he's probably got Tuberculosis and he'll have to be sent away to a sanatorium."

Barbara breathed a sigh of relief. It could have been much worse. She had imagined he'd died in the night or something. People got better from Tuberculosis. The public health nurse had come to school and told the girls all about it.

"He'll be fine Mother, you'll see, he'll be fine."

Helen sighed. "Yes, I suppose he will be. We have to trust." Her voice sounded dreamy. "But that's what they all say when they go away. 'I'll be fine. The bullets won't get me. I'm too fast. I'm clever. I'll dodge them.' You don't know. You think you do, but you don't. I can't lose another."

Barbara barely knew what to do. She let go of her mother's hand, pressed the bell on the wall and returned to the sofa.

A minute or so later Mrs Benholmly appeared and took in the situation. "Sweet tea and cake. I'll bring some."

Five minutes later, she reappeared bearing a tray laden with tea, fruit cake and sweet chocolate biscuits. Barbara poured and they ate and drank together in silence. Eventually Mrs Firth straightened her back and took a long deep breath. "Thank you, Barbara. You're a good girl. You can go and see Stephen, but don't get too close. Doctor Sykes says he'll be going in a couple of days. So we can make the most of him until then. Lunch will be at one."

Monday 16th November

Barbara spent all the time she could with her brother over the weekend and looked in on him before leaving for school on Monday morning, but he was sleeping and when Barbara returned in the afternoon, he had gone. Mother explained that an ambulance had come after lunch and they'd taken him on a stretcher. She gave Barbara a long hug, which she couldn't remember ever having happened before and she couldn't help feeling it was more for mother's benefit than hers. The sanatorium was in Harrogate and they couldn't visit for at least a month.

Never mind, she had work to do, and took her leave of Mother, having promised to do her piano practice before dinner. Why was the piano so important, when the world was self-combusting?

Having reached her room, she retrieved her copy of the day's Manchester Guardian from her bag and opened it out on her bed.

Bombardment of Königsberg begins as Allies await crucial Battle.

Two German destroyers sunk off Wilhelmshaven: British Cruisers pick up casualties.

Volunteer nurses flock to join medical brigades.

Government pledges full pensions to widows of deceased servicemen.

Prime Minister responds to questions about deployment of Royal Flying Corps.

Barbara turned page after page. Before long she was into the depths of the financial news and then it was the sport. She turned back to the beginning and scoured the pages again – nothing. Surely someone was able to get some news out and why was there no editorial comment? If there was a blackout on Moscow, what about St. Petersburg? What about those Russian Generals? Didn't the Guardian have something to say about them? Barbara cut out several articles, pasted them into her scrap book and slipped it and the newspaper under her bed. She felt like a secret investigator. Pulling off her school blazer, she loosened her collar and threw herself face down onto the bed, suddenly very tired.

Moments later the sound of the dinner gong forced itself into her dreams. The room was dark. She stood up, found the light switch and gaped at the gangly unkempt figure staring at her out of the wall mirror. Mother wouldn't let her in to dinner like that. She slipped off her school skirt and blouse and got out a black taffeta dress. There was a knock at the door and mother's head appeared.

"... Sorry Mother, I fell asleep and then looked terrible, and I hadn't changed."

"I know dear, it's all right. I turned out your light. We all need our rest at the moment. I told Mrs Benholmly to hold dinner until you're ready. Let me help you to do up the back ... That's lovely. You look very smart, dear. Brush your hair and come down when you're ready. I'll tell Mrs Benholmly you'll be just a few minutes. She's such a treasure."

Alexander Fedorovich Kerensky pulled up his fur collar as he turned out into the street. The wind from the Neva seemed even more biting than usual. He crossed the road and leaned against the wall, looking down into the dark water. Dusk already. He glanced at his watch; four o'clock. Looking at his train ticket, he wondered where he should hide. Four more hours before he could steam out to the safety of Helsinki.

Milyukov, the leader of the Kadet Party had unexpectedly turned up at his office earlier in the day, warning him to leave Petrograd immediately as the Tsarina's troops were on their way. He had already sent his wife and the boys to Helsinki. There was no telling what the Tsarina would do. For Milyukov to come was amazing. They hardly spoke. He too was on his way into hiding.

Kerensky knew he had to be careful, the police could well be on the lookout for him, but from what he'd been told the Imperial Guards were several hours away by train and they would arrive at Moskovskiy and his train left from the Finland Station. He made his way along the embankment, a small suitcase in hand. He'd had to leave so much, so many papers; documents which could very easily cause a lot of trouble in the wrong hands. It worried him. Flurries of snow swirled in the wind. He turned left and crossed the Trinity Bridge. Two insubstantial figures appeared out of the gloom. Kerensky made to let them pass, but they blocked his way.

"Papers!"

Kerensky pulled out his identity card and stood silently, smelling the vodka on the constables' breath.

The man looked into his face, closed the cardboard booklet, returned it and stepped out of the way. Kerensky knew this had just been a petty charade. Neither his name nor face were really visible. He walked on. He passed several beggars and threw a few kopecks into their bowls. The entrance to the station was thronged with people. Passing the queues at the ticket office, he located the platform. Two hours until the train was due to leave. He looked around and saw a café set back from the concourse, went in and ordered some tea. He buried his head in a copy of the *Petrograd Gazette*, occasionally looking up to inspect the growing throng of desperate people.

At seven o'clock he paid the waiter and slipped out through the crowd and onto the platform. An inspector glanced at his ticket and identity papers without looking up. He made his way to the middle of the train; carriage ten, second class. He climbed aboard. Compartment four. He slid open the door; it was empty – better full. He placed his case on the luggage rack and sat by the window. Forty-five minutes. A man and

woman with four young children noisily invaded his space. A little boy was crying; his parents hadn't let him bring his pet dog. His mother tried to quell his fears for *Babushka's* safety, but he was inconsolable. Eventually his father slapped his face and he buried his whimpering body in his mother's skirts. Two more parents, with a teenage girl and two young boys pressed into the compartment. The first family protested and there was a heated exchange. Eventually it was agreed that given the circumstances everyone had to help each other and all the young children took up places on the floor. Outside the sliding door, the corridor was beginning to fill up. The first woman apologised to Kerensky, but he said he quite understood. "We live in difficult times." She said she'd heard they were on the last train out of St. Petersburg, she didn't know for sure, of course, but Misha Gravetskya, whose husband taught at the university had told them and she thought they should take the opportunity, although it had been difficult to get tickets and she knew she shouldn't say it, but you didn't know what would happen now the Tsar was dead, God rest his soul.

Fifteen minutes to departure. Kerensky rubbed a hole through the fogged up window and looked out. The platform was well lit. A peasant soldier sat on a box under one of the lamps, rolling a cigarette, a bottle at his side. Where was he from? Did he have a wife ... children? ... Probably. They married young. Where was his unit? What was he doing there? Why wasn't he at the front? Did he have anywhere to go or was he just lost? The man looked up at the train and for a moment he seemed to look straight into Kerensky's eyes. Then he rose, his unlit cigarette between his lips, picked up his bottle and ambled away across the tracks and into the darkness.

Oh, Alexander Feodorovich, what is Russia? Where is she going and how is she going to get there? The train whistle sounded and Kerensky knew he was in the wrong place. He grabbed his hat, glanced at his suitcase and knew there was no time. He scrambled as carefully as he could over the children out into the corridor and squeezed through the throng. The train was beginning to move. A fat woman blocked his way. He pleaded that he had to get off the train and somehow squeezed past to the door, down the steps and hurled himself onto the end of the platform. It was incredible. It was stupid. It was absurd. It was madness, but never in his life had he run away. He lay on the gravel surrounded by darkness. A few curious, desperate faces peered at him and the train was gone.

He sat up. His head was cold. He had lost his hat. He touched the side of his head. It was wet and sticky. Carefully, he rose to his feet and made off across the tracks

and back towards the station. He crossed some darkened goods sidings and found a street running down the side of the station and made his way back to the Litenyii Bridge, hailing the first horse drawn cab he saw.

“225 Nevsky Prospekt. Five extra Roubles if you get me there without being stopped.”

The man whipped up the horse, crossed the bridge, and turned into a side street. Clattering along narrow streets it took twenty minutes, but they arrived without incident. Kerensky thanked the man, knocked at 225 and was ushered inside.

“Alexander Feodorovich, what are you doing here? The last train for Helsinki left an hour ago. You’ll be dog meat by tomorrow morning if you stay around here.”

“Dmitri Igorovich, have you ever known me run away from trouble? I sat there on the train and I just couldn’t do it, and anyway, what makes you think you’re safe?”

“They’ll not be interested in me. I may be the brains behind our party, but as far as the Tsarina’s concerned, I don’t exist.”

Kerensky thumped his friend on the back as they mounted the stairs. “Well, I’d keep that big head hidden for a while if I were you.”

They turned into Dmitri’s apartment to be met by his wife’s astonished face. “I thought you left on the last train. Anatolia Drovna said she saw you buying a ticket for Helsinki.”

“We’ve just been through that my dear. The stubborn fool thinks he should stay and stand by Mother Russia, or something like that.” He threw himself down by the fire and motioned Kerensky to the opposite chair.

“I need your Dacha in the forest near Lake Ladoga. I’ll hide out there while I work out what I should do.”

“Why don’t you go to Pskov. You’ll be much more comfortable. Ladoga’ll be cut off. You’ll freeze to death.”

“Exactly! I need to disappear and then make contact with the underground, once they’ve given up looking for me. Can you lend me a sledge and give me a few provisions. I’ll stick it out for the winter and then see how the land lies. Then I’ll be back and I can harness myself to the revolution. There’s no other way now.”

“Yes, Yes, of course, anything for the leader of the SRs. When do you want to leave? I can drive out with you to Skovia in the morning. You can be my driver. Then you can go on from there.”

The door opened and in came Marianova carrying a large tray, loaded with crockery and pastries, followed by the house keeper bearing a Samova. "At least, Alexander Feodorovich, we'll be able to feed you up for tonight. You look so thin."

There was the sound of heavy knocking at the door on the landing. Everyone froze. "Quick! Upstairs. Hide in Anisha's room. There's a balcony and stairs down to the courtyard if you need them ... Don't just stand there, go!" Marianova pushed her sturdy bulk past her husband and hustled Kerensky up the stairs. "Now, Dmitri, sit yourself by the fire and I'll pour the tea. Oksana, you answer the door ... Come on girl! Quick!" Another set of heavy thumps hit the door and they heard a muffled shout.

Oksana ran to the door, straightened her dress and cap and pulled it open. A tall, large framed man in a snow encrusted great coat and sable hat stood on the threshold.

"What's happened to the Postevsky household? Have you all gone deaf?" Oksana took an involuntary step backwards and the towering beast thrust himself through the portal. "Where's Dmitri Igorovich? "

Without waiting for an answer he thundered along to the door at the end of the hallway and burst in on a middle-aged couple, taking tea in silence before a roaring fire and a mountain of pastries.

"So, here it is that you're hiding, Dmitri Igorovich." He threw off his hat and coat and bounded up to stand by the fire. "Mother-of-Jesus, if the snow hasn't come early this year? We're in for a harsh winter if you ask me."

"Maksim Petrovich, will you take some tea." Stammered Marionova.

"Or would you prefer something stronger," managed Dmitri, rising and making for the drinks cabinet.

"Hot, sweet tea will be wonderful, followed by a double vodka and maybe this body will start to come to life again ... May I?"

He picked up the largest pastry and consumed it in three mouthfuls, as his hosts poured the tea and vodka.

"God! That's better. I've hardly eaten for two days."

"We thought you were at the front. The Empress hasn't called you back has she? I thought we'd need our crack troops up there, if we're going to withstand the German onslaught? But then I wouldn't put it past her doing anything with that criminal rogue, Rasputin at her elbow. He's Tsar in all but name, by what we hear, and I don't mind anyone hearing me say it. I'd rather have Lenin and Trotsky than that putrid wretch!"

Colonel Volontsyn's wet uniform was now steaming gently as he stood with his back to the fire. "I need Kerensky and the other Duma leaders ..."

"I'm sure you do, for your imperial mistress, no doubt. Do you take us for idiots? We're expecting Imperial Guards any minute to take them back to Moscow and pacify the Putilov works. I suppose you're the advanced guard."

Marianova opened her mouth to speak, but shut it again as she caught sight of her husband's glare. Volontsyn looked from one to the other.

"He's here isn't he? By God! I knew I was right. I told Grand Duke Nicholae he wouldn't cut and run. We're counting on him."

"I think you better explain yourself, because unless you've got a battalion of troops out there on the landing, no-body's going anywhere," said Dmitri coldly.

There was the sound of a door brushing against carpet and everyone looked up to see Kerensky framed in the doorway.

"Maksim Petrovich, here I am, you old devil! Now tell us what's going on and maybe we can help save Russia from herself." He shut the door and sat calmly on the sofa.

Volontsyn's face lit up with a smile. "Well done Alexander Feodorovich! I knew you wouldn't let us down. Are Olga and the boys safe?"

"Yes, my friend. They're in Helsinki. Now, what've you got to tell us?"

Volontsyn continued to dry himself by the fire, but somehow his dominating presence had shrunk.

"I've come from the Grand Duke Nicholae at Warsaw. I travelled by train to Ostrov, but they told me there that Her Imperial Majesty's Guard were in control of the line at Peskov, so I commandeered a horse and rode from there. The poor beast is exhausted."

"So that's why we've no news from the Front. They've cut the telegraph line at Peskov," interjected Dmitri.

"Just so," continued the colonel, offering his glass for a top up, "so you won't know that the army chiefs of staff have refused to accept the Tsarina's authority and have formed a provisional government in the name of the Tsarevich. Telegrams and coded radio messages have been sent to trusted reformist personnel at Sevastopol, Rostov, Donets, Kiev, Minsk and several other garrisons. They have all promised to secure their cities against the Tsarina's forces and to send contingents to the front. I

passed a troop train from Minsk on my way from Warsaw. I am carrying orders to the Petrograd governor to accept the orders of the Grand Duke.”

“You know he’s sworn allegiance to the Empress?”

“We’ll send the Vyborg corps to take the city if we have to, but we really want them at the front. The Germans are pouring troops into East Prussia. That’s where you come in, Alexander Feodorovich, if you can persuade the leaders of the Putilov Soviet to back the provisional government under the Grand Duke, then we may be able to persuade the governor to come over to our side without a fight.”

“Mmm ... Malentikov’s a hard man: a bone head for autocracy. Would do anything for a Tsar, but I’ve heard he may not be so staunch for the Tsarina. Do you really think we can turn him?”

“When he sees what’s at stake, I think he’ll come over. There’s only Moscow and a few outposts backing the Tsarina and her monk. The army’s taken new heart. The troops are fighting for the Tsarevich. His picture’s in all the trenches.”

“And what’s His Highness, Duke Nicholae offering in return for all this?”

“He’ll recall the Duma and form a broad based government. He’ll make you Minister of the Interior.”

Kerensky looked up sharply. “So much, so soon. It’s tempting, but we’ll need more to sway the Putilov workers. There will have to be fresh elections in the spring, with universal suffrage. They won’t accept anything less and what about the Poles, what have they offered Poland?”

“Self-government now, and full independence at the end of the war. The British’ll back it and have offered military aid to a new Polish army. Enough men for three regiments had volunteered already when I left. As for elections here, they’re on the cards, but no promises.”

Kerensky stared up at the ceiling.

“We’ll have to promise. Now, Dmitri, I need a hat and a dry coat. Come on Maksim Petrovich we’ve got a country to save.”

Wednesday 18th November

The British Home Secretary pushed back his chair and stared into Herbert Asquith's anxious face.

"Prime Minister, I can only hold the press for so long. Since that piece in the Manchester Guardian slipped through, they've agreed to a three day moratorium, that's all. We are a democracy after all. We can't be seen to be muzzling the press. Even if the Cabinet tows the line, the rank and file will never buy it."

"But man, can't you do anything. We need more time to find out what the hell is going on out there. We agreed to help an ally in his darkest hour, We've got to rescue something from this dreadful mess – the Great Russian Steamroller and all that! And now its driver has changed, and for all we know she's putting it back in the garage! At the same time, we've found out just how pathetically disorganised the Imperial Russian Army really is and are waiting to have our 'contemptible little force' blown to pieces by up to four German armies, massing to attack as we speak. Now, there must be something you can do. The Home Office must have some reserve powers it can use."

"Prime Minister, there is nothing, short of declaring martial law, and none of us wants to do that. Let the government fall. What's the alternative? Can you see Baldwin and that Labour fellow, Kier Hardy round a cabinet table? The only real danger is Lloyd George. You know he's got his eye on the top job. It's going to be dangerous and tricky for a few days, but we've just got to brazen it out and be a little economical with the truth, if you see what I mean? I'll make a statement of some kind tomorrow. That way we'll have the upper hand."

"I suppose..." There was a knock at the door. "I said I wasn't to be disturbed! Come!"

"Sir, this just came in."

"Oh, what is it now, Hemmings. I thought I made myself clear."

"Yes, Sir, but, the chief of the defence staff insisted."

"It better be important."

"Yes, Sir."

Asquith was handed a sheet of yellow ministerial memo paper and read silently.

'Urgent Field dispatch from General Sir John French to Prime Minister Mr Herbert Asquith. New British Expeditionary force well dug in in defence of

Königsberg. Heavy artillery has been deployed and morale is high as we await the forthcoming, critical battle. Our troops continue to respond with their traditional bravery and gallantry. Russian General Remenkampf has placed one corps of his 1st army directly under my command to support the defence of the city. A key development is the establishment of a joint British-Russian command structure under the titular head of the Grand Duke Nicholae.

Asquith's head began to throb. Whatever has French done now? No British army can serve under the Russians. It was absolutely clear, 'an independent British command in support of the Russian Imperial Army'.

'British officers and logistical support units have been attached to all Russian Corps and divisional commands in order to improve field effectiveness of Russian armed forces. Key Russian generals, including the Commander-in-Chief, are now acting independently of the Tsarina and her advisers in Moscow in co-ordination with a provisional government led by certain members of the armed forces. All contact with Moscow has been suspended. Representatives of the Tsarina's government are being apprehended in the event of their arrival at the front. Officers and men who refuse to accept the new command structure and political leadership are being removed from their units. Russian troops have been sent to Petrograd to secure ministries and munitions production facilities and to reinstate the Duma as the constitutional authority of the provisional government.

In the obedient service of His Majesty the King.
General Sir John French.'

"Well this looks like we might be on our way out of the rough, old boy. Take a look at this, Reggie."

Asquith tossed the sheet to the Home Secretary, picked up the whisky decanter and topped up their glasses. Here's to French. I didn't think he had it in him. He then pressed the bell on the wall and moments later in came the Prime Minister's private secretary.

"Hemmings, has Kitchener seen this?"

"I don't believe so, sir."

“Good, well I need him on the blower immediately. We need to get as much information as we can. Then I need to talk to the Foreign Secretary. And convene an emergency war cabinet meeting for nine o’clock tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Well? What do you think? Good news?”

“I’ll say. If it comes off, some kind of modern government might come to power. The question is, will it be stable or is this the prelude to some kind of full-scale revolution. At least we can use this in the House and if it comes to nothing, we can show the press that we are acting on information from the front. We should push the Polish independence thing again with promises of munitions and training for a new Polish army. We could offer logistical support and expertise. It looks like they would be open to it.”

“Right you are. I’ll get Kitchener and the Foreign Secretary onto drafting a proposal to bring to Cabinet. I just wish we had more details.”

Monday 23rd November

Grand Duke Nicholae stood at the end of the map table in his Warsaw headquarters.

“You agreed to what, Colonel Volontsyn?”

“Your Honour, without elections under a democratic suffrage and representative government, we could not have saved Petrograd and Russia is Petrograd.

“I went along with your plans to save the throne for His Royal Highness. The way we are going there will be no throne left, the Bolsheviks will be in power and our heads will be on pikes outside the Winter Palace!” Grand Duke Nicholae looked out of the *Ratusz* across the Warsaw sky line and back towards Russia. “Damn you, Volontsyn, Damn you!”

Volontsyn took a deep breath. “Malentikov disarmed the Tsarina’s guards in person at Moskovskiy Vokzal and sent a detachment to Peskov, to re-establish communications. The train and telegraph lines are now open.”

“Where’s Kerensky?”

“At the Winter Palace, awaiting confirmation of his, and other appointments to the cabinet. The Putilov Soviet has agreed to resume armaments production as soon as the new cabinet is confirmed in office and the Duma is recalled.”

“Well I can’t meet with them for the present. I have a war to win. What about Her Majesty?”

“She has refused talks and demands complete submission.”

“As expected. What about the garrisons near Moscow?”

“They are all under your authority.”

“Good. We’ll let her stew, until we have troops to spare. Do you know anything about the anti-Rasputin faction in her entourage?”

“The word has it in Petrograd that Prince Yusupov and the Grand Duke Dmitri Pavlovich travelled to Moscow with her Majesty.”

“Good! Our work may have been already done. Now, you can send a coded telegram to Malentikov telling him to inform Kerensky that the cabinet positions are confirmed as requested in his letter and that the Duma is to be recalled before Christmas. Now, did you say the British minister is waiting to see me?”

“Yes, Your Honour.”

“Ask him to come in on your way out and then you can arrange for the senior staff officers, colonel and above, to make a visit with me to General Samsonov’s headquarters tomorrow. It’s time they were given a taste of field conditions. We’ll stay overnight and go on to Rennenkampf the next day. Inform them by wire telegraph.”

“Very Good, Your Honour, is there anything else?”

“Not that ... Yes! You stay at general headquarters and keep an eye on all incoming communications. Also, let all units know about the provisional government and the Duma. That should keep them happy for the moment, though God knows what the future holds.”

“Thank you, your Honour. I shall keep you abreast of developments.”

Volontsev saluted smartly and left The Grand Duke’s office, pounding the floorboards as if he was on a parade ground.

The Army Commander-in-chief and effective ‘Imperial Regent of All the Russias’ slumped into a chair, sighed and pulled at the tight, braid encrusted collar of his uniform.

Two men sat in the dining room at No. 10 Downing Street, tucking into Salmon fillets, white sauce, new potatoes and a variety of vegetables. Churchill’s cigar sat smouldering in an ash tray.

“Well, Winston, I hope you’ve got good news for me. I heard we lost another troop ship last night.”

“Not quite, Prime Minister, a destroyer was hit by a U-boat outside Wilhelm’s Haven this morning, but it managed to limp back to Harwich and so far the press haven’t caught up with it.

“What’s the news from the Front? The papers are very quiet. Is anything happening? You’re being very cagy, Herbert. And where are we with the Russians? You’ll have to say something in the House of Commons tomorrow. Lloyd George is starting to witter on about that voice of the working man stuff. The government will fall without his support.”

Asquith took a drink from his glass of Chardonnay, savouring the flavour before swallowing it.

“One of your problems, Winston, is patience. You’ve got to learn it in politics or you’ll never get anywhere. We’re playing a high stakes game here. If we fail, I might go down in history as the man who lost Britain her Empire, but if we succeed, Europe will be at our feet: German expansion will come to an end, Austria-Hungary will be broken up for good, the Russians will be crying out for our manufactures and investment and even the French will forgive us for helping them lose at the Marne. So, saying as little as possible and keeping our nerve is the name of the game. What I will tell you is that I’m talking to the Bank of England about a Russian loan of fifty million pounds, tied to their purchase of British armaments. They’ll be grateful and it’ll create a few more jobs here. As I’m sure you know manufacturing’s been hit all over the country since the war started. If your lot could find a way to deal with those damn U-boats it would help a great deal. Now, do you want crêpe suzette or jam roly-poly?”

Bradford Telegraph

Tuesday 1st December 1914

Long Awaited Battle of Königsberg

Our correspondent with the British forces in East Prussia reports the heaviest artillery bombardment of the war so far.

The German Second Army opened up with a sustained bombardment of British defensive positions around Königsberg at 6 a.m. yesterday. Sources in the NBEF have informed correspondents that intelligence reports had warned commanders of the imminent onslaught, which allowed our forces to take refuge in deep bunkers. Our own artillery barrage, which began last week had prevented enemy guns from being situated within range of major positions in and around the city. Our reserve formations will remain in the rear, out of range of enemy artillery until called upon to respond.

Simultaneously, it is reported that the German fourth army has unleashed its long expected counter attack against the Russian First Army commanded by General Remmenkampf, situated to the south-east of Königsberg. Sources within the Russian lines report high morale. Clergy from St. Petersburg have been seen visiting the front and blessing the troops as they knelt before pictures of the late Tsar Nicholas II's son, Tsarevich Alexei..

Reports of dissension between General Remmenkampf and his compatriot General Samsonov, commanding the Russian Second Army have been denied by the War Office and sources in the Russian military. Samsonov is rumoured to be preparing a forceful response to the German attack.

Polish Brigades Join Russian Second Army

Jubilant members of the embryonic Polish army are reported to have taken up positions alongside the Russian Second Army. Since the proclamation of Polish autonomy, young men have been flocking to the recruiting stations in Warsaw and across Poland. Those with experience in the use of fire arms are being deployed as part of the first three Polish brigades. Troops have been equipped with the latest Lee Enfield rifles, howitzers, machine guns and mills bombs. It is reported that the training of two mounted brigades is underway and British military training personnel are helping the Poles to establish training camps around Warsaw.

German Redeployment Slowed

We are reliably informed that the German East Prussian offensive has been slowed by an inability to redeploy troops from France as quickly as was expected. Sources in France reveal a quiet, but co-ordinated campaign of civil disobedience and resistance to the German occupation. The passage of German troop trains through Belgium and northern France has been disrupted as lines have been blown up and locomotives disabled. In Paris and across France strikes, demonstrations and occupations have forced German troops to remain in France longer than expected. In another development, correspondents with the victorious Russian armies in Upper Silesia report seeing German troops moving into position to support their Austro-Hungarian allies.

Monday 21st December

Helen and Barbara Firth stood at the bottom of a flight of stone steps. To their left a peeling green sign informed them that they had arrived at “St. Luke’s Sanatorium for the Recuperation of the Chronically Sick”. Harrogate had welcomed them with the worst snowfall of the winter so far, and their hotel manager had dolefully informed them that coal restrictions meant that fires were only being lit in communal areas. Their taxi pulled away and the two ladies hitched up their skirts and made for a pair of glazed double doors.

Once inside, they were pleased to see glowing logs in the hall fireplace and feel a soft carpet under foot. Barbara made for the fire, while her mother looked around for assistance.

“Here, mother! Try this,” called Barbara, holding up a diminutive bell she had found on a side table. The tiny instrument’s shrill tone momentarily filled the hall, just as quickly leaking away to leave an emphatic silence. A log collapsed in the stone fireplace, sending up a shower of sparks.

“It’s like a haunted house,” said Barbara, giggling. “Maybe they’ve all died and gone to heaven.” Then she remembered that meant Stephen as well.

“Sorry, Mother. I didn’t mean ...”

“I know you didn’t, but you really should learn to control that wicked sense of humour.”

A door squeaked primly and they both turned to see a dark blue, statuesque figure closing a piece of wooden panelling behind her.

“Good afternoon Ladies, may I help you?” A welcoming smile spread across her face as her head wobbled precariously on top of her deep, white collar.

“Yes, Mrs Helen Firth and this is my daughter, Barbara. We are here to see Captain Stephen Firth. I did write and you said you’d be expecting us.”

“Ah, yes, that would be Matron. Unfortunately she’s been taken ill with influenza and we are already under staffed. Two of the girls volunteered to help with the war effort just last month. It’s very good and brave of them, but it does rather leave us in the lurch. Stephen? Oh yes, of course. He likes us to call him Steve. He’s been very good to some of the other men, particularly the amputees, with his condition, though we have to be careful ... Oh, I’m sorry. I’m Sister Cheeseman. You must forgive me. It’s such a busy time. There’s so much to do. Now, would you care for

some tea, or would you like to see Steve ... I mean, Captain Firth, right away? You must have had a terrible journey in this weather.” She stopped speaking momentarily to draw breath and Barbara jumped in.

“We’d rather like to see him right away, if we may.”

“Yes, I think that would be most appropriate,” continued Mrs Firth “and maybe we could have some tea in his room.”

“Oh, yes, of course, of course. How silly of me not to think!”

Sister Cheeseman led them down the hall, along a gloomy passage and up a creaking, uncarpeted staircase.

“Look mother, what beautiful carving. So many different kinds of fruit. It’s amazing.”

They turned the corner and began to ascend the next flight. “Oh look, what lovely stained glass. Stephen’s so lucky to be in a place like this. I wish I’d brought my sketchbook.”

“Oh, it is rather lovely isn’t it, my dear. And they do say it’s very old and rather valuable, put in by the first owner of the house back in the eighteenth century. Now, this way. We keep the T.B. patients in the west wing. The prevailing wind you know. It helps to clear the lungs. You’ll need your coats, I dare say. The rooms tend to be a bit chilly with the windows open. Oh, Stephen’s been just wonderful, taking the other men out for walks. He’s a credit to you, you know Mrs Firth, a real credit.”

“I’m glad to hear it. It’s very kind of you to say so,” replied Helen, smiling for the first time.

“This way. He’s in here. I don’t know if he’s expecting you. As I said, Matron didn’t say you were coming. She’s not much of a talker at the best of times. They say I make up for her.”

She opened a panelled door in the panelled hallway and led them into a four bedded room, with yawning sash windows. The four occupants, all in thick coats and woolly hats, were seated playing cards at a square table.

“Captain Firth, your mother and sister to see you.”

Stephen froze, his hand poised to play an ace. Fortunately there was no money to be seen on the table. He sprang up, folding his cards neatly and placing them on the table with a sharp click.

“Mother, Sis., oh how marvellous. When did you get here? Why didn’t you tell me you were coming? Meet the men. This is Charles, George and Thomas. We’re all shivering our way to good health under the careful watch of Sister Cheeseman, here.”

They all shook hands as, rather awkwardly, the men offered the ladies their chairs at the card table.

“Thank you, gentlemen, that’s very kind, but maybe, Sister, you could find somewhere more appropriate, so we can talk with Stephen more privately. We do have some business to discuss,” replied Mrs Firth, somewhat stiffly.

“Yes. By all means. I’m sure we can use the downstairs sitting room. I should have thought. Come along and then I’ll make arrangements for some tea. Oh, you must be so cold, you poor things.” With that she tripped her way daintily out of the room and led the little family back down the stairs and into a comfortable sitting room, with green velvet curtains, floral carpet, chairs and sofas.

“At least the hot pipes take the chill out of the air. I’ll ask Henry to make up a fire for you and then Janice can bring you some tea.”

Sister Cheeseman left hurriedly and they all began to relax. Helen kissed Stephen on the cheek and Barbara made to do the same, but Stephen prevented her. “Just in case I’m still infectious.”

“Sorry, Mother about the cards, but we have to keep our spirits up somehow or we’d go bonkers.”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter. I know the ways of the world. Just as long as you’re not gambling your lives away. Anyway, how are you? Are they looking after you all right? It all feels very cold and spartan. You could catch your death. What about the other patients. It’s all so quiet.”

“We’re in semi-isolation, so we don’t infect the others. The other side, overlooking the valley is a bit more lively, but we can only see them when we’re out in the open air, so I hardly know anything about life in the ‘real world’ as we call it. We call our side ‘the deep freeze’. They close the windows in the evenings or if it’s raining in, otherwise its fresh air all the way.”

“Have you seen a doctor?”

“Yes, yes, the doc. comes twice a week and listens to our chests. Seems quite pleased with me. I’m not sure that’s good or bad. I’d rather be in the deep freeze here than freezing to death in Prussia, but there we are, I made my bed and now I have to lie in it, as you’d say.”

Helen pressed her lips together and looked directly into his eyes. "I've never said it like that and you know it. We didn't come here to argue, but if you want my views on this and any other war, you can have them."

"Mother, he didn't mean that."

"You keep out of this. Sometimes a little straight talking doesn't go amiss." The chilly atmosphere of the home seemed to have spoiled the visit before it had got going.

"Sorry, Mother. Can we start again? I do really appreciate you both coming. It must have been a tough journey. The weather's bitter..

To Barbara's relief, Helen smiled. "Yes, let's not waste our energy on old squabbles. We always said your life is yours to lead as you wish. Are you really getting better? I must say, you do look stronger."

"Yes, I'm certainly on the mend. For all the jokes, the spartan treatment does seem to work, but whether it's the rest, the cold, the fresh air or none of them, I don't rightly know. Did you know Stuart had been up here?"

"Yes, he wrote last week," replied Barbara, glad of an opportunity to speak.

"He made a detour on his way back from a conference of some sort in Edinburgh. Evidently, while he was up there he had dinner with a professor from the medical school and heard about the development of something called BCG. It's from cattle, but they hope one day to give it to people as a T.B. vaccine, so places like this will be a thing of the past. I got a real bucket full of pure physics as well. I can't make much sense of it, but he's very excited about something he calls 'relativity'. Then, I never was the clever one, was I?"

Helen smiled, tea and sandwiches arrived and they were alone again.

Mrs Firth's eyes began to water and Barbara took her mother's hand. "It's all right dear. It's just that I've got something to say and I'm not very good at this sort of thing." She straightened her back and gently freed herself. "I just want to say that I really thought we'd lost you in France and I was so relieved when you came back. I know I don't really need to say it, but I must. I do love you and hope you'll be better soon, but if you have to stay in here for the duration of the war, then I won't be sad. I'm not sure how I'll cope if you have to go back to the war. I will of course and the Lord'll help me, but I do just want to say how much I care for you ... Now! I've done it. We can move on." She took a deep breath and patted her daughter's knee.

"Thank you Mother. It means a lot to me. I wanted to let you know that once the war's over, I'm going to resign my commission and leave the army. I'd do it earlier, but

obviously they won't let me go at present, and it's no good me thinking about not going back. If I'm judged fit for active service, I'll just have to go and they're crying out for experienced men like me."

"D'you think they'll send you to Prussia?" broke in Barbara.

"Why not? The regiment's there or what's left of it.."

"What d'you reckon to the war news? It sounds like ..."

"That's enough! You know how all this war talk upsets me. Maybe you two can go for a walk together tomorrow and discuss it all, when I'm not there."

"Sorry, Mother, I wasn't thinking. Everyone's talking about it so much and I've been longing to hear what Stephen thinks, but you're right. Let's do it tomorrow."

Stephen looked out of the window. "I hate to say it when you just seem to have got here, but it's snowing again. I wonder if you should be getting back to the hotel. I wouldn't want you to be marooned in this place."

"Quite!" replied Helen, with feeling.

"Oh, isn't it just so beautiful," replied Barbara impractically, running to the French windows and gazing out at the myriad of white flakes floating majestically to the ground.

"I'll telephone for a taxi," said Stephen, disappearing hurriedly into the hallway. As it happened, the temperature had risen, preventing the snow from lying, so mother and daughter were able to escape quite easily back to their hotel. The next morning a thaw had set in and Barbara went back alone to St. Luke's to spend several hours of intense discussion with her brother, who was then granted permission to join the ladies for lunch at Betty's. He wore a smart civilian suit and felt almost as if life was returning to normal – a bit too normal. The disapproving looks he got from several passers-by reminded him of reality.

1915

Tuesday 19th January

Stephen froze in front of his wardrobe mirror and dropped his collar stud on the floor. He knew the heavy knock of the telegram delivery boy and it was too late for the post. He retrieved the stud, attached his collar and tied his tie. Then sat down on his bed with his head in his hands. He could feel the pronounced throbbing of his heart and a band was forming around his temples. Oh, God, I don't know if I can do this. He stood up, took several deep calming breaths and finished dressing. By the time he reached the breakfast room the tremor in his hands was gone and he had forced his feelings back behind his usual mask of confident resignation.

He had been declared fit and allowed home in the second week of January and knew he wouldn't have long to wait. He stoically opened the fateful telegram and ate a largely silent breakfast. No-body knew what to say. He had forty-eight hours to report for final medical clearance at Hull military embarkation point.

Immediate gloom descended on the Firth household. Stephen booked his train ticket for the following morning and spent the rest of his day packing his kit. Despite Mrs Benholmly's best efforts, dinner seemed interminable. All efforts at conversation seemed to flag and Stephen excused himself early on account of tiredness. Barbara had already claimed that she had homework to finish. Mrs Firth tried unsuccessfully to read the newspaper, attempted to bury herself in some business accounts and finally retired early.

Three days later Stephen found himself in the officers' mess of a troop ship waiting to join a convoy to Russia. On the table lay a pair of woollen mittens and a hat that Barbara had knitted.

"Hey Firth, good to see you back in the club. Been a while."

Stephen, startled out of his sombre reverie, stood and saluted.

"Major Pringle, Sir. A pleasure to see you."

"Likewise, likewise. Sit down old man. We don't stand on ceremony here."

"Thank you, Sir. How long have you been back in Blighty?"

“Just a couple of weeks. I don’t get much time on dry land these days. In charge of logistics, as they call it. Running the gauntlet of the Hun, I call it! Then we all have our parts to play in the drama of life, as they say.”

“Yes Sir. I suppose we do.” Stephen sighed. He’d known Pringle for at least five years and had never known him to be anything but positive and enthusiastic. How did he do it?

“Mmm, looks like you’ve been through it a bit. No-one finds it easy to get back to the front and especially not this one, but I may have some good news for you. Major-General Warwick’s had his eye on you for some time and after that business off Dogger-bank, he reckons you need a bit of a pay-off.”

Stephen looked away. “How did he get wind of that?”

“Some talk in the sergeants’ mess and the men put two and two together.”

“It was nothing. You’d have done the same.”

“Saving six men out of the drink isn’t ‘nothing’.”

Stephen tried to protest, but Major Pringle carried straight on. “Anyway, we’re taking these men and equipment to Königsberg. Then we’ll steam on to Riga, from where you’re on your way to St. Petersburg and a month’s intensive Russian language study. What you can learn in a month, I don’t know; the high-ups must think you’re a genius. There’s you and four other officers who’re going to be attached to the Russian government. You’ll be with the Ministry of the Interior. A man called Kerensky’s in charge. Bit of a socialist, by all accounts. Warwick thought you might understand him better than most other officers, seeing as you’re from the industrial north – dark satanic mills and all that. Oh yes, and they’re promoting you to colonel, so it looks better. What do you think old man?”

Stephen wanted to jump and shout for joy, but he just smiled. “That’s marvellous Sir. I don’t know why I should be chosen and I don’t know what I can do, but I’m so grateful. I would have done my duty at the front, but I can’t pretend I wasn’t dreading it.”

“Well just keep that under your cap, and don’t count your lucky stars too fast. We’re not through the Baltic yet.”

They did, however, traverse the Baltic without incident, deposited most of their cargo at Königsberg and arrived in Riga a day later. Stephen immediately fell in love with the ancient walled city, with its brightly decorated buildings and narrow cobbled

streets. It turned out that there was no train for three days, so he booked into a hotel on the main square and despite the biting cold, spent many happy hours enjoying the city's quaint beauty. His evenings were spent in the less pleasant study of Russian grammar, bringing back memories of some of his most torturous school experiences with French and Latin. He set himself the task of mastering the Cyrillic alphabet and was surprised at his own progress.

His arrival in the Imperial capital was equally cold, but impressive, in a different way. The cosy old fashioned atmosphere and slow pace of life were replaced by a sense of grandeur, which was quite new to him. Maybe if he had spent time in Paris or Rome, he would have experienced something like it before, but he had always eschewed opportunities even to experience the delights of London and his military experience had always taken him to the more prosaic parts of the British Empire. He had already become aware of the immensity of Russia, as his train had trundled for hour after hour through tall, spindly stands of silver birch and spruce and flat white plains gently undulating into the distance until they were absorbed into steely skies. At times he passed hamlets of sorry-looking houses, each with its small parcel of land, blanketed in the ubiquitous snow. Occasionally he saw a horse and cart labouring its way along what must have once been a road, but there was no sign of other livestock and little activity.

As he clambered down from the train at Petrograd, he found the British Ambassador on hand to receive him. They shook hands and he turned back to retrieve his luggage from the train.

"Oh, don't worry about that, old boy, the porter'll take it. You just come along with me. I suggest you get one of these furry hats like mine as soon as you can. Save you from getting frost bite. Why Peter the Great couldn't have found somewhere a bit warmer for his capital, I don't know. Now, we've fixed up some accommodation at the Embassy for the first week or so. Then you'll be moving in with a friend of Kerensky's: terribly nice family by all accounts. Quite rich they say, with several properties around these parts and a dacha on the Black Sea. The name's 'Postevsky'."

They came out of the station onto a broad street. The porter was some twenty metres behind with the luggage trolley. A horse and sleigh sat at the curb.

"It's been snowing since last night, so I thought this might be the best way of getting you across town safe and sound."

As they skated across the frozen snow and ice Stephen stared at the imposing grandeur through the screen of swirling snowflakes. Sturdy baroque palaces lined the

streets, exuding imperial power, yet except for the occasional spire or onion domes of a cathedral, nothing rose above four storeys. It was all so flat, stretching like Russia itself towards distant vistas. Who could ever mount a challenge to such immensity?

“We’re out near the Tauride Palace. Let’s us have a slightly safer and more detached view on developments. Now, I hope you don’t mind, but I’ve engaged a Russian teacher for you all from tomorrow morning. You’re the last to arrive. I don’t expect you’ll know each other. All from different regiments, though the others seem to be more traditional officer material than you, Eaton, Rugby, that sort of thing, but I expect you’re used to that. From somewhere in the north, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Huddersfield, near Leeds, not far from Manchester.”

“Oh yes, don’t they make rather good cloth, up there?”

“Yes, so they say, fine worsteds. It’s my family’s business. We own a mill.”

“How splendid! I don’t think I’ve ever met a real Yorkshire mill owner before. You don’t seem to have the twang.”

“No, I don’t use it much, ‘cept when I’m ‘ome. That way folk’ll understand me right.” Stephen smiled and Digby Charles Montague-Smythe broke into a wild laugh. “Oh, that’s truly marvellous, old boy. I see what you mean. What a wit! Now I know why they chose you. I’m sure you and Kerensky will get on like a house on fire. He’s quite a socialist; a bit of a Lloyd George. I wouldn’t be surprised if makes Prime Minister. He’s the only one of the present lot who can whip the workers into line.”

They turned into a compound and a soldier sprang to attention. The sleigh drew up at the bottom of a flight of steps and the two men alighted, while a liveried servant emerged from a side door and disappeared with Stephen’s luggage. On gaining the door, another flunky waited to relieve them of their coats, while a woman in a calf length print dress, jacket and fur stole kissed her husband on the cheek, greeted Stephen and led them forcefully into an elaborately decorated drawing room.

Stephen felt quite over powered, but tried not to show it and began to make polite conversation with Mrs Montague-Smythe.

“Well, my dear,” broke in the ambassador, “we’ve got our very own north country mill owner to stay and he’s positively charming and such a wit; takes off the twang perfectly.”

Another servant arrived, coughed and gave him a telegram, which he opened immediately. “Sorry, my dear, urgent business. Hopefully see you both at luncheon.”

His wife turned back to Stephen. “Colonel Firth, you must forgive my husband. He’s had such a sheltered life; home counties through and through. He’s been dying to meet you. You’re quite exotic in a way for a man like him. He thought mills were just for grinding wheat until a few years ago. Russia suits him down to the ground. Now, let me ask you a few questions about the old country. We came here straight from Siam, and India before that. I haven’t been home for six years.”

Stephen answered her questions about politics and society as best he could and then asked if he might be shown to his room, as he had found the train journey rather tiring. He had to admit that really he just wanted to escape. He wondered how he would cope with a week of ‘gentility’. He had never enjoyed it, even in the mess. Some of those boys straight out of public school could be such twits!

Saturday 6th February

The week had gone rather well. The other men turned out to be quite serious about their assigned studies and two of them were particularly good at languages, giving Stephen some valuable tips. Stephen stood in the embassy lobby running basic Russian phrases over in his mind and was pleased to have discovered that their teacher had been engaged for six months. The British government was not expecting linguistic miracles after all. Even the ambassador had become quite likeable and was proving himself to be an astute student of the political and military situation in Russia. They bade farewell and Stephen was passed into the safe hands of Simon Devlin, a second undersecretary in the consular division, deputed to introduce Stephen to his new hosts.

A minor thaw had set in, so the two men were deposited on the pavement outside no. 225 Nevsky Prospekt by an embassy car. Stephen had enjoyed Simon’s non-stop, lilting Irish tones all the way from the embassy. He seemed to have a view on all aspects of Russian life and a particular interest in the revolutionaries. He was just about to deliver his opinion on Kerensky, when the door opened and they were led inside, up the echoing stone stairs and into the Postevskys’ apartment. A servant ushered them into a drawing room, where two well built figures stood formally in front of a roaring log fire. Simon introduced his near compatriot in fluent Russian and Stephen managed a few words of formal greeting and they sat down to tea and pastries.

“Please be forgiving me Colonel Firth, if I am not speaking the English as well as your compatriot does the Russian.” Simon smiled his thanks, making no attempt to refuse the complement.

Stephen breathed an inward sigh of relief, as the Russian’s wife mumbled something quietly to her husband, pointing to her head.

“I am most grateful for your hospitality and the opportunity it gives me to learn the Russian language and culture and I am most impressed with your command of the English Language.”

“The privilege is ours, Colonel. Just one thing, Sir, my wife would like to know if it is the English custom for the wearing of hats inside as well as outside the house?”

Stephen felt his face redden and quickly snatched his new fur hat from his head. “No, no, please tell your wife I do apologise. It was most rude of me. I had forgotten my manners.”

His face was a picture of glum misery, but Mrs Postevsky’s had already broken into a broad, beaming smile and she was speaking directly to him in rapid Russian.

“My wife says she understands well and she is seeing you are a good man and looks forward to you becoming her new English son. She thinks the Russian hat looks well on you.” Then, from somewhere in her voluminous clothing, she produced a small gold plated icon, and pressed it into Stephen’s palm, smiling as she spoke more indecipherable Russian.

“My wife wants you to have this as a sign of friendship and a prayer for God’s grace and protection upon you while you are in Holy Russia. She hopes that one day she may meet your mother.”

Stephen wondered what his own reserved Quaker mother would make of this effusive and demonstrative Russian lady.

Stephen looked to his host. “I can’t accept this. It must be very valuable.”

“You must accept it, or you will offend her greatly and our house,” said Dmitri Igorovich seriously. His wife was looking from one to the other, anxiously.

Stephen smiled broadly, took his hostesses hands and in halting Russian thanked her for her generous gift, saying he would look after it very carefully. With that she rose, pulled him to his feet, clasped his upper arms with her hands and kissed him on both cheeks. Then she smiled and nodded to her husband, and with a few more words sat down and began to pour the tea.

Dmitri smiled appreciatively. "My wife says she already knows our friendship will be blessed by God, as is the fruit of the honey bee and the black earth of Russia."

The conversation lapsed into English and Mrs Postevsky made no further attempt to intervene. After half an hour Simon left and Mr Postevsky conducted Stephen to his room, where he found his cases stacked and his clothes already arranged in the cupboards and wardrobe.

"Make yourself as home, Colonel Firth. We are dinner tonight at seven of the clock. Maybe you are needing a rest?"

"Thank you Sir, but please call me Stephen. I don't like the formality."

"Then you must call me Dmitri Ivanovich. Do you not have a ... er, what do you say? patronymic?" Stephen thought for a moment.

"Ah, yes, my Father's name was Wilfred, but we don't use patronymics in English. Stephen is enough."

"Then Stephan it shall be."

"Just one last thing," replied Stephen, "do you wear evening dress for dinner?"

The smile vanished from Dmitri's face. "Not for the present, unless we are entertaining guests of a certain status. What is it you English say? ... Ah, yes ... 'It is not quite the thing'. These are revolutionary times. The people are demanding rights and we, the bourgeoisie, must be seen to be at one with them. What you say? The trappings of class conflict do not be helping our position."

Stephen nodded. "Thank you. I see your point."

Dmitri bowed slightly and left.

Stephen surveyed his elegantly proportioned room. The style of the furniture reminded him of his brief sojourn in France, but was more sturdy and functional. He strode over to the window and opened the thick velvet curtains to reveal the double glazed windows similar to the ones he had noticed on his way up the stairs to the apartment. They opened onto Petrograd's famous main thoroughfare. Snow was already falling again, but although the night had already closed in, the road was still vibrant. He closed the curtains, lay on the bed and picked up his tiny icon. He could hardly believe he was in a place such as this, so far from the horror of the battlefield. Was there after all some force protecting his destiny?

Some hours later Stephen's sister and mother were finishing their usual nightly ritual.

“... neither height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.”

Barbara Firth closed her Bible and looked up at her mother.

“Do you really believe it, Mother?”

“Of course I do. We must believe it. It’s the Word of our Lord and the foundation of all the worship and works of our Society.”

Barbara fidgeted with a lock of her hair. “I know mother, but do *you* really believe it? It was written so long ago and in a land far away and some of the girls at school say it’s just a story. They say a loving God wouldn’t allow this war and also, why did he take Father?”

Helen Firth stared vacantly at the sideboard, from where Wilfred still presided in all his formal glory. “Let’s go and sit by the fire and I’ll tell you a story about something that happened to me long ago, before any of you were born, before I even came to Yorkshire.”

Barbara felt a sense of awe as she settled into one of the big armchairs opposite her mother. She felt like she was on the edge of a new world, a grown up world.

Helen took a deep breath. “You see I was 22 years old and very unhappy.”

“Why, Mother.”

“It was about a man. He said he loved me, but he didn’t really. I didn’t know what to do. I felt my life was over. I knew your grandparents loved me, but they were also very strict and we weren’t allowed to read very much, except the Bible and some other books that the Friends Meeting said were suitable for young minds. One night, your grandmother had kissed me goodnight and was going to turn out the oil lamp by my bed, but I asked her to leave it. I remember sitting for a long time in the gloom. Then I picked up my Bible. I started reading. I don’t know which Gospel it was now, and I can’t explain it, but it was as if Jesus jumped out of the pages and was with me in the room or I was with him in the Holy Land. I don’t know which. He was just so real. I couldn’t see him or hear anything, but it was as if a reality entered into me that has never gone away.”

Helen dabbed at her moist eyes, with a delicate handkerchief.

“So now, whatever happens, I just know he’s with me in everything.”

“Did you tell Father?”

“Oh yes and your grandmother. You’re only the third. It’s too personal.”

Barbara stared at her mother and then knelt at her feet and clasped her hands. "Oh Mother, that's so beautiful. I wish something like that could happen to me. The Bible often seems so distant and unreal."

"I think you'll know Him my dear when you really need Him and want Him. The Holy Ghost comes when you least expect Him. You know, the night your father died, I felt such peace. I couldn't believe it."

"Why do you think God took Father?"

"I really don't know, maybe he shouldn't have gone. The factory inspector's report said the belt should have been renewed three months before the accident. He'd not be the first Yorkshire mill owner to die trying to save money, but I do know he's at peace."

Barbara hid her face in her mother's skirts and sobbed gently as her mother stroked her burnished locks. Suddenly she straightened up and looked directly into her mother's eyes. "I need to ask you something. I was reading about Elizabeth Fry."

Helen's face stiffened. "I think I know what's coming and the answer's no."

"Oh, Mother, you don't know and you need to listen. Times are changing. I want to do something to help people, like Elizabeth did in the prisons. She was so courageous and I know I can't be like that. I'm too young, but you know the hospital they're setting up at Royd's Hall. I want to leave school in the summer and become a nurse, so I can help the soldiers. I don't want to help the war, but I do want to help the wounded. They need us."

She looked up pleadingly into her mother's eyes. "At the Meeting, they're always urging us to live useful lives."

Helen smiled. "It's a noble ambition, dear, but I just can't allow it. You're doing so well at school. One of Greenhead's brightest. Miss Gordon hopes you might even make it to one of the universities. You need to consider your future. With a degree, you could make an even greater contribution to society. I'm sorry to be negative, but you have to think ahead. Nursing is an honourable profession, but I know you could do better for yourself."

"Oh Mother, you're always thinking about status and position. Don't you realise it doesn't matter? Isn't that what the Bible teaches? We're all equal in God's sight!" Her eyes blazed as if she was challenging Moses from the burning bush.

Her mother's smile never faltered. "Very true, dear, and that truth is at the heart of our Society, but in order to put it into practice, our Lord said we must be 'as shrewd

as snakes' and with your courage and candour, I can see you challenging the highest in the land."

"What do you mean? Surely you don't want me to be a socialist?"

"No, not exactly. I think socialism doesn't meet man's real needs, but there's a lot of wrong to put right and you could play your part. Do you remember the Christmas before last, when you told us we should increase the workers' Christmas bonus?"

"And you did!"

"Yes, we did. I said at the time to your father that Mrs Pankhurst would be proud of you, the way you made your case for the needs of the women and children."

"I thought you didn't like Mrs Pankhurst?"

"I don't like her methods, especially the violence, but I agree with the aim. Women need parliamentary representation. Maybe then we'll avoid wars like this one."

"You've never said so before."

"Maybe we've never been able to talk like this before."

"I hope we can be like this again. It feels so good ... Oh, but now you've got me away from what I asked. I really want to work at the hospital."

"But don't you see what I'm saying. There are huge issues facing this country and the world. The workers won't stay in their present position much longer. There'll be strikes and demonstrations like in Russia. The country needs people with passion and intelligence, as well as tenderness, faith and vision. I've read some of your school essays, Barbara and I've seen your tenderness towards Stephen and I know that sometimes when you're late home from school it's because you've been to see some of the families who've lost people."

Barbara pouted. "How did you know?"

"Huddersfield's not such a big place. People talk ... I'm very proud of you."

Barbara wandered if her mother knew about the biscuits and fruit cake she'd taken from the pantry. "Thank you, but can we do something for the soldiers? I really do want to help them."

"I'm sure we can. Some of the ladies from the meeting have been talking the same way. We'll get in touch with the military authorities and see what assistance they're willing to accept. Though I don't like dealing with the army; they never seem to understand our stance on the war. You'd think we were the enemy sometimes."

Barbara lay in bed feeling the rounded firmness of her developing breasts. Womanhood struck her as a strangely awkward business. Why had God made women

the way they were? Boys seemed to have life a lot easier, at least when it came to the business of growing up. She knew some girls at school who'd suffered horribly when the bleeding had started. Her mother had at least warned her, so it wasn't so bad, and she'd been able to help some of her friends.

The talk she'd had with her mother had made her feel she was almost an adult. It was wonderful to know that mother wasn't just worried about keeping up the house and the expectations of polite society. She really wanted things to change. 'There'll be strikes and demonstrations like in Russia.' Could it really be as bad? The Tsar sounded to have been so foolish and cruel and they had no proper parliament. They'd learned at school that the British constitution had evolved to meet the needs of the people and King George acted on the wishes of Parliament. They had representative government. Still, war had been declared without a vote in Parliament. She thought about the copy of the *Daily Worker* that lay hidden under her bed; its bold assertion of working class suffering and rights had both frightened and attracted her.

Saturday 20th March

"Sergeant Crossland, if I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times. Keep your head down! We're not dealing with the 'fuzzy-wozzies' now. These are crack German troops with the best artillery in the world and they're trying to aim it at us."

"Sorry, Sir, just tryin' to take some bearings for our artillery. The battery'll need to change the elevation. I reckon them Huns are a good bit closer than they were this morning. I wouldn't be surprised if they're limbering up between volleys. If we don't return some accurate fire soon, they'll be down our throats by dawn, with two 'undred thousand infantry to 'elp 'em."

"I see what you mean, Sergeant. I'll get onto command, but get down and stay down! That's an order!"

"Yes, Sir. I'll ready the men."

Crossland worked his way steadily along the deep, forward trench, encouraging and scolding as he went. Finally, he took refuge in an underground bunker. The earth shook as the British guns opened up behind them. The men cowered and pressed their frozen gloved hands into their ears. The sky was as bright as day. Their sergeant took out a cigarette and lit it, unseen by the outside world. God! This is hell! Have we escaped the icy grasp of the Baltic to have our heads pulverised in someone else's war?

He blew a smoke ring as the ground shuddered and he pulled his coat around him, brushing away the few pieces of damp earth that fell from the ceiling. Then his candle went out and the crushing weight of several hundred kilos of soft earth forced him to the ground, filling his eyes and mouth. He held his breath and tried to dig, but his body was clamped where he lay. Eventually he tried to breathe, but only searing pain filled his lungs and he prayed for annihilation.

Not much later furtive movements were seen in no man's land. The shout went up, "sappers" and the troops went over the top. At dawn, waves of German infantry came rushing across the frozen muddy terrain, expecting the way to have been opened before them. Instead they found the bodies of their dead compatriots and layer upon layer of barbed wire. Still, equipped with wire cutters, they overwhelmed the defenders by sheer force of numbers. The British withdrew to the next line of trenches, closed the wire and awaited orders as they counted their losses. Only then did they realise that no-one had seen their Sergeant since the night before.

Monday 22nd March

General Samsonov, surrounded by a group of his staff officers, sat astride his horse on a hillock in the region of Orlov, gloomily surveying his army's positions. In the far distance lay the forward trenches, which had been under heavy bombardment since the previous morning, but by all accounts they had stood firm. Reports from the English General at Königsberg said they had taken heavy casualties, but that all of the city and port were still in British hands. If the Germans did break through in the north, then he'd have to trust that dog Remmenkampf. Everyone knew he'd only risen to the position of army commander by dint of seniority. He was a desk man. He'd failed Russia in 1905 against the Japanese. He'd failed to send support to the south at the near debacle at Tannenberg in the previous August. Why should he perform any better now?

The old man tightened his hold on the reins as the artillery duel continued. His horse whinnied and reared. Surely, there was something to be done. Surely, he, General Samsonov, commander of Imperial Russia's Second Army, had some part to play. Had Napoleon and Kutuzov sat on similar hills and just watched the fate of nations play out before them?

"Your Honour, there is some movement at the front."

Samsonov trained his binoculars on the distant, misty shapes indicated by his aide de camp. He stiffened in the saddle. It was impossible to see clearly, but there were some kind of vehicles moving determinedly towards the Russian infantry. He smiled. Some kind of motorised troop carriers. What will the modern German mind dream up next? Our field artillery will disable them long before they reach their objectives. He turned to a subordinate, but the man's eyes were riveted on the front. He re-focussed his vision and the horror of it all burst on his senses as pinpoints of light flashed repeatedly from each of the vehicles. The guns fell silent.

"Vasili?"

"Yes, Sasha?"

"Do you think anyone slept last night?"

"I doubt it Sasha. Did you?"

"Not a hope. I don't think I've ever been as cold and wet in all my life."

"At least it's stopped now and the cloud's lifting somewhat."

"It's so quiet."

"It won't last for long. We've already taken a heavy pounding. The Germans'll be over to finish us off before long. Valeri says he's heard they've got hundreds of thousands of men ready to smash through our lines. They've just been waiting for the spring. Then we'll clash in the greatest battle the world has ever seen. He says it'll make 1812 look like a picnic. He said we'll all be dead, by the end, but then the soldiers and workers will rise and overthrow our rulers and the revolution will come."

"Does he now? Well, whoever this Valeri is, he better not let me hear him talking such revolutionary garbage, or he'll be facing a firing squad."

Vasili and Sasha swung round to face Colonel Barechev, their regimental commander.

"Sorry, Your Honour," they chorused, "we didn't mean any disrespect."

"Good! Now you two can get down the line, and find Captain Malenkov. He's got a machine gun for you. I want you two up on that hillock over there, just behind the forward trench. You'll find corporal Yelinsky waiting for you up there."

Before any of them could move the piercing scream of a shell tore the morning open and exploding shrapnel put an end to their war and sent somnolent warriors running for their weapons, officers screaming for reports and sentries peering furtively

over the trench parapet into no-man's land. What they saw left them in no doubt that war had spawned some terrifying new offspring.

Lumbering, iron clad boxes were making their ponderous, but seemingly inevitable way across the gently undulating terrain. Yellow flashes indicated the presence of their death dealing dimension. Behind them, long lines of infantry snaked across the land, cowering behind their demonic protectors, awaiting opportunities to fan out and strip the land of its occupiers. The fruit of German industry would at last be welded to her heartland as the messianic saviour of her Teutonic rural idyll.

Slav peasants crossed themselves and kissed available crosses and icons as their officers sought to marshal them to stand and fight the fire breathing dragons. Rifle and machine gun fire rattled uselessly against their infernal skins. The Russian artillery was in action, but it was pounding away at enemy artillery positions, which, for all they knew had long been vacated. Colonel Ustinov had seen the demise of his regimental commander and struggled with the thought of asserting command. He'd been groomed by Barachev for such a moment as this and who could know how long a moment it might be. He ran into the officers' dugout and grasped the field telephone, yanking the handle ruthlessly. A voice answered.

"Colonel Ustinov. Give me Karkov regimental battery."

Ustinov waited. The sound of gunfire and dying men rasped and howled around him.

"Ah! Polansky. Colonel Ustinov. I'm assuming command. Barachev is dead. You are to focus all artillery fire down into the valley and knock out those motorised gun emplacements, or whatever we call them, moving towards our infantry positions.

"What do you mean? 'No can do.' The situation has changed on the ground. Our forces will have to retire behind the second or third line of retreat and re-group.

"We can't hold the line..."

"I don't care about the order of the day, the day has changed. We need a new order.

"Where is the corps commander?

"Usdau? What's he doing there?

"Look, we need covering fire to withdraw ..."

Ustinov slammed down the telephone, his face scarlet with rage. Out in the trench some men were holding their positions, while others had already begun to stream

back to the rear. He saw a captain pulling a man by the shoulder and forcing him back into the trench.

“Captain, get these men out of here. Send the word down the line. We’re retreating. The men’ll just get slaughtered here. We need to regroup at the rear ... Leave the machine gun emplacements. They can do some damage.”

The man seemed barely to understand. “But, Your Honour, the order of the day.”

“Damn the order of the day! The situation has changed. We need to withdraw and regroup. These are Russia’s finest, not pigs for the slaughter. Now, get your company out and pass the word.”

Ustinov continued his progress down the trench, haranguing officers, NCOs and men to get themselves to the rear as fast as possible for the sake of Mother Russia. He crawled to Machine gun emplacements and exhorted the men to hold on as long as possible, to give cover to the withdrawal and hold off the infantry. Then he found himself a horse and made for his artillery battery. When he arrived, he found they were already in the process of limbering up to withdraw and pinpointed the company commander.

“Paltinshky, you told me you were sticking with the order of the day to pound the enemy artillery positions. Where the hell do you think you’re going? If you’d set your guns on those infernal machines that are about to massacre my infantry, we could take them out.”

“Orders, Your Honour, from army H.Q. A general retreat to prepared defensive positions.” He handed Ustinov an order signed by Samsonov himself and saluted.

Ustinov frowned. “Good work, man. Do you know where you’re going?”

“Not really, Your Honour. It just says withdraw to defensive positions and await further orders.”

Ustinov pulled a tattered map from his pocket. “We’re here. Take this track and dig in on this rise behind the lake. It’ll give you command of Bishofsburg and the land towards Allenstein, but you’ll have to hurry or those infernal things’ll be there before you.”

“Thank you, Your Honour. Good to have you in command.”

“Oh, and where’s the army commander?”

“Staff H.Q. is at Neidenburg, but they say General Samsonov’s taken to the field and is somewhere south of Allenstein, but from what I’ve heard it’s already fallen, so heaven knows where he is now.”

What was the point of hunting for Samsonov? He re-mounted his horse and followed the first of the guns as they disappeared into the shadow of the hillock from which they’d been firing. Once down in the valley, he made for the rear trenches, where he found groups of men drinking tea and discussing the events of the morning. A young man with an open-faced smile thrust a mug of tea into his hand, saluted, “Thank you, Your Honour,” and disappeared. It was raining again, but the biting northerly wind had been replaced by a warmer southerly.

Wednesday 24th March

Three Russian Generals sat uncomfortably at a polished mahogany dining table in an East Prussian manor house. Samsonov stared mournfully at Grand Duke Nicholae.

“No-body was expecting them. How were my men supposed to respond? The only way was to retreat and regroup.”

“Your orders were to stand your ground,” asserted General Rennenkampf.

Samsonov turned slowly to face the First Army commander. “As you did against the Japanese at Mukden, I suppose.”

“That was different,” responded General Rennenkampf hotly, “we were outnumbered four to one. You can’t compare. My troops were exhausted.”

“They weren’t facing ‘tanks’.”

“What?”

“Tanks. That’s what the men are calling them; mobile, armoured artillery. We’ve never seen them before. My army withdrew in good order along the line from exposed positions. Have you forgotten the first rule of warfare? – if you’re in an impossible position, get out with as few casualties as possible.”

“Gentlemen, Gentlemen, enough! We were on the same side, the last time I looked.” The Grand Duke tried a tentative smile.

General Samsonov rose ponderously to his feet. "If the Commander-in-chief is dissatisfied with my conduct or that of my army, I willingly tender my resignation of my command and will gladly return to tending my estates at Ekaterinburg."

"Alexander Vassilievich, I am accepting no-body's resignation. I needed merely to hear your explanation of your conduct, that is all. Please resume your seat ... General."

"What we need to know is your precise position and your ability to hold your ground in the future."

"My forces have retreated to an agreed defensive line stretching from south of Bishofsburg, south-west to the north of Usdau and then to the border west of Soldau."

"And the First Army?"

"We hold positions near Bishofsburg, north to the Königsburg salient. We are taking a major artillery bashing, but are responding and no part of the line has broken."

"So here is our weak point." The Grand Duke rapped the map with his swagger stick and frowned emphatically at the two generals. "There is a gap in the line which needs to be closed before the Germans take advantage to break through and encircle us. Now General Samsonov's second Corps has already taken a battering, I suggest the First Army, eighth corps needs to wheel south and connect with the Second Army behind Bishofsburg. Is that agreed, General Rennenkampf?"

The general drained his brandy and gently replaced his glass on the table. "For the sake of His Royal Highness the Tsarevich and Holy Russia I will redeploy." His lips pulled themselves into a thin smile and he bowed his head solemnly in Samsonov's direction.

"Then, generals, let us drink a toast." An orderly filled their glasses as the men rose to their feet. "To the Tsarevich, victory and peace." Samsonov and Rennenkampf echoed their commander and drained their glasses. Simultaneously, they replaced their caps, nodded to the Grand Duke and escaped from his presence without another word.

Far from the dead hand of war, Kerensky sat at his desk in the Kshesinkaya Palace opposite the Alexandrovsky Park, where he liked to wonder in the early dawn. He nodded to an aide to open the French windows. The noise of the crowd invaded the room and he took a swig of brandy, as he placed his glasses in his jacket pocket. The applause and cheers rose to a crescendo as he stepped onto the balcony. He raised his hands, half in recognition and half to quieten the masses spilling across the road into

the Park. Grasping the balustrade, he launched into his speech, prepared three days before on the train from Warsaw.

“Brothers and sisters of Russia, Revolutionary masses of our glorious Motherland, victory is at hand!” He stopped to let the cheers die down. “This time last year, we dwelt under the yoke of tyranny. Tsar Nicholas II, autocratic Ruler of all the Russias, could demand our obedience and impose his will upon us through the power of his police and army. We dared not speak openly for fear of his secret police. Today we stand on the verge of electing Russia’s first truly representative government. Soon, you will go to the ballot box and elect Russia’s first true Duma; not a Duma of the land owners and bourgeoisie, not a Duma filled with the snakes of autocratic power, not a Duma muzzled by a Tsar who hates the voice of the people, but a Duma in which your voice will be heard and the will of the people will be done.

Once again Kerensky paused to bask in the glory of the people’s response to his words.

“When our new Duma comes together, the Grand Duke will step aside as our Prime Minister and the leaders of the Duma will be your government for the first time in the history of Russia. We will have government *of* the people, *by* the people, *for* the people. Our government will not belong to autocratic aristocrats, but will belong to you, the workers, the soldiers, the mothers, the fathers, the sons and the daughters of our holy nation. Then we can truly begin to build a new nation; a nation freed from its old shackles; shackles of oppression, shackles of injustice, of poverty, of hunger, of imprisonment in the wastes of Siberia, shackles dividing the people of Russia, shackles of waste and corruption, shackles that now shall be broken as Russia rises to a new destiny; a destiny where each one of you can be his own Tsar, take hold of his own future, live not as a slave, but as a free man or a free woman, in the free nation of Russia.

Once more the crowd roared its approval and Alexander clapped in response and acknowledgement. He still had to deal with the most difficult issue.

“But, my friends, let us not forget that today we must stand shoulder to shoulder with our brothers who are fighting for the life of our nation.”

“End the imperialist war!”

“Yes! End the Tsar’s war!”

“End the war!”

“Bring home our boys!”

Angry shouts went up from various parts of the crowd and Kerensky gripped the balustrade again.

“Friends and comrades! We will end this war, but we must end it in an honourable and just peace. We cannot build our nation unless we have a true peace, free from the fear of aggression, free from the imperialists casting their jealous eyes upon the fruitful soil of Mother Russia. Therefore, we need to put our shoulders to the wheel of history, to the wheel of production and continue to equip our men with the tools and armaments of war. Under the Tsar corruption and ineptitude robbed our men of victory. Now, as we the people of Russia take the leavers of power in our hands, we must show that we can truly stand with our men on the battle fields and provide them with the tools of victory.

“I call upon you today, to vote for us, to equip us, to enable us to go forward in your name and build a great and glorious Russia, a Russia of the people, your Russia.”

Once more Kerensky nodded and raised his clasped hands in victory and thanks. Eventually, he slipped back inside and collapsed on a chaise longue at the side of the room. An aide thrust a glass into his hand and squeezed his shoulder.

Saturday 27th March

Hundreds of kilometres away, Samsonov’s Aide de Camp replaced the telephone receiver on its cradle as the old man rose and went out onto the veranda of the Neidenburg house that had become his headquarters. The aide offered him his coat, but he waved it away. A new joy filled his soul. The weather had turned and spring was in the air and with it had come unexpected rain. It was over a month early and four weeks of rain had fallen in the last three days. The cobbled streets of the town had become dirty streams, washing out the winter’s frozen flotsam and jetsam in a cascading torrent, belting its way through the centre of the town.

For the men in the trenches it could be hell on earth, extinguishing all pretence of civilised life and worse, it was the carrier of disease. Every Russian general knew that more men fell from disease than ever died in battle. Rain was the enemy of a decent campaign. It could turn certain victory into miserable defeat. Hence every general watched the sky with trepidation. Yet this rain and the early thaw were becoming Russia’s salvation. Only forty-eight hours after its thunderous commencement the German offensive had faltered. Their bold iron beasts had begun to

slide and slither and eventually stick fast in the deepening mud, becoming sitting ducks for the Russian artillery, which he, General Samsonov, had directed at their destruction. Even better, Colonel Ustinov of his own Karkov Regiment had seen the gap in the line north of Bishofsdorf and redeployed three platoons to prevent a wholesale German breakthrough a whole twenty-four hours before Rennenkampf had managed to wheel half of his southern corps into position. Word had gone to the Grand Duke that the two generals were co-operating well. Even better, the redeployment had led to the encirclement of over a thousand Germans, trapped by the rain.

He pondered his next move. Since the death of Rasputin and the capitulation of the Tsarina, the Imperial Guards Regiments had been freed to become the nucleus of a new Seventh Army, to be commanded by his friend General Pavlov. If they could coordinate their forces in a pincer movement and catch Hindenburg unawares, he would demonstrate just how important decisive leadership was in the control of vast bodies of men; something that desk-bound generals like Rennenkampf seemed incapable of understanding.

Bradford Telegraph

Monday March 29th 1915

Yorkshire Fusiliers Hold Out in Heroic Fight back

As the night closed in along the British line of defences around Königsberg on 20th March our miserable rain-soaked heroes feared that the long awaited battle might be all in vain.

The Germans had pounded our fortifications on the previous day before sending in their sappers to cut our defensive wire. But our men were ready for them and in hand to hand combat beat them back, so that when the main force arrived in the morning much of the wire was still in place. Yet such was the ferocity of the German attack and the sheer weight of numbers that our forward trenches were abandoned.

By early afternoon much of the line had withdrawn in good order to prepared defensive positions. Then through steady rain our troops saw the approach of armoured vehicles carrying mounted artillery pieces and machine guns. Our brave infantry held on to their positions in the best traditions of their regiments until further retreats were forced upon them. Retreat to the final outer ring of the city defences seemed to spell disaster.

Yet the Royal Engineers and The Duke of York's Own Regiment of Engineers worked all night to build additional defences including protective ditches. As another wet and misty morning dawned the fighting intensified once more, but the Hun was unable to close in on the British positions, due to the increasingly wet conditions. An unseasonal thaw has turned the battlefield into a quagmire preventing the enemy from moving forward.

During the subsequent night, many of the newly named 'tanks' were abandoned by their crews and in

subsequent days were either blown up or retrieved by our sappers.

Within a week our troops were beginning to regain lost ground as the enemy offensive petered out. Inevitably, there have been heavy casualties, but once again the men of Yorkshire can hold their heads high as worthy heroes and ambassadors of our county.

The war office expects to inform relatives of the lost and injured within days. Our hearts once again go out to those grieving at their loss.

Social Revolutionaries Gain Most in Poll

Results in the elections for a new Russian Duma (Parliament) show a strong showing for the Social Revolutionary Party led by Alexander Feodorovich Kerensky. He is unlikely to command an absolute majority, but with assistance from the Kadet (progressive centrist) Party it is expected that he will form the first truly representative government in Russian history. Critics of our own government's policy of supporting the Russians, have long complained that we as a nation are supporting an oppressive dictatorship. Prime Minister Asquith today heralded the result as a very positive outcome and said he looked forward to strong united action to prosecute the war and build a prosperous partnership for development and peace in Europe.

Both the conservative Decembrists and the Bolsheviks of Vladimir Lenin produced a poor showing.

Japan To Join The Allies

It is reported from Japan that British and Russian representatives were summoned to the Emperor's palace yesterday to receive Japan's decision to join the war against Germany.

Thursday April 15th

“Colonel Firth, have you read the latest dispatches?”

“Yes, Minister, they seem very encouraging.”

“Your Russian is coming along well. Could you follow the cabinet meeting this morning?”

“Much of it, but I don’t understand why the Grand Duke wanted to delay the elections. It seems clear to me that he can’t expect to win the war without the workers on his side.”

“Ah! Clear to you, because you understand workers, but for him it’s not so easy. He was born five years before serfdom was abolished. His father had twelve vast estates, with over fifty thousand men and women to command as he wished. For him people belong not to themselves, but to Mother Russia and are to be commanded as she pleases and according to her needs, but even he has acknowledged that times are changing. The simple, uneducated Russian soldier, brave, but incapable of independent thought, is no-longer enough for modern warfare. We’ve been lucky so far in this war, very lucky.”

“Now you’ve won the election, what will you do?”

“Oh, my friend, there is so much. The first thing we will do is to break up the great estates. The aristocracy will hate us for it and I expect some of them will try and fight back, but with the Grand Duke on our side, we’ll win through. Then, we need to vote in a proper constitution and a new basic law. Only then can we really safeguard workers’ rights.”

“From what I hear, the employers’ll fight you tooth and nail.”

“They will, but you know from your own history, once the people get organised in real free trades unions, the boss’ll have to accept they’re not oligarchs, but partners in a democratic process and if they won’t accept it, we’ll nationalise their businesses and make workers’ co-operatives. The workers have tasted power. The genie won’t be pushed back into the bottle again.”

“You know, you Russians are very different from the English; much more confrontational. Somehow over the years we’ve learned the art of compromise.”

“But you’ve had your revolutions?”

“Oh, yes, back in the 17th century, but since then the monarch has gradually ceded power to the land owners and then to the bourgeoisie and they learned to give

just enough away to the workers so the majority enjoyed a limited prosperity. It's all happening too fast here. If the owners don't learn to give a little, Marx and Lenin will have their way and I think you could have a cataclysm like the Terror in France in 1793."

"You are something of a scholar, Colonel Firth."

Stephen laughed.

"Not at all. I joined the army to escape all that, but here my social life is somewhat limited. Mr Postevsky has a fine library. I have even managed to polish up my French."

Kerensky frowned.

"This will not do my friend. Even in war Petersburg is awash with music and dance. We Russians are a poetic people. Nothing can drive it from our souls. Only last week I was at the Front and found a group of men taking a rest from the fighting. One of them suddenly produced a balalaika and moments later, with the sound of shells exploding in the distance, they were all dancing and singing. You must get out at night and enjoy our culture or you'll return to England with a very dull view of Russia. I'll get tickets for the opera. The Postevskys can join us."

"Thank you. I'll look forward to that. I've never been to an opera."

"But, you have a fine musical tradition in England. You must have."

"No, there's lots of music where I come from, but opera belongs more to the south of the country. The north basks in the great oratorios; Bach, Handel, Berlioz, Steiner. Our churches all have their choirs and try and out-sing each other. It's quite comical sometimes. But seeing as you mention it, I am going to the ballet tonight with a second undersecretary from the Embassy. I believe it's Swan Lake. I've heard the Russian ballet is the best."

"Oh, marvellous, my friend, marvellous. At last you'll experience Russia. Ballet is the union of the Russian soul in music, drama and dance. You are bound to enjoy it. I believe Anna Pavlevna Gorenova is dancing the lead. They say she's at the height of her powers. You must tell me how you find her when we meet next week. They say she's a marvel, quite unlike any principal dancer Russian ballet has hitherto produced."

Stephen rose, shook hands with Kerensky and was about to leave.

"Oh, one last thing, Colonel, as Prime Minister, I would like to have you with me. You have some interesting insights. I have spoken with your ambassador and he does not expect difficulties with your military."

“Thank you, Alexander Feodorovich, that’s marvellous. I will be most honoured.”

The Russian turned to his desk and began pouring over a thick bundle of papers as his English colonel closed the richly panelled door and stepped out into a marbled ante-chamber, to be presented with his hat and coat by a liveried footman. He made his way down the ornate staircase past a multitude of historic paintings, out of the Winter Palace into its snow encrusted courtyard and thence to the classical grandeur of Palace Square. He took a sleigh back down the Nevsky Prospect, and changed for the evening, making sure his hosts remembered he was dining out. He could not remember when he had felt happier. His future was assured. He looked at his watch. Yes, there was time. He sat down at his desk, dipped his pen in the ink well and hurriedly penned a letter home. As he finished, he was about to sign it with his usual flourish, but something stopped him. Why not add a postscript about the ballet when I come back? Mother would be most interested.

Saturday 1st May

Barbara was already sitting at the table in the breakfast room, tucking into her porridge, garnished with a heavy serving of brown sugar when her mother bustled in carrying a bundle of letters. Barbara quickly stirred her porridge.

“I saw that. You’ll get fat. You’re already complaining your corsets are too tight.”

“Well, they are. Mother, I’m growing up you know.”

“You’re looking very bright and lively today. Going somewhere?”

“No, I just felt with spring here, it was time to brighten myself up a bit and look to the future. I’ll wear something more sober on Sundays.”

Mrs Firth ladled some porridge into a bowl, added warm milk and sat down.

“What’s that you’re reading, dear? Isn’t that Stephen’s hand?”

“Yes, sorry Mother, it came this morning. I couldn’t sleep and heard Mr Worthington on the drive, so I thought I’d see if there was any interesting mail.”

“I thought I said the mail ...”

“Mother it’s from Stephen!”

“Sorry, you’re right, you are growing up ... What does he say?”

“It’s very exciting. He’s getting on very well with Mr Kerensky. He wants Stephen to keep working with him. Imagine it, our Stephen from little old Huddersfield, aide to a Russian Prime Minister!”

“Oh, thank the Lord! That’ll keep him safe for the present.”

“Yes, isn’t it marvellous.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes, he went out to see a ballet the day before he sent this; Swan Lake.”

“Stephen? Wonders’ll never cease. You know your father used to threaten him with the strap to make him do his piano practice.”

“I think it might be a bit more than just the music he went for. An Irishman from the Embassy took him along and they met up with the principal ballerina afterwards. He seems to have been quite taken with her.”

“Oh, was he now? Maybe I should take a look at that!”

Helen picked up the letter and propped it up against the toast rack, devouring it silently between porridge and gentle sips of tea. “Well, he’s certainly taken with the girl, if not the ballet. I wonder how the opera went down? I sometimes think it was better when we had no idea what he was getting up to, except for a short note every three months.”

“Oh Mother, stop worrying about him! He’s twenty-six and he’s been round the world.”

“Mothers never stop worrying about their children.”

Silence fell between them, broken only by the tapping of rain on the window and the scrape of cutlery on china.

“Mother?” ventured Barbara, tentatively.

“Yes, dear?” Some strands of hair had escaped her bun and she was busy tidying them into place. Barbara waited.

“You know that business about helping at the hospital, did you find out anything?”

“Yes. I was wanting a few more details, but I’ve been talking to Miss Cochrane from the Green Lea hospital in Lindley. She says they’re looking for ladies to do voluntary duties at Royd’s.”

“Oh, that’s marvellous. I’d love to do that. We should go up this afternoon and I could apply.”

“Well, I was considering proposing to the meeting that we organise a group of willing volunteers to offer our help to the hospital. I think this will reflect well on us.”

“So, we can still go up to see them this afternoon and find out about it. Then you can speak to people at the meeting tomorrow. Oh, do let’s go and see. I can’t wait to get involved. I feel so useless and as you say we need to show we care. Some of the girls at school have been horrible you know. The Flynn sisters won’t speak and I’m sure Janice Sedgewick deliberately tripped me up coming out of assembly last week. We could go straight after lunch. I’ll harness Robby up and clean out the trap. Please, Mother, please.”

“Oh, I don’t know if it’s proper, just going down there.”

“Oh, Mother! There’s a war on. Life is changing. It’s never going to be the same again. If we want to change the world, we’ve got to be bold. The worst thing that could happen is they’ll send us away with fleas in our ears. If you won’t go I will!”

Barbara shoved her chair back, threw her napkin down on the table and was about to storm out of the room, but her mother was too quick for her and grabbed her arm. A smile spread across her face.

“You are so like your father when righteous anger takes you over. I wish he was here. He’d have taken you up there like a shot.”

Barbara moved over to her mother and gave her a hug, kissing the crown of her head.

“Yes, I remember. So, we’ll go? After lunch?”

“Yes, my dear, we’ll go and if they throw us out, the British army’ll have two angry Quaker women to deal with ... Is that the time? Mr Strangeways’ll be here in fifteen minutes and you’d better be note perfect.”

“Yes, Mother. Thank you Mother. I’ll do an extra hour’s practice. You’ll see. It’ll be fine.” Barbara ran jubilantly into the sitting room and began pounding out scales and arpeggios with startling vigour. At last she could do something in the world. At last she could live!”

Saturday 18th May

Three weeks later Barbara, accompanied by two slightly older ladies, alighted from a tram at the gates of Royd's Hall and walked up the drive. It was her second visit. The first had been just for an introductory tour of the hospital. This was for real. The matron had been welcoming, but firm about standards and behaviour. They were not there to fraternize with the soldiers. They mounted the steps, hung their coats in the porters' office as instructed and reported to the senior sister's office on the opposite side of the vestibule.

A very functional desk half filled the room, seemingly too big for the two manila files and a telephone, sitting on opposite corners. Three wooden chairs sat neatly under a window. The three women eventually sat down and waited. The telephone produced a few desultory rings and then gave up in unbelief that the hospital could be empty. An efficient looking officer stomped his way past, stopped and asked if they had seen 'Sister.' They shook their heads and he disappeared, rapping his right hand riding-boot with a stick.

"Something must be up," whispered Barbara to the other two.

"That, or they've all gone 'ome," replied Dorothy Blenkinsop, an angular young woman with freckles.

Barbara was just about to suggest that they should go and explore, when a stentorian voice made her jump to her feet.

"The volunteer auxiliaries, I presume. I thought you were due at two."

"Sorry, Miss, the tram were late, ventured Dorothy."

The Senior Sister scanned the three miscreants. "Mmm, now, you call me Ma'am and I don't accept excuses. Come! And by the way, you can drop that dreadful vernacular. We speak the King's English in this hospital."

With that, she strode off down a wood panelled corridor to their left, with Barbara and her friends scuttling behind her, trying desperately to staunch their giggles.

They soon stopped at a frosted glass door and Barbara's companions were ordered to remove their boots, enter as silently as possible and report to the sister. Barbara continued to follow the senior sister along the twisting corridor, mounted a narrow back staircase to the second floor and stopped outside double oak doors.

"Now young lady, I want you in here. We've had a coach load of men straight off the ship at Hull this morning. Some are in a bad way, so you better have a strong

stomach. The worst are in here. The others are down stairs with your friends. Just do as you're told. Don't ask any questions and tell the nurses if you need a breather."

As they entered the smell of blood, urine and carbolic hit her full in the face. Barbara saw nothing of the richly decorated ceiling or ornate fireplace as the smell caught her throat and she wretched, her eyes filling with tears.

"Don't worry dear, it'll pass," said a kindly voice. She felt a hand guiding her forward and was made to sit on a hard chair. She fumbled for her handkerchief, wiped her eyes and blew her nose. "I'm sorry," she managed to stammer, "you must think I'm very silly."

"Don't worry dear, we're all like this at first. War isn't pretty or heroic here."

Barbara looked up at the nurse in her long, light blue belted uniform, high, white collar and box-like cap. She felt like they were friends already.

"Nurse, what's happening about Corporal Macalister's dressing? Why hasn't it been changed?"

"I'm sorry, Sister, but we needed some more help. It's stuck to the wound. Now you've brought Miss ...

"Firth."

"Miss Firth. I'm sure we will manage quite well, with such a capable looking young lady."

Barbara found herself warming to her new friend even more, especially as she was sure she did not look at all capable.

"In that case I shall go and see Captain Jefferies about the operating schedule. I must commend you, Nurse Jacobs, everything seems ship shape and Bristol fashion. Well done, considering."

"Thank you Ma'am. We're doing our best."

The Senior Sister nodded slightly, and strode from the room.

"Now Miss Firth, we've got a young man who's got a real mess on his side. It's going septic, but he won't let us touch it. We need three to do the job. Do you think you're up to it?"

Barbara was unsure if she was, but she smiled tentatively. "I came here to help, so if you tell me what to do, I'll do it."

"That's the spirit. You'll make a nurse yet. The poor man's over here."

They went behind a couple of screens, at the other end of the room, and found the corporal bathed in sweat. Another nurse was gently sponging him with cool water.

“Nurse Greenway, this is Miss Firth. She’s a volunteer. It’s her first day.”

Barbara offered her hand and Nurse Greenway took it hesitantly. “Thank you for coming. As you see, we’re very short. I don’t know what the army expects.”

“It’s a privilege to help.” Barbara paused and looked up firmly at the older women. “I don’t agree with the war, but I wanted to help the men.” She had decided she must make her attitude clear from the first.

Nurse Jacobs smiled. “Are you a Quaker?”

“Yes.”

“So am I. I knew there was something. Nurse Greenway’s a Baptist. We sometimes study the Word together before we come on. You’re welcome to join us.”

“Thank you. That’s very kind.”

A low moan issued from the bed.

“Come, we must deal with this poor man,” said Nurse Greenway, turning to the terrified figure in the bed. “David, we’ve got to change you dressing. If we don’t clean it up, it’ll kill you. Will you let us do it?”

David looked into the faces of the three women and slowly nodded his head.

“Now, hold onto the bedstead behind your head as tight as you can. Don’t let go. Nurse, you hold his shoulders. Miss Firth, you take the legs. I’ll tell you when I’m going to remove the dressing.”

Everyone took up their positions and waited. “Now.” Nurse Greenway peeled away the bloody cloth and David let out a hideous cry bending the tubular steel. It was all they could do to hold him down. Eventually, the gaping wound was cleaned and a new dressing applied. David relaxed and descended into gentle moans. Nurse Greenway put her hand on his forehead and mouthed a short prayer, before going to the bedside of another patient.

Nurse Jacobs led Barbara back to the other end of the ward, sat her down and gave her a drink of water. “Are you All right?”

“Yes, I’ll be fine. You’re marvellous.”

“Not really. Cynthia’s the best. All the men adore her. She’s their Florence Nightingale.”

The rest of the afternoon was easy compared with changing David’s dressing. She bathed some of the patients, gave them drinks and helped some to eat a little. None of them were really well enough to talk much, except for one man who she thought might be in his mid twenties and lay in the bed next to Corporal Macalister. His right

arm was bandaged to his torso and he explained that it was pretty smashed up. "The doctor says it's goin' green or some'at and they're goin' to cut it off. It's my right arm and I won't be able to work no more. I'll be for t' poor 'ouse after t'war. I'll be no bloody use to no-body."

"I think they mean 'gangrene'. We learned about it in science. If you get it, you probably die ... Sorry, I shouldn't have said that. It's too cruel."

"No, no, Miss. I know you mean it kindly. You've got lovely eyes."

Barbara blushed. "Thank you." She was too embarrassed to say anything more, so just gave him a drink. Then she remembered Nurse Greenway and said a short prayer.

"Sorry, Mr ...?"

"Fieldhead ... Albert Fieldhead."

"I'm not very good at this. It's my first time."

"Miss Firth." She looked up and saw the Senior Sister at the door.

"Sorry, I'll have to go."

Albert smiled and touched her arm lightly with his free hand.

Barbara hurried away. The sister held the door open for her and they returned by circuitous route to the plain, front office, where her friends were waiting.

"Thank you for coming ladies. I understand you have been very useful. We'll see you next Saturday at two." She seemed a little more relaxed.

Thursday 27th May

Stephen sat watching Swan Lake for the third time. His introduction to Anna Pavlevna had had an astonishing effect on him. Her smile had captivated him and he would have been quite unable to forget her, even if he had wanted to. She had offered to meet him the next day and show him round the Russian Museum, opened fifteen years ago by Tsar Nicholas. Her gentle, lilting Russian, reminded him of his occasional encounters with Welsh and was so different from the harsh directness he often encountered. She also seemed to have time to listen to his own faltering responses. He had never expected it to happen, but he had to admit he was in love.

In a way he hated himself for it. He'd always been so much his own man, his own boss. Even in the army, he interpreted orders in his own way and his men loved him for it. No-one could really tell him what to do. Of course, he'd met and liked girls

before. He was regarded as a handsome catch, but so far had refused to be caught. Now, he was smitten and despite himself, he was enjoying it.

There she was: spinning and leaping, twisting and gliding in poetic motion, but there was more than the physical. He'd never thought about it before. Music and dance had belonged to other people; clever people. His attempts at anything artistic were nothing but fumbling travesties and going to concerts had left him cold. His heart soared with each leap and prickled as she tripped her pointed way across the stage. And it wasn't just her; the other dancers captivated his spirit too. They seemed enveloped in their own performances, yet not lost to the audience; willing every man and woman to glide with them into another world. Stephen wondered if everyone else felt the same. He had wanted to share his feelings with Simon, but once the Irishman had introduced Stephen to the ballerina, he had made his excuses and left, suggesting casually that Stephen might take Anna to a new restaurant near the Church on Spilled Blood. Her eyes had immediately sparkled at the thought. Stephen had helped her into her rich fur coat and gone out to commandeer a cab.

The girl had warmed to him so quickly. Despite his faltering Russian and her minimal English, conversation flowed easily and they laughed and joked over a delicious meal. Not even the bill seemed to worry him. His colonel's salary would suffice.

Tonight, Stephen had booked a table at an exclusive restaurant on Vasilevsky Island. They entered and allowed their coats to be lifted from their shoulders and were taken to a table overlooking the Malaya Neva. Anna seemed more serious than before.

"Colonel Firth, tell me about your country. I would love to visit it. Is it like Russia? Britain must be very big to be so powerful in the world."

"Please, call me Stephan."

"But, it sounds so short, so empty. You must have a patronymic. Who is your father?"

"My father died last year in an accident, but his name was Wilfred."

"Mm, Stephan Wilfredovich. That will do. Now, tell me about England."

"Well, it's a very small country, actually, but because of its powerful navy, it's got a big empire."

"And who is the Tsar of this empire. He must be a very powerful man."

“We have no Tsar. There is a King, but he has no real power. We have a parliament, like the Duma, but it’s been around for a long time, so it’s got a lot of power and all the members of the government have to be Members of Parliament.”

“And your King doesn’t mind?”

“No, he can’t change things.”

“This sounds very strange to Russian ears.”

“But now it’s like that in Russia. Kerensky is the new Prime Minister, chosen by the Duma. By the time the Tsarevich is grown up, the Duma will be governing the country as a democracy.”

“I don’t think so. Russia will always want a strong Tsar: it is our nature. But that is enough of politics. It bores me. What does your family do? Was your father a soldier, maybe a general?”

“No, no, nothing so grand. My family owns a factory.”

“You mean like Putilov?”

“No, not big like Putilov, just a small family firm. We make woollen cloth.”

“And you make much money?”

“Enough, but we’re not very rich, though some would say we’re too rich. Marx and Lenin would give it all away to the people, I suppose.”

“Oh, Stephan, don’t mention those terrible people. The Bolsheviks will ruin Russia if they ever get power.” She took Stephen’s hand gently in hers and looked out of the window. “Oh look at the Neva. Isn’t it magical? Oh, my friend, the summer will soon be coming and the long white nights, when the sun hardly sets. Then we can sail down the Neva and I will show you the real St. Petersburg. Her magic will whisk you away to another world, like you say my dancing does. Then you will fall in love with Russia and never want to return to little England. Oh, I am so happy we’ve met. You are so different from Russian men. I feel so safe with you.

Stephen glowed as he took her other hand. “It’s strange, but I am beginning to feel so at home here. It’s almost like I was meant for Russia. I can feel the magic already. I don’t know what’s happened, but you’ve awakened something in me that I think I’ve been trying to ignore all my life.”

However, Colonel Firth had little time for Russian magic over the next few months, as he was drawn increasingly into the machinations of politics and diplomacy. With Kerensky as Prime Minister of a new government, he had become a Special

British Military Attaché, increasingly responsible for negotiating military support to the Russian government. By the end of July, he had made several visits to the Prussian Front.

The arrival of the Japanese had created quite a stir. The compact Asiatic figures, emanating dignity and control contrasted so totally with the stout, full bodied Russians who filled every space they occupied with hearty emotion or resigned fatalism. The Japanese, on the other hand, shunned attention until the situation demanded they show their presence. Despite this, the columns of disciplined soldiers, marching through the streets of Moscow were impossible to ignore. There was some considerable suspicion at first. Were these not our enemies a decade ago? How can we trust them? Why have they come to our aid? Also of interest was the fact that they could often be seen reading books or writing letters, something that the rank and file Russian soldier was rarely able to do. As a result a lively debate arose amongst the informed intelligentsia as to the roots of Japanese modernisation and the question as to whether Russia had anything to learn from her new Asiatic friend.

What was not in doubt as the summer blossomed, was the adequacy of the Japanese fighting machine. The rain and early thaw might have saved Russia in the spring, but as the ground hardened with the onset of warm, dry weather, the German industrial advantage began to tell even against Russia's numerical strength and improved organisation and equipment. The deployment of the Japanese north and south of Bishofs Dorf, at Grand Duke Nicholae's suggestion, had been eagerly embraced by the staffs of both the first and second armies. No-longer would they be embarrassed in the field by the fruits of their generals' bitter quarrel. Despite their own inexperience with combating tanks, the Japanese proved effective at the rapid deployment of light field artillery to disable the new weapon. As a result the German advance had come to a halt by the end of July, for fear of encirclement by the Japanese.

Königsberg, on the other hand, was cut off. Rennenkampf had been unable to maintain contact with the British left flank and the immanent fall of the city to German attack had been trumpeted in the German press for several weeks. Yet, in fact, strong fortifications and regular supplies by sea had enabled the British to hold out and to use their artillery to harry the German rear in their attack on Rennenkampf. Due in part to the refusal of the French navy to surrender to the Germans, the latter's Grand Fleet was

still largely imprisoned in Wilhelmshaven and dared not challenge the Franco-British mastery of the seas.

Tuesday 8th September

Bethman-Hollweg enters Kaiser Wilhelm's private drawing room in Berlin. He bows and waits as the Kaiser, dressed as usual in a field marshal's uniform stares out of the window.

Kaiser Wilhelm: Do you like the autumn, Herr Chancellor?

Bethman-Holweg: Well enough Sire, but personally, I prefer the spring; a time of promise.

Kaiser Wilhelm: And a herald of disappointment, would you not agree?

Bethman-Holweg: On occasion, Sire, but sometimes of great success.

Kaiser Wilhelm: I think you know to what I refer. I was promised a rapid victory in the west and then success in the east, which would provide expanded living space for people and economy; a necessary war for the sake of German prosperity.

Bethman-Holweg: Your Majesty must appreciate that circumstances have changed. We could not predict that the British would offer such direct assistance to the Russians, or that Nicholas would be killed and open the way for the modernisation of Russia, still less that Japan would support her erstwhile enemy, nor that Italy would be inveigled by the British to attack Austria.

Kaiser Wilhelm: Excuses! We have the finest army in the world, but we've nearly lost the heart of my patrimony and the price of wheat is soaring

out of control. What I don't see is why, if Prussia can no-longer feed us, we do not commandeer the French harvest? Have we not two armies stationed there?

Bethman-Holweg: We do indeed, Sire, but to say we control the life of the country would be an over statement. We have taken Paris, but the French are stubborn. They refuse to sell us their grain and when we demand it, they burn it, before we can take it. We have taken over coal mines and steel mills, and then have found our efforts to run these concerns sabotaged at every turn.

Kaiser Wilhelm: Then if there are underground saboteurs, they must be shot and examples made of them. Bring the country to heel man. Teach the Franks a lesson they will never forget.

Bethman-Holweg: It is not so easy as that Sire. One group gives in to our demands in one area and then problems arise elsewhere. Our troops are tied up all over the country. It is as if some invisible hand is directing it all, but our intelligence services are unable to find who, if anyone, is co-ordinating them.

Kaiser Wilhelm: So, what do you propose, Chancellor?

Bethman-Holweg: Peace, Your Majesty.

Kaiser Wilhelm: On what basis? We will give up no land. The Empire is inviolate. If we formed another army and launched an offensive against the Polish frontier, as I always wanted, we could come round the back of Samsonov's army and turn the tables on them all. Then the Japanese and that renegade, von Rennenkampf will be gone and we can deal with the insufferable English. My cousin George has a lot to answer for.

Bethman-Holweg: That is of course a proposal that the Army Chiefs of Staff will consider, if Your Majesty wishes to make a formal approach through the Ministry of War, but Your Majesty must be aware that the 1915 armaments development and production programme has already been financed by the issuing of two sets of war bonds and further war expenditure will involve borrowing at a high price. The Reich Mark is under severe pressure on the markets. If the Americans were not suffering such turmoil at home, I dare say the situation would be dire. Added to all this, as you know, Sire, we are already supporting over a million refugees in and around Berlin.

Kaiser Wilhelm: Well, on what basis can we begin negotiations? We must come to the table as victors and show we are willing to fight on.

Bethman-Holweg: The British have proposed a ten point plan, based on 1914 frontiers, but we will have to pay reparations to Britain and Russia and make an early withdrawal from France. Yet it would be cheaper than continuing a war which will probably leave us in the same position.

Kaiser Wilhelm: I don't like this defeatist talk, Chancellor. It is not German.

Bethman-Holweg: It is not defeat, Sire. Your vision of a greater Germany lives on. Austria-Hungary is crumbling from within, and as she does, her German minorities, including the Austrians, will crave to join an enlarged empire. You could yet be a greater emperor than your grandfather.

The Kaiser returns his gaze to the palace courtyard as his chancellor runs a finger round his increasingly tight collar.

Kaiser Wilhelm: Then, go to it, Chancellor, but I will accept nothing that leaves Germany weakened, nothing, you hear, nothing!

Bethman-Holweg: And Your Majesty will not be asked to sign anything that is not in the best interests of Germany. Thank you, Sire and please give my best regards to Her Majesty the Empress and the princes and princesses.

Bethman-Hollweg rises, bows stiffly and exits the room, knowing that his time as the Kaiser's first minister would soon be at an end.

Friday 29th October

Barbara Firth tore up the drive of Thornhill House, pulling her school hat down over her face against the driving October rain, threw the front door open and dropped her school satchel unceremoniously in the hall.

“Mother, Mrs Benholmly, Becky, anyone ... have you heard the news?”

Finding no-one in any of the ground floor rooms, she dived down to the kitchen and met their house keeper on the stairs. “Oh, Mrs Benholmly, have you heard? The armistice is signed. It's peace at midnight.” The old lady crossed herself. “Oh, praise God! Well I never, they kept that to ‘emselves didn’t they. Nowt to speak of about t’war in t’papers for days and then this. Oh, I’m right glad. I really am. D’you think you mother’ll mind if I go off a bit early tonight, our Becky’ll be so ‘appy. She don’t half fret over young Willy.”

From upstairs, they heard the heavy sound of the front door closing.

“Barbara is that you?”

“Yes, Mother, I’m here with Mrs Benholmly, in the Kitchen.”

She raced up the stairs, with Mrs Benholmly following heavily at her heels, dusting flour from her apron.

“Have you heard, Mother, they’ve ...

“Yes, I have dear. It’s marvellous news. There was a troop train at Doncaster. The men were all over the place. Their officers had quite a time getting them to calm down. One man wanted to waltz me up and down the platform. It was all quite amusing, though I don’t think the young captain quite agreed. I was worried there might be some shooting, but they calmed down and got back in their train after a good bit of carousing.”

“So, that’s why you’re late.”

“Yes, quite a journey. Then we were stopped by wet leaves on the line and when I got to Huddersfield I had to wait half an hour for a cab. The weather I suppose.”

“Mrs Benhomly, could you bring us some tea and cake in the sitting room. And, by the way, I’m very happy for Willy. You must be relieved.”

“Yes, Ma’am. It’s a weight off my mind. I only ‘ope he’s been all right these last couple of weeks since we ‘eard from ‘im. I’ll bring some tea right up. T’kettle’s boiled.”

Helen Firth hung up her heavy winter coat and surveyed the dripping hem of her long dress.

“I’d better change, and I think you had too,” she said, surveying her bedraggled daughter.

Twenty minutes later, Mother and daughter sat opposite each other, tea and fruitcake between them, in front of a newly invigorated fire.

“I’m so happy, Mother. We should give the workers a day of paid holiday to celebrate and we could have a party at the mill. Oh, I don’t think I’ve ever been so excited.”

“It is indeed marvellous news, dear, but can we talk about it later? I’ve been travelling since nine this morning and there’s something else I have to talk about.” Her hand was trembling as she sipped her tea. “Cut me a piece of cake, would you dear?”

Barbara frowned as she cut her mother a generous slice, which she accepted without protest. “Are you, all right? Maybe you should go to bed and I’ll bring your dinner up.”

Helen smiled. “You’re a good girl. I’ll be fine. This tea’s already working its magic. I’ve got to talk to you now, or I’ll fret all night.”

“Whatever’s the matter, Mother. I thought you’d come back from Aunt May’s all rested and relaxed. What’s happened?”

“It’s a long story my dear, which started before you were born. I’m afraid I was a little economical with the truth the other day ... Yes, I’m sorry. I know what I always say, but I needed to be certain about something before I talked to you about it. What I’m going to say is strictly private. Even Stephen and Stuart don’t know. I don’t want a scandal, at least not yet.”

Helen sipped her tea again and took a bite of cake. Barbara followed suit. She was lost for words. She felt very privileged, but also had a sense of foreboding.

"I never imagined telling you this, so it's very difficult." She took a deep breath and straightened her back. "You'll remember I told you I was once very unhappy. Well, before I married your father, a man took advantage of me and I had a baby out of wedlock ... I had to give him away and never talk about it. Only your father and my family knew."

"But, that's terrible, Mother, it wasn't your fault. You shouldn't feel ashamed." Barbara rushed and knelt in front of her mother, taking her hands.

"You don't understand, people always blame the woman, especially then."

"How did you cope?"

"I made them give me the child, just after it was born and we fell asleep together. I felt so happy, but when I woke up, he was gone. I cried and cried, but it was no good. They told me it was better that way. After a few days, my parents came to the nursing home and took me away and soon after that I married your father."

Helen stopped to dab her eyes before continuing.

"The nursing home was near Nottingham and I remember sitting looking out of the window wondering about my boy. Every morning I'd see the milk being delivered from a wagon with a sign on the side which said 'Fieldhead Farm'. It was a big sign and I never forgot it; it was bright and cheery and I felt so miserable."

Barbara looked up sharply. "Why are you telling me this now, Mother?"

"It's because of one of those young men you brought home from the hospital last week, the one you said looked so much like Stuart, but a bit older."

A heavy silence hung between them.

"No, Mother, you can't. It's a coincidence."

"I went to see Aunt May to try and find out what happened to my son. She took me to the nursing home where I gave birth. They didn't want to tell me anything, but I threatened them with a court order and the matron reluctantly opened their books. My son was named Albert. Of course it was a common enough name in 1887, the year of the Golden Jubilee. There were lots of Alberts in that year in honour of the Queen's beloved husband. There was no surname, because of course the father had disappeared. Then I asked what happened to the boy and was told he was adopted by a family called Cradock who ran 'Fieldhead farm.'

"Mother! No! I won't believe it. You can't control my life and who I love. It's not fair." Now Barbara was on her feet, glaring down at her mother.

“I went to see the Cradocks. They still do the same milk round. I hoped I would find my son there, but they said he’d run away when he was sixteen. I asked if they had called him Cradock. They said, no. They had named him after the farm; ‘Fieldhead’. I’m afraid it’s true. That young man is your half brother. I could see you were sweet on him and I wanted to go and find out if my suspicions were correct before I said anything. I should be happy. I’ve found my son, after all these years, but I’m sorry for you my dear. I’ve broken your heart.”

Barbara sagged into the chair by the fire and buried her face in her handkerchief. She couldn’t deny the truth of what her mother was saying any longer, but it was all too cruel. She wanted to be happy that her mother could be with her long lost son, but how could she? The love between her and this wounded soldier, ten years older than herself, had grown slowly, but delicately into something that was so delicious that she could not think of life without him. She stood up and announced, “I’m going to bed, Mother. We can talk tomorrow. I need to think.” Helen Firth rose and went towards her daughter, but was too late. The door stood open as she listened to her receding tread on the creaking stairs. She poured another cup of tea and stared into the fire, tears gently coursing down her cheeks.

Saturday 30th October

Helen sat in the breakfast room in her usual chair, gently running her hands back and forwards along the smooth arms, as was her habit, when she had a lot on her mind. The morning paper lay unread and a coffee pot sat on the sideboard. Mrs Benholmly always knew something was up if coffee was ordered. She knocked at the door and asked if she should clear. Mrs Firth told her to wait while she slipped upstairs to see Barbara.

“Very well, Ma’am. I’m be in the kitchen, when you want me.”

Helen knocked lightly on her daughter’s bedroom door. There was no answer. She tried again, louder this time. Still, all she heard was rain beating against the landing window. Eventually, she pushed open the door, calling softly, “Barbara, it’s nearly half past nine. You can’t ...” Despite the fact that the curtains remained drawn, she could see that the bed was made and there was no sign of her daughter. She snapped on the light and strode over to the window to draw back the curtains. On the bedside table lay a small white envelope. Helen steadied the vase of flowers the curtain had nearly sent

crashing to the floor and took the envelope - the stupid girl, it'll serve her right if she gets into trouble. She sat down by the vacant fireplace and immediately regretted the thought, praying for Barbara's safe keeping. Oh how she missed Wilfred. She pressed the envelope between her trembling palms in an attitude of prayer before carefully pulling back the flap.

Dear Mother

You know I love you very much, but I can't stay any longer in this claustrophobic atmosphere. I must get away and explore the world. There is so much of Stephen in me. I need to be with Albert and I cannot bear the thought of living without his love. We'll go to a place where no-one knows us and can live as we wish.

Your ever loving daughter.

Barbara

Mrs Firth crushed the letter and envelope into a ball, threw them into the non-existent fire and stalked from the room.

"Mrs Benholmly! Mrs Benholmly!" she called, as she descended the stairs.

The older woman came panting up the stairs from the kitchen and into the hall.

"Where's Tom?"

"I do believe he's in the greenhouse, Ma'am."

"Will you please ask him to harness Grace to the trap and drive me to Royd's Hall at once."

"Yes, Ma'am, as soon as I can find him."

Mrs Firth donned her winter overcoat, pinned a stout felt hat in place, laced up a pair of ankle boots, picked out a sturdy umbrella and sat down to wait on the hall settle.

"You're getting fair soaked Ma'am," said Tom as they passed the Bay Horse pub and turned into Westbourne Road. "We should've brought the carriage, then you could've been dry."

"No time Tom, speed is of the essence."

"Then I could have driven the master's car, God rest 'is soul."

"I'm not quite ready for that. Grace, we can depend on, and we won't melt."

At last they were at the foot of the steps, below the Hall's grand entrance. Mrs Firth clambered down from the trap, aided by the redoubtable Tom who held the umbrella over them, as he guided her to the entrance. The door was open and they took a thankful step inside. Tom doffed his now sodden cap, as the stately figure of the Senior Staff Nurse advanced towards them.

"Mrs Firth, what brings you out in such weather? I thought you were not bringing another group of your ladies up to see us until the end of the month."

"Quite so! It is on another matter that I am venturing to disturb you. I need to see one of your patients, a certain Albert Fieldhead. I believe he lost an arm defending Königsberg."

"Oh, yes, I know the one. Quiet young man, very personable. Something about him that puts him above his station. Good character. That's why we let him stay on."

"What do you mean, Sister?"

"Some of the disabled ones have been settled in a row of old estate cottages. Albert and the others had no-where to go when they received their discharge papers. It appears they are orphans. Matron prevailed on the army to let them work here in the hospital, just while they find some more settled employment. I believe a couple of local churches are helping them. Your daughter seemed rather taken with Albert, but expect you knew about that. We don't encourage such relationships, but she doesn't seem the kind to get herself into any trouble and the Fieldhead boy is so gentle."

"I do need to see him rather urgently, so if you would be so good as to tell me where I can find him, it would be much appreciated."

"It's one of the first cottages on Oaks Road South, which one, I don't actually know. You'll have to ask. Your man will know where it is."

A bell tinkled distantly from an upper floor.

"Sorry, duty calls. I trust all is well."

The Senior Staff Nurse nodded stiffly, turned, lifted her heavy blue skirt, launching herself up the graciously curving stairs.

Mrs Firth and her gardener glanced down at the growing puddles collecting at their feet on the parquet floor.

"Talk about stiff! That one takes the biscuit," whispered Mrs Firth, "still, we now know where to find them, if they haven't flown the nest. Come on Tom, we'll have to brave the weather again." The long suffering Yorkshire man held the door open as

they emerged to find that the rain had reduced itself to a fine drizzle and the wind had dropped.

Grace looked at them sorrowfully as they descended the steps.

“You know the place?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Twenty minutes later, they were outside a line of low cottages. The rain had stopped and patches of blue sky were just visible. Mrs Firth sat perched on the trap, while Tom went to make enquiries. A couple of working men greeted her politely as they passed, touching the peaks of their caps.

The cart’s springs creaked as Tom climbed aboard.

“Not ‘ere Ma’am. They be gone.”

Helen pressed her lips together in stern determination.

“Well, they’ll have to be found. Did they tell you anything else?”

“Maybe. Seems t’young Miss came this morning ... early, with a carpet bag. She stayed a while. T’lads I spoke to said they heard raised voices. They said they’d never known ‘em argue afore. Then they left about eight.”

“Did they say where they were going? Did Albert take anything?”

“I don’t know Ma’am.”

“Right! Well if they’ve gone away, they must have gone to the station first. I’m sorry, Tom, do you mind? I know it’s your half day today.”

“No, Ma’am. We must find the young Miss before anything ‘appens to ‘er.”

Half an hour later Grace was brought to a halt at the steps of Huddersfield’s princely railway station.

“If you don’t mind Ma’am, I’ll just be gettin’ some feed for the ‘orse, while you go in and see what you can find out.” Mrs Firth clambered down and disappeared up the steps between the Doric columns while Tom and Grace went in search of some oats.

She surveyed the ticket hall and advanced towards a tubby man in a railway uniform standing by the door to the platforms.

“Excuse me, I’m looking for a couple of young people: a girl of seventeen and a man about ten years older. They may have been here earlier this morning, oh and the man has only one arm.”

“Is he in uniform, Ma’am?”

“Maybe, but I don’t think so. He has already received his discharge papers.”

“Aye, well I might ‘ave seen ‘em Ma’am. There were a couple on platform one, when I came on. I thought it were rather strange. They sat there a long time, talkin’. Several trains came and went, but they were still there way past ten, when I went to see about a problem with t’down line signal. When I came back they were gone, so I reckoned they must ‘ave caught t’Sheffield train as it was the only one going from number one at that time. She were well dressed, but ‘e just had an army great coat, like they give to ordinary soldiers like, and a scarf. Looked a bit of a scruff. I thought it were strange. And now you mention it I think he did ‘ave just the one arm.”

“Thank you, you’ve been very helpful.” Mrs Firth returned to the station entrance and looked across at the fountain playing dismally in St. George’s Square. Tom was nowhere to be seen. Why does my family have to be so wilful?

Just then, Grace came clip-clopping gently round the corner onto the station forecourt, as a few pale rays of sun sneaked their way over the roof of Lion Chambers on the opposite side of the road. Mrs Firth made her way down the still wet steps and Tom dismounted.

“Any luck Ma’am?”

“Yes, one of the ticket inspectors thinks he saw them, but they’ve probably taken a train to Sheffield, but why there, I don’t know.”

“Well, if I may make so bold, I think thee needs a good cup a tea. We can go into t’ station café, while Grace ‘as ‘er oats. She’s none too young and she’ll be needing ‘em to get back up ‘ome.”

Mrs Firth’s face fell. “Oh dear, I’m afraid we can’t. I forgot to bring my purse. I was in such a rush.”

“Never mind Ma’am, I reckon I’ve got a few pennies for a cuppa.”

Not a few heads turned in surprise at the sight of the retired cabby having tea and biscuits with his well dressed lady companion. No doubt the tongues of Huddersfield polite society were kept busy for several days.

It was past lunch time, when they arrived back at Thornhill House. Helen hung up her hat, coat and umbrella in the hall and called for Mrs Benholmly. Her voice seemed to disappear into a void. She waited, sighed heavily and made for the sitting room.

As she entered the room, the first thing she saw was an army great coat hanging over the settee framing back of Stuart’s head.

“What for heaven’s sake are you ...”

Then the head turned, revealing the vacant shoulder. Barbara and Albert leapt to their feet just catching their mother as she fell, half dragging her and half carrying her to the settee.

“You stay with y’ mum. I’ll get ‘er some strong, sweet tea ... Where’s the kitchen?”

“Across the hall, down the stairs.”

By the time Albert returned, struggling under the weight of a well-laden tray, Mrs Firth was waking up.

“Do you want me to send for the doctor, Mother.”

“No, dear. I think I just fainted. Nothing to worry about, but I thought ... and is Stuart here and where’s Albert.”

“You’re just a bit mixed up Mother and it’s all my fault – I’m sorry.” Barbara thrust a cup of tea into her mother’s hands. “Have a biscuit and some tea and then we can all talk.”

Albert had set the tray down on the coffee table by the fire and now sat on a chair at the side of the room.

“Come over and sit by the fire, Bert. You’re part of the family, aren’t you?” Barbara went over and led him by the hand to the matching wing chair opposite hers. He reminded her of a lost puppy dog, unfamiliar with its new surroundings.

Helen finished her tea and biscuit and placed her cup on a side table. She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came. She tried again. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me. I’ve never fainted before, except when ...” She looked up at Albert.

“Neither has your daughter ever run away with a complete stranger before. I’m sorry mother, I really am. I should have told you about Albert and me before, and then maybe things wouldn’t have happened like this. I’m so sorry ... but I still love him.” Tears squeezed themselves out of the corner of each eye. “Oh, I did so much crying since last night, I didn’t think I had any tears left.”

“Dear, I forgive you, not that there’s much to forgive. Your actions were quite understandable. I should have thought more carefully; I knew you were fond of each other. I just didn’t know it had gone so far.”

Albert rose. "Well, now I've brought your daughter home, I best be getting off. The lads'll be wondering what's become o' me. We've agreed we're just friends, haven't we, Barbara? And it'll go no further."

Barbara looked away, but nodded in agreement.

"You don't think I'm just going to let you get away like that do you, Albert Fieldhead or whatever they called you, you're my long lost son. Sit yourself down. I haven't seen you for twenty-seven long years and now you're not going to just walk out of my life, you daft lummock!"

"But you gave me away. I always thought you didn't want me, that I wasn't good enough or something or I was a mistake. Is it true what Barbara told me, that you were raped?"

"Yes, it is, your father was an army officer who forced himself on me at a ball. My parents enquired as to his identity, but no-one seemed inclined to point the figure and it was only my word against his.

"The bastard!"

"Quite! But that doesn't mean I loved you any the less, but everyone said I couldn't keep you. It wasn't the done thing. It's hardly easy even now. So, they just took you, while I slept. You made me so happy when you were born and when I woke and you were gone, I wanted to die. I wouldn't eat at first, but then mother came and, as it were, loved me back to life."

"But 'ow could you love me? I were a child o' sin, a devil's babe."

"Who told you that?"

"The Cradocks. Every time I did something wrong, they reminded me. They're the first words I ever remember and it's like I 'eard 'em every day. Then when they beat me they'd say it over and over. I took it until I were about fourteen, then one night I broke out of the outhouse where they kept me and I ran away. I didn't know what I were gonna do, but I 'ad to get away."

Helen shook her head slowly from side to side. "I've heard of such evil people, but I'd never thought my own flesh and blood would suffer at their hands. I hope you'll learn one day that everyone born into this world is a child of God, a child of love and you were born into loving arms. Come here, my boy."

They rose together and met in the middle of the room. Mrs Firth wrapped her arms around Albert, pressing her cheek to his. He stood stiffly, his one arm dangling at

his side. He didn't seem to know what to do. She let go of him and led him to the settee, where she sat facing him and held his hand. "Do you believe in God?"

"I don't know. 'es never done nowt for me has 'e?"

"Well, I never stopped praying for you. Every day you were in my prayers and now you've come back home. Maybe he has done something for you and for me. It's up to you to make up your own mind, but I just want you to know I love you and God loves you and it's for you to decide what you want to do with that love."

"I don't know Ma'am. It's a lot to take in."

"You take your time with it all, dear. Now it's time we had some lunch. You will stay, won't you Albert? Barbara, go and tell Mrs Benholmly to lay something simple in the breakfast room; cold meats, bread and soup, that sort of thing and some stewed apple from the cellar. Oh and show Albert where to hang his coat and wash his hands.

Saturday 4th December

Hundreds of miles away, in Imperial Russia another member of the Firth family was also celebrating peace. He sat by the window in a private compartment of a special government train trundling past the inevitable stands of spruce and silver birch. Their mesmerising monotony had a soporific effect and he was soon asleep.

After five weeks of intense negotiations, the Treaty of Warsaw had been signed amidst pomp and circumstance. All parties declared themselves publicly to be satisfied with the outcome, even if privately there were mutterings about fighting another day. Only Austria had lost territory, but even their Archduke talked lightly of 'turning a new page'. There were murmurs behind his back that he would have to, if he expected to keep his throne, when he finally ascended it.

Kerensky and his ministers were jubilant. Russia needed peace. She demanded peace and they had delivered peace. The vodka rotated endlessly round the dining tables with toast after glorious toast. Stephen's powers of translation and interpreting were celebrated along with all the other glories of Russia. The train conductor opened the door to the compartment and asked the English colonel and his two Russian companions if they would like to take dinner in the dining car or in their compartment. The Russians chose the former and invited Stephen to join them, but he declined, fearing another interminable round of Vodka.

He enjoyed the roast pheasant in quiet contemplation, as his mind returned to St. Petersburg and the unalloyed pleasure of being with Anna again. When he was with her, he felt so relaxed. She was so open and free, so expressive, not only of her own feelings, but of his. He could speak Russian with her, better than anywhere else. Words he fumbled for elsewhere came so naturally with Anna. The first time they had made love, she had responded so fluidly to his advances and they had ended in such an impassioned erotic crescendo, that he had been in a state of suspended exuberance for the following three days. He had telegraphed ahead to let her know when he was returning and hoped that she might be at the station to meet him.

The following morning, as the Russian government delegation was still wending its weary way back to the capital, Anna Pavlevna stared moodily into a tall cup of black coffee. A tram clattered its way down Nevsky Prospekt and came to a halt a short distance past the café where she sat. Off jumped Simon Devlin, nearly slipping on the wet snow. Dressed in a fur coat, hat and leather gloves, he looked quite the young Russian industrialist. Anna saw him before he entered the café and shuddered

“You’re not having cold feet are you?” asked Simon as he tucked into a pastry.

“He’s so trusting and lovely. I hate myself for it. I nearly found myself speaking my English when he was leaving. He thinks I am making such good progress, that he has taught me all I know.”

“Have you fallen in love with him?”

“No, no, Simon. How could you think such a thing, my dear.”

“Well, no-one said the revolution would be easy. We all have to make sacrifices.”

“But to kill and maim all those men, when we are not ready to take power. Lenin is not even here.”

“When the peace comes, he will return and then the workers will rise. Anna, don’t you remember the message from the Central Committee? We are to create maximum disruption now. Otherwise when the soldiers come back from the war, there will be a return to normality. Kerensky is already the people’s hero. He will give just enough concessions to keep the workers and peasants quiet and it will be business as usual.”

“I know, I know, Simon. I know the revolution will be good for Russia, good for the people. We must be strong. I will do it. Don’t be angry with me. Just be patient.”

Simon smiled and blew her a kiss.

“Good. Now you remember the plan. I’ll give you the package tonight. The timer will be set for seven tomorrow evening, when the cabinet meeting will be in full swing. He will take you to the reception beforehand and then have you driven to the theatre afterwards. That way, there’ll be no connection with you.”

“Now, you know the cabinet room?”

“Yes, I’ve studied the plans of the palace and Stephen has shown me around. I know what I’m doing. Just before I’m due to leave, I say I need to go to the bathroom, so I go downstairs to the cloakroom under the cabinet room and leave the package on top of one of the toilet cistern in the last cubicle and connect the wires; red to red, blue to blue.

“Well done, my dear. Now, remember to put the package in your music case and insist on taking it into the palace. You want to keep it safe in the cloakroom, because you don’t trust the car.”

“Yes, I know. We’ve been through it a thousand times.” Anna deftly cut a piece off Simon’s pastry and popped it into her mouth.

“Hey, that’s mine!”

“We all have to make sacrifices for the revolution, you know, my dear.”

“I could have bought you one.”

“But I didn’t want a whole one. I’m still in the ballet, though you may have forgotten.”

“So you are. I’ve just been giving you breathing space. I didn’t want to come between you and lover boy. Is he joining you tonight?”

“No, he’s got some kind of meeting to go to and says he wants an early night before tomorrow. Oh, he’s so sweet.”

Simon gave her a stern look.

“But there’s nothing like my Irishman in bed.” She pushed back her chair, smiled, winked and was gone. Simon could only watch her mincing figure disappear through the double doors out onto the street. He waited for a few minutes, called the waiter, paid the bill and left. All was set for him to play his part in history’s dialectic. His time had come.

Friday 10th December

The next morning dawned bright and sunny, but as usual looks were deceptive. The Neva sent its habitual chill slicing through the rags of Petrograd's swollen army of beggars. Stephen sharpened his razor on the strop hanging from his wash stand and carefully excised the shaving soap from his neck and cheeks. His freshly pressed uniform sat on a stand at the foot of his bed. This was going to be a great day for Russia; the beginning of her new life, an opportunity to build a new, democratic future in peace. It would be five years before the Tsarevich came to the throne, five years to build consensus under a new constitution. He had come through the war unscathed. Now he would be free to resign his commission and build his own future. He would propose to Anna. She had already intimated she would accept and they could decide whether to live in Russia or go to England, where he would meet his mysterious half-brother, who Mother had so recently written about. The world seemed to have changed so much: mother with a bastard son!

He dressed and went down stairs, cap and briefcase in hand. Marionova was pouring tea as her husband tucked into an omelette.

"Ah, Colonel, so the great day has arrived. You will sit in the same room as Alexander Feodorovich Kerensky as he takes credit for your peace treaty."

"Hardly mine, Dmitri!"

"Now don't you tell me British behind the scenes diplomacy didn't have a big part to play in achieving peace? And I have my ears to the road as to who was behind a few little tricks on the way."

"I'm sure you have, but sometimes sources can be mistaken," he replied, blushing, as he helped himself to fried eggs, bacon and onions and let his hostess fill his cup, as she in turn gave her husband a dressing down in Russian. Stephen responded to her that he hadn't been at all offended by her husband's remarks as they were quite complementary. As Dmitri still insisted on speaking to their guest in English, such misunderstandings with his wife were far from uncommon.

"So, will you be taking your ballerina to the reception?"

"Yes, I thought it might be a little boring for her, but she was very keen to come. I think it could be a bit of a coup, the British colonel turning up with a beautiful and charming Russian first ballerina."

Dmitri translated for his wife, who frowned. "You be careful, Stephan, not all Russian women are what they seem."

Stephen was not impressed. He knew how much prejudice there was against dancers and artists in polite Russian society, but he decided to say nothing. It would be impolite. Mrs Postevsky had looked after him so well. The subject was politely changed and they discussed their plans for a weekend trip to Lake Ladoga.

Stephen left soon after breakfast to spend the morning at the British Embassy, where his colleagues were somewhat annoyed at his elevation as the principal Russo-British go between: understanding the culture was one thing, becoming a true Russophile was quite another. He needed to mend some bridges, but appeared to have smoothed things over by the end of luncheon and set off in the Embassy's Rolls-Royce to collect his partner for the celebratory pre-cabinet reception. They were due there at around four in the afternoon. He'd been offered a chauffeur, but had chosen to drive himself. Anna was waiting for him, in an ankle length cocktail dress and mink stole.

"Aren't you going to wear your coat? You'll be frozen!"

"Oh, but I want to make an entrance, with my intrepid British colonel."

"Oh, you are silly. You can leave it in the cloakroom downstairs."

"Oh, I suppose so, but I will keep the mink. It was a present from my mother."

"As you like."

She pulled on her coat and picked up an old leather bag, lying on the hall table.

"What do you want with that old thing?" said Stephen, becoming irritated.

"The conductor lent me his score for tonight's performance. I must return it and I will not have enough time to come back here. I'll leave it with my coat."

"Very well, but it looks a bit strange to be walking in with a thing like that. It is a high level occasion, you know. They might even wheel out the Tsarevich and Prince Lvov, the new regent."

"What happened to Grand Duke Nicholae?"

"Retired to his estates in the Ukraine. The word is he had a fallout with Kerensky over the constitution."

Stephen had to wipe snow from the windscreen of the Rolls when they got outside and Anna said she was pleased to have her coat. The snow crackled under their feet as they walked the short distance to the car. Once settled inside, Stephen pressed the self-starter and the machine quietly leapt into action.

He was full of excitement about the meeting. “You know, I think this will be the beginning of something really marvellous for Russia. It’s the best chance this country’s had since the liberation of the serfs. If only Alexander II had followed through, Russia would have been a modern democratic state by now, a world leader ...”

Anna sat trying to look attentive, but was lost in her own thoughts. What did this dreamy foreigner know about Russia and why should he care anyway? He had his own country, with its own empire. Russia had suffered too long under the Tsars and their land owners; the one feeding off the other in a wretched carnal orgy, sucking the blood from her people. Her own father had been sent to internal exile just for petitioning the Tsar.

“Are you all right, my dear?”

“Oh yes, sorry, just a bit nervous of meeting all those important people.”

“You’ll be fine. They’re not really frightening at all. You’ll sweep them off their feet, you’ll see.”

He turned to her and smiled.

“Look Stephan! Stop!”

The body of an old woman bounced off the front fender, up onto the bonnet and slithered to the ground as the car skidded to a halt. Stephen threw his door open and clambered out into the middle of the intersection. Traffic was continuing to move around them, apparently oblivious to the human tragedy unfolding before their eyes. A tram clanged past. Stephen pressed his fingers to the woman’s neck and located a pulse. He lifted her in his arms. She was as light as a feather. Her old threadbare coat felt damp and she smelt of urine.

“Open the back door ... quickly!”

“But where are you taking her? She’s just another vagrant. She’ll die in the winter anyway.”

“Open the door. We’ll take her to hospital.”

Stephen laid her on the back seat. “Now, get in and sit with her. Make sure she doesn’t roll onto the floor.”

Anna did as she was told and then looked around frantically as Stephen climbed back into the driver’s seat. “Where’s my bag?”

“I don’t know where your bloody bag is? It’s only a music score. We’ve got to save this woman’s life, for God’s sake. Where’s your humanity. I thought all you Russians were Christians: Holy Mother Russia and all that.”

Then she saw the handle of her bag; it had slipped under the front seat. She pulled it out as they lurched off. "Where are we going?"

"St. Mathaius Hospital on Tavrichesky Sad."

"But what about the reception? You must be there. We're expected."

"We've still time and what does it matter if we're late? We've got a life to save."

"But, what's the point. There're hundreds like her. They pick them up off the streets in the morning to dispose of them. You've seen them."

"Is she still unconscious?"

"I think so ... No, she's opening her eyes. She's saying something, but I can't make it out."

"Just keep her quiet. We won't be long."

They turned right; Liteynny Prospekt. It was snowing heavily. A tram was having trouble making progress; its wheels skidding on the wet rails. He turned into Ulitsa Zhukovskovo and immediately regretted it: the snow was deeper and the wheels began to skid. Turning the steering wheel to the left and right, he managed to get some traction and turned left at the next intersection. The road had been cleared earlier and ran down a slight gradient until they reached Ulitsa Kirochnaya, where they turned right and soon reached the hospital. Anna looked at her watch. It was already four.

Stephen dashed inside, returned almost straight away with two orderlies and a stretcher and they took the woman into the building, where he was told she would have to wait with the other destitute cases. Stephen looked the attendant in the eyes and exploded.

"I am a senior member of the British government delegation and I expect this woman to receive the best care that Russia can provide. If you do not do so, you will only show me, my government and the world that Russia has failed her people and is not worthy of our continued support. Now you do not want to do that do you?"

The poor man disappeared without a word, returning a few minutes later with a man in a white coat, sporting a stethoscope around his neck.

"I understand Your Excellency has a patient for me to see. Please bring her this way. Who is she?"

"I'm afraid, I don't know her name. She was knocked down in the street by a car."

“You know, this happens every day. We can’t treat them all. They have no money to pay.”

“I’ll pay for her care.”

The doctor untied the string holding the coat around the old lady and peeled back several layers of clothing and newspapers. There was a large bruise on her chest and she gasped with pain as he felt her.

“Probably some broken ribs and maybe internal bleeding. We’ll just have to keep her under observation.” He turned to her and asked her name, but she just continued to mumble incoherently. “I’ll admit her. I’m Dr Stollyepin. You are?”

“Colonel Stephen Firth, attached to the office of Prime Minister Kerensky.”

“Mmm, you do have good connections. You know, he won’t last. Once he lets the Bolsheviks back in, they’ll make mince meat of him.”

“Well, I hope not, but thank you for the warning and many thanks for treating this woman. I have business to attend to, but I’ll call by tomorrow.”

“It’s my pleasure, but I’m afraid it just means someone else won’t get seen. We do our best, but there are just too many to keep up with.”

Stephen looked back at the old woman. Her flesh was drawn tightly over her features and her deep eye sockets looked almost empty. He reached into his pocket and found his ever present icon of Christ and the Virgin Mary, pressed it into her hands and kissed her forehead. He clasped the doctor’s hand. “Thank you. I’ll be back tomorrow. Must dash. Important meeting.”

Stephen turned to see Anna standing with her back pressed to the wall, a handkerchief over her nose. “Come on dear, we can’t keep the Prime Minister waiting.” He took her hand and pulled her through the throng of spectators out into the hospital courtyard, where mounds of snow were already gathering around the Rolls. They got in. He pressed the self-starter and she began to purr. Then he descended and with vigorous sweeps of his big leather gauntlets he cleared the windows and then scraped the snow from behind the rear wheels. Once inside again, he turned on the heater and wipers and reversed out into the main road. There were few vehicles now and it was already dark. The gas street lights emerged as ghostly orbs at intervals out of the driving snow. They slowly crunched their way down to the Neva, where they found an army of hooded figures shovelling and scraping snow from the road. It was already after five when they arrived at the Winter Palace. Stephen pressed the car keys into the hand of a reluctant attendant and marched Anna through the outer court and into the

building. She was still clutching her bag, but hadn't said a word since they left the hospital. They descended to the cloakroom and shook off their wet things. Anna thrust her bag into a cupboard together with the wet mink stole and closed the door. Stephen retrieved his military cap from a small leather satchel, checked his appearance in a mirror and offered Anna his arm. She took it and smiled for the first time since they had left the apartment.

They followed the attendants' directions up the wide stairs, past imposing granite columns.

"Do I look acceptable?" asked Anna, as they reached the top of the stairs, "I'm just from peasant stock, you know."

"You are much more than acceptable, my dear. Forget your background. This is the new Russia."

The welcoming dignitaries had long disappeared from the entrance to the Hall of Peter the Great, but the attendant still announced them in resonant tones.

"Colonel Stephan Firth and Miss Anna Pavlevna Gorenova."

They glided together through the ornate rooms, sampling the wine and canapés as they admired the masterpieces staring at them from the walls and greeted a selection of officials and dignitaries. Stephen introduced Anna to the British Ambassador and his wife.

"Where've you been hiding my boy? Kerensky's been looking for you; seemed rather agitated. Better find him if I were you."

"Sorry, we had a spot of bother on the way, but it's all sorted out now."

"Well done. That's the spirit and I'd say you've certainly done well for yourself there," he said quietly, offering a nod towards Anna, while his wife engaged her in conversation. "She's a stunner."

They drifted on and eventually found Kerensky seated with Prince Lvov, the Tsarina and a boy of about ten or twelve.

Kerensky spotted him, rose, nodding to the Tsarina, and marched towards him.

"Colonel Firth! It is unlike you to be late. Whatever happened?"

"I do apologise, Prime Minister. We had a spot of unexpected business to deal with on the way"

"Well, I hope it was important. You don't keep a future Tsar waiting."

They approached the seated group and were introduced. The Tsarina offered her hand coldly, but made no effort at conversation.

“Tsarevich Alexei has a question for you, Stephan,” continued Kerensky.

“Oh yes, your Highness, I will try to answer it as best I can.” Stephen squatted down, so his head was slightly below the level of the boy’s.

“Does the King of England really have the biggest navy in the world?”

“Yes, I believe he does, but the navy belongs to the British people, not just the King.”

“Thank you. I hope to visit my uncle and cousins in England one day.”

“I’m sure you will, and we will make you very welcome.”

“Thank you, Colonel Firth,” offered the Tsarina, “Alexei is a clever boy for his age, don’t you think?”

“I’m sure he is, Your Majesty.”

“Will you stay on in Russia?”

“In many ways I hope so.”

The Tsarina nodded and looked away. The audience was obviously over. Stephen bowed, Anna curtsied and Kerensky took them to one side.

“Unfortunately, your late arrival makes it impossible for me to get to know your companion, I regret it my dear. May I just say that I am impressed with your performances. Another time perhaps. Now, we must convene the cabinet, or we will be here until well after midnight. We are in the cabinet room on the ground floor, as usual.”

“Yes. I will just make arrangements for Miss Gorenova to be taken to the theatre and will join you below.”

“It’s such a marvellous place. I’ve heard talk of it, but I never thought it was so grand,” whispered Anna, as they made their way back through the state rooms.

“It is incredibly grand, isn’t it? Have you looked up at the ceilings? They’re all so different from each other.”

“Well look who we have here!” A fair haired man in evening dress stepped out from behind a pillar.

They swung round, with little doubt in their minds as to who had spoken.

“Simon, what are you doing here?”

“Got a ticket at the last moment. Martin Amery, our Foreign Ministry man, is sick.”

“He was all right at the morning conference.”

“Strange, wasn’t it? Taken ill after lunch. Stomach upset. Poor thing.”

“Oh, well, seeing as you’re here, would you be so kind as to take Anna straight to the Opera House. The embassy Rolls is outside. One of the Russians has the keys. You’ll find him, I know you will.”

Anna turned to Stephen. A look of shocked desperation flashed across her face. “Is that all right dear?” said Stephen, looking anxiously at Anna. “Yes, of course, sorry, I was just thinking about something in tonight’s performance.”

“Don’t worry, old man, I’ll look after your Firebird.”

“Well, I’ll see you before the performance tomorrow. I’m so looking forward to seeing the Stravinsky. I hope it goes well for you tonight. I’m sure you’ll be a dazzling success.”

He pecked her on the cheek, glanced at his watch. “Sorry, I better run on ahead. I need my briefcase and we’re scheduled to start in five minutes, though I doubt it’ll be on time.” He fled down the stairs, so did not notice how Simon Devlin had tightened his grip on Anna’s upper arm, as they took in the majestic splendour of empire.

“It makes one feel so sick, doesn’t it, my dear?”

Stephen remembered sitting in one of the red leather armchairs ranged one row back from those occupied by the principal participants in the cabinet meeting. Kerensky had been sitting diagonally to his right at the head of the oval, richly inlaid table. His Ministers of the Interior and Foreign Affairs had sat on either side, with Prince Lvov and Grand Duke Georgy, the Minister of War, taking the next two positions. These were the men who actually ran the country.

The meeting was just a blur. His mind was a maze of faces and voices as he drifted in and out of consciousness, with little of substance in his memory. What did recur nauseatingly often was the image of an ink pot flying through the air and spewing forth its contents as the lovely table erupted before him. Then everything was a cyclone of terror: a whirling mass of bodies, furniture, falling masonry and flames. A weight crushed the life out of him and the searing pain began.

Faces appeared and he felt his bed moving; trundling over a ridged surface. Every bump hurt. Then there were bright lights. Eyes ogled him from featureless faces and something pressed on his face and nose.

Saturday 11th December

Barbara had heard the doorbell. She bounced down the stairs, hoping it was Albert. He'd said he would call after his Saturday morning shift at the mill. They'd found him a job as a fault finder, responsible for finding small imperfections in the woven cloth and marking them with chalk. He had a quick eye and had proved himself to be as fast as any of the able bodied workers.

The hall was empty and disappointedly she went into the sitting room to find her mother standing by the fireplace, a telegram in one hand, holding onto the mantelpiece with the other.

She turned and saw Barbara. "I knew it was too good to be true. 'The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away'. It's Stephen. He's been injured."

Mrs Firth thrust the paper at her daughter.

'Colonel Firth injured in bomb blast – stop – moderately severe injuries – stop – undergone surgery – stop – 50/50 chance of recovery – stop – deepest sympathy – stop – British Embassy Saint Petersburg – stop'

"Oh, Mother, just when we thought he was safe."

Helen nodded and let Barbara help her to her favourite chair. She pressed the bell and knelt beside her. Mrs Benholmly appeared and took in the situation.

"I'll be getting some tea and fruit cake. Is it Master Stephen?"

Barbara nodded. "Injured by a bomb," she whispered.

The doorbell rang. A few minutes later Albert came quietly into the room and sat on the wide arm of his mother's chair, kissed the crown of her head and wrapped his arm round her shoulders.

Part Two

1916

Sunday 16th April

Karl von Allenstein sat alone in the Tiergarten. Increasingly, he preferred his own company. He felt so guilty for having been part of it all: that nauseating victory parade, months of occupation, the need to humiliate in a pretence of superiority. Worst still was the way his memory replayed the details of the surrender: the opening of the gates and the proud mounted figure of General Joffre walking gently forward to meet his hated adversaries and then the horrifying single shot and the bloodied body of the old man lying on the ground as his conquerors filed into the city.

Berlin's church bells rang out in the distance, but he did not answer their call. He preferred the varied tones of the birds calling to each other in the branches above his head. And those branches, what different kinds there were: spruce, beech, maple, cedar and ... oak. Yes, the beloved oak of Germany – strong, dependable, determined – finding its God given purpose in slow and steady growth. Other saplings might try and rise around it, but nothing would stop the oak from becoming the king of the forest. Yet he also loved those other trees. He could never quite believe that green could come in such varied hues.

Karl had always loved the Tiergarten as boy when he had been brought to the big city to visit his Great Uncle who had fought in the Unification War of 1870. Every evening they would dress in grand style and after a sumptuous dinner Uncle Klaus regaled them with tales of how the great Prussian army had vanquished the disorderly and cowardly French at the Battle of Sedan. Then he would talk about how Bismarck himself inspired him to help build the new unified Germany. He described the great man coming to his humble drawing office to look at his plans for the new Reichstag and later his meeting with Kaiser Wilhelm I. He had risen fast through the ranks of the bureaucracy until Bismarck lost his grip on power. History seemed to have stopped in 1890.

Karl had been taken round all the grand buildings, and did really marvel at them, but his favourite place was still the Tiergarten. It was here that he had first learned to play football, something his Great Uncle despised as 'a feeble English game, whose nihilist anarchy is an affront to German dignity and organization.' Now, this

place had another charm. It reminded him of Paris's *Bois de Boulogne* where he had met Alicia.

A few days of leave had allowed him to escape from his regiment's headquarters and his hated uniform. His language skills were second to none in the intelligence corps, which allowed him to slip unnoticed into Parisian life. It was a pleasant April evening and he had decided to take a walk before going to the opera. He was deep in thought and without warning she was there.

"Bonsoir Monsieur."

He stopped in his tracks and for moment was lost for words.

"Bonsoir, Mademoiselle. Enchanté." He raised his hat and out of propriety was about to move on. He found meetings with unfamiliar people, especially young ladies, quite difficult.

Before he could escape, her much older companion intervened.

"Forgive us Monsieur. We will not detain you long. My daughter has seen you walking in the Bois on several occasions and I agreed that if we should chance to meet, I would allow her to make your acquaintance. I am *Monsieur* Languere and this is my beloved daughter, Alicia."

"I am most pleased to make your acquaintance, *Mademoiselle ... Monsieur*. My name is Duferier, Xavier Duferier." He hated himself for giving his French pseudonym, but there was no avoiding it."

"Ah, then you are from Alsace, if I am not mistaken," replied the father, "Duferier, a good family, forced to leave following the criminal German usurpation of our ancestral lands." He spat on the path.

"Father! What will Monsieur Duferier think of us?"

"I am sorry my dear... Monsieur. I cannot forget, and now this!" As if to order two German officers rounded the corner laughing loudly.

"They may be gone sooner than you think. Then we can return to normal." Replied Karl, swallowing involuntarily.

"Umf, you sound resigned and a little over accepting, if I may say so."

"Well, Monsieur, I prefer to look to the future, when France will once again take her place as a proud and independent member of the European family of nations. With the Japanese in the war and a new Russian government, who knows what may happen."

“You may well be right. I am an old man, with old injuries. Let us not quarrel at our first meeting, but don’t forget your patrimony. Now, enough of politics. It is a beautiful evening and I have the privilege of living ten minutes walk from here. Would you care to walk with us and join us for dinner?”

“Oh, please, Monsieur Duferier. We would love to get to know you better.”

Karl thought for a moment. “That would indeed be very kind, but I am on my way to the opera and I just wonder if you would both care to accompany me. I have a friend’s box at my disposal and my partner for the evening is indisposed, so there would be plenty of room for us all. I do hope I’m not being too forward.”

“Maybe, young man, maybe, but it sounds a splendid idea to my ears. Alicia loves the opera, don’t you my dear. Let’s go home, take a brief repast and call a cab.”

And so the relationship developed. Feeling desperately guilty, Karl further embroidered his cover story, but love was love and he just hoped desperately that once his military service was over, he would somehow be able to live in France as Xavier Duferier.

Four months later he called at the Languere house to take Alicia to a dance at the *Société de l’Education Francaise*. He was met at the door by an unusually stern butler and commanded to meet Monsieur Languere in the Library. Karl began to sweat. He knocked.

“Enter!”

He took a deep breath and went in. The room was in semi-darkness.

He approached the silhouetted figure seated near the window.

“You need not sit, Monsieur. I had the privilege today to meet a Monsieur Lentell, who runs the Engineering company, where you have claimed to be working. I told him of your friendship with my daughter, but he seemed confused and replied that he knew no-one by the name of Duferier. I described you and he said my description sounded remarkably like that of one Karl von Allenstein, who is his primary contact in the German army for engineering contracts. Explain yourself, Monsieur!”

Karl placed his hand on a nearby table to steady himself.

“You are right, Monsieur Languere, I am indeed Karl von Allenstein of the German Intelligence Corps. I could not tell you this on our first meeting, as it would have prevented me getting to know your daughter. I am now in love with her and had hoped that one day I might be able to reveal my true identity ...

“Monsieur, you are a liar and a cheat and your hope was in vain. I have sworn never to have a German in my house. Now, leave. You will never see my daughter again.”

“I am sorry, Monsieur.”

“So am I, that I ever met you!”

Karl bowed and left the room. A desperate thought came to him that he might see Alicia in the hall, but it was empty and he let himself out.

He had written to her, and in response received a curt note expressing her anger and revulsion at his behaviour. What could he do? It might as well have been in her father’s hand. Anger rose within him and he made to tear the letter and envelope and throw both into the fire, but then he stopped. It was at least her hand. He reached into the envelope again and unfolded the thin, blue paper; that delicate curling script. This time something else fell out: a tiny paper heart.

It was this that now lay in the palm of Karl’s hand. He slipped it back into his wallet, lay back on the grass and let the peace around him seep gently into his soul. Why couldn’t the leaders of nations hear the call of peace? Did they ever stop to listen? Did they ever realise how much damage they did, not just in their lives, but to generations to come. Karl felt his anger arising. Monsieur Languere’s face appeared. He understood the man’s hatred, but knew there was another way. He let the sounds and smell of the Tiergarten overwhelm him. It was the only way for him, let go of anger, breathe in peace. Soon he was asleep.

He was startled into consciousness by a sudden pain in his side. He squinted into the sunlight and saw a teenage boy running towards him.

“I’m very sorry, *Mein Herr*, are you hurt? Do you need a doctor?”

Three boys were now staring down at him, one carrying a football. He jumped to his feet, rubbing his side.

“I think I’ll live, but be careful, not everyone is as sympathetic towards the English game as me. Do you play for a team?”

“We call ourselves the ‘Berlin Eagles’. We are training so we can join the youth league in the autumn. The others are over there.

Karl saw a group of worried faces some distance away and asked to be introduced. It turned out that they all attended a technical college on the southern side of Berlin, but went to churches in the city, so met up on Sundays in the Tiergarten to

train. Karl asked if he could join them and spent a contented hour, playing football and sharing his skills. He was in his element and his heart felt at peace for a while.

As he was dressing, Karl noticed that the boys had formed a huddle some distance away. One of them, called Torsten came over to him.

“Herr von Allenstein, we were wondering if you would like to be our coach and meet us here on Sundays?”

“Yes, yes. I would love that. I don’t know how long I’ll be in Berlin, but yes, while I’m here I’d love to help you. Tell the other boys, I’ll see you all here next Sunday at noon. Will that be a suitable time?”

“That will be excellent, very good indeed, Herr von Allenstein. See you next Sunday at noon.” Torsten clicked his heels smartly and ran off.

Karl waved goodbye and set off for the tram. He felt so young again, so excited. These boys actually wanted him, and wanted him to do something he just loved doing. He was walking on air.

Monday 17th April

The day dawned cold and wet, but it didn’t dampen his spirits. He would make sure he bought some boots and kit, so he could be ready for Sunday. In the mean time he had to start looking for work. He had spent the winter following his demobilisation on his family estate in East Prussia, near Marienburg,. Both his parents had encouraged him to stay and take over the running of the estate, but Karl had seen too much of the world. Even his love for nature couldn’t overcome the sense of confinement he felt in small town Prussia. He promised his parents that if he didn’t find anything suitable in Berlin, he would return and work with his father for a year and see how things went, but he was determined to find work in Berlin.

Prior to the war, he’d graduated in languages, literature and philosophy – not a lot of use in a German Empire determined to rule the world through industrial technology, if not by military might. He knew he was by no means the only young educated man of a good German family, pacing the streets of Berlin in search of work. Where to start? Teaching? No doubt he could find himself a position with his educational credentials, but could he really force his head into the confines of a school curriculum and make himself observe the petty restrictions of school culture? He’d been in enough trouble at school himself to know that he was just too much of a non-

conformist. Uncle Albrecht had given him letters of introduction to several Berlin company managers. Out of respect, he should really contact them, but eight hours a day behind a desk? The interminable report writing in the army had been bad enough.

He finished his coffee, asked the maid to clear breakfast and laid the morning copy of the *Deutsche Tageszeitung* out on the breakfast room table. Chancellor Hindenburg had made another speech invoking his military record and describing the trajectory of future peace time successes. On page three there were pictures of the Kaiser opening yet another training centre for the *German Youth League*. He flicked on and then stopped. Now this was worth reading. Brehmen had beaten Dusseldorf in the Reich's League, but would have to beat Hamburg to make the next round. A new national athletics institute was to be established with branches in Munich, Hamburg, Berlin and Frankfurt and the Ministry of Sport and Culture was preparing a bid to host the 1924 Olympic games in celebration of German sporting prowess. He forced himself to turn over to the classifieds – situations vacant. He had to try and be positive, but as he eyed the columns of dreary options his heart sank. He was not “an enthusiastic and creative design engineer”, “a dynamic salesman” or “an accountant with an exacting eye for figures.” Of course there were positions for teachers at several private schools, but that would have to be a last resort. He closed the paper, got up and stared out of the window. It was still raining.

The door opened and in strode Uncle Albrecht, grinning with bon amie.

“Not dressed yet, my boy! The early bird catches the worm you know. If you're on their doorsteps by nine o'clock, you'll have a position by the end of the day.”

“Yes, Uncle, I'm sure you're right, but ...”

“No buts, you von Allensteins always under sell yourselves. Those introductions from me will get you a long way and with a smart suit and positive attitude, I'll guarantee you'll have good news for your parents before the week's out. Now, sharp's the word, quick's the action, as they say and let's get to it, ay, boy?”

“Yes, Sir. Thank you.” There was no point in arguing and Uncle Albrecht meant well.

Karl went upstairs, washed, shaved and selected his best black suit, put on a clean shirt and wing collar and inspected himself in the wardrobe mirror. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to try his uncle's introductions and if he got something, at least it would be a start. He could always move on. He checked the letters were in his writing case and made his way quietly down the twisting staircase, past the Kaiser's benign smile

and was just putting on his coat and hat at the front door, when Uncle Albrecht reappeared.

“Well, I must say that’s a whole lot better. Fine style. Like the cut of the trousers. You’ll be a company director before we know it. Just the hair might need a trim; trip to the barber’s eh?”

“Maybe, I’ll see. Thank you, Uncle.”

Karl pressed his hat down over the offending hair and was out of the door before his uncle could offer him any more advice. The tram stop was only a short walk, but even that was hard work with a cold wind and rain in his face.

His tram took him to Herr Brunner’s coffee shop in Alexander Platz. It reminded him of old university days and was a legend for the variety of coffee blends and the *Kuchen* were irresistible. He settled at a corner table at the back of the café and ordered his favourite Peruvian blend and an apple strudel. If the Tiergarten was outdoor bliss, this was its indoor counterpart.

Karl sipped his coffee. It was so good to be back. He drank in the student atmosphere: all the excitement of youth in their voices, unspoilt, carefree. He strained to hear some of their conversations. Were they discussing Hegel, Leibnitz and Marx or was it girls and beer? He wanted to join them, but suddenly felt old. Had he seen too much of life already? Sighing, he closed his eyes and prayed that now hopelessly familiar prayer ...

“Well, well, if it isn’t Karl von Allenstein, our Junker democrat, if that isn’t a contradiction in terms?”

Karl was shocked out of his reverie, as two heavily built men joined him at his table, both thumping him heavily on the back. He looked from one to the other. This wasn’t good. They were familiar, but he couldn’t place them.

“So have we forgotten the commoners?” Said the other man, with a broad grin on his face.

Then something connected.

“Reinhardt Niedendorf! I’ll never forget that grin. And if I’m not mistaken, Andreas Nielsen. Are you still playing?”

“Not since de-mob. Haven’t settled down permanently anywhere yet, but we’ve only been out for six weeks. They kept us back to finish a bridge building project. I was so mad,” replied Andreas.

“Let me get you some *café und Kuchen*. Oh, wow! This is unbelievable.” Karl signalled to the waiter and they all ordered. He was glad of an excuse for a refill.

“So, are you two still confirmed Marxists? I heard rumours Lenin may be allowed back into Russia.”

The two men looked around nervously. “Only in private, just at the moment. You obviously haven’t been around Berlin very long. Just be careful what you say in public. There are some as might take exception to it and they don’t want a democratic debate,” replied Reinhardt

“But surely Germany’s a modern democratic society, especially since the war. There’s been a huge public debate over the peace treaties. The socialists are in the ascendancy. I don’t see old Hindenburg lasting much longer. We’ve never had such freedom.” Karl was honestly shocked.

“Let’s just say it’d be better talk somewhere else,” said Andreas quietly. An uncomfortable silence settled on the three young men as their coffee and pastries were delivered.

“So what are you two doing? Are you working yet.”

“No,” replied Reinhardt, “not yet.”

“We thought we’d take a few weeks to see how the land lies. See where the best place might be for folk like us and our views. A kind of critical spot to lie low and be ready for the action when the time’s ripe. What do you think are the industries of the future? Not farming on your Junker estate, I’m sure.”

“No.” Karl wrinkled his brow in thought for a moment. “I wouldn’t be here if I thought that was anything more than a backwater. Obviously ship building: after the navy’s pathetic wartime performance. Then there’s aircraft, not only the flying corps, but civilian planes. My uncle says there’s a real push on amongst some of the big industrialists to speed up international travel. Millions of Reich Marks are headed that way. Then there’s the motor industry. I was reading that some of the Social Democrats are pushing the party to build a series of people’s highways across the country and are looking at some ideas from a man called ‘Ford’ in America: some kind of mass production technique. Any of those’ll give you a firm future, but as for your other plans I don’t know where they’ll fit in.”

Reinhardt grinned. “Well, there speaks the young executive. You certainly look the part. Whose board room do you sit in?”

“Oh, this,” Karl tapped his collar, “it’s not really my idea. My uncle wants me to call on some of his friends in high places to see what’s out there. I’m not so keen, but maybe it’s a start, while I look for my niche.”

“If only we knew men in high places.”

“Come on guys. You know I’m not like that. I want to make it on my abilities, not my connections.”

“Hey keep your cool. Your trouble is you take us too seriously. So what do you really want to do?”

Karl felt the warmth of his former team mates. “Sorry. I should know you better. I suppose the problem is I know what I don’t want to do, but I can’t work out what I would really enjoy, except playing football and I can’t see me making a career of that.”

“All right,” Andreas took a battered notebook and stubby pencil out of his breast pocket, “Let’s just see if we can help. You write, we’ll come up with the goods.”

Karl could hardly write fast enough as his friends rapped out the names of job after job. Some were so absurd he refused to write them down. “Come on men, can you really see me as a chef? The man who made such appalling coffee that the whole team refused to drink it.”

“Fine,” continued Andreas, “now let’s have a look at these great careers and see if you can be fitted into just one of them. Let me see ... engineer?”

“No, I’m not practical enough. I once tried to mend my father’s car and ended up with five pieces of the engine which didn’t seem to fit anywhere.

“Well, maybe not then,”

“What about doctor? I’m sure Father would stump up the training fees and you know medicine’s the growing profession. Imagine all those pretty young nurses.”

“Come-on, be sensible! For one thing I studied arts not sciences and I’m sure you remember the incident with Helmuth Krantz and the carving knife.”

Reinhardt howled with laughter and thumped the table. “And best keep clear of dentist and taxidermist for the same reason.”

They all peered at the list as if searching for some hidden wisdom.

“There must be something you can do. What did you do in the army?” Andreas stared directly into Karl’s face.

“I mainly wrote reports for no-one to read. It was ridiculous!”

“That’s it! Staring us in the face. This is the man who could make Hegel interesting to a cabbage brain like Reinhardt here.”

“Hey, watch it my friend ... But I do think you’ve got it – Journalist! It’s obvious. Karl is a born journalist. You can write, man. You can write like no-one I’ve ever read in my life. Go on get yourself a job as a journalist. You’ll be a sensation. They’ll be talking about you from here to Hamburg.”

“I can’t. I can’t put myself out there like that. And how much do journalists earn anyway? Have you seen any jobs for journalists?”

“They earn enough and you don’t have to wear fancy clothes like those all the time. No, You can’t escape it. It’s your destiny to be a journalist – the *zeitgeist* has decreed it!”

With that Andreas was on his feet. “Come on my friend, the world of work and revolution awaits us. Let’s leave Karl to accept his future.”

Reinhardt was out of his chair like a shot, and with mock bows they were gone, with a promise to look him up at his newspaper.

Karl sat motionless staring after his old friends. No doubt everyone was looking at him. His collar felt tight and he was no doubt blushing.

Could he do it? He had to admit there was something attractive about it. Not writing boring reports of meetings and projects, but describing real life and maybe, just maybe, influencing opinion.

He paid, took his hat and coat and left the café. Alexander Platz was now bathed in sunlight and he could have done without his coat. Opening his writing case he pulled out the first letter. Brunner, Walt und Dressler: Electrical Engineers, 44-47, Leipziger Strasse. Not too far. He would walk. There was so much to get to know again. He loved Berlin in the spring; the light playing on the imperial grandeur of the Rathaus, the boats on the Spree and for a city, there was so much green space. He sauntered through the Spittelmarkt and was soon outside the imposing façade of Brunner, Walt and Dressler. He went up the steps and a revolving door deposited him in a sumptuous lobby. A receptionist, whose face was almost as polished as the marble walls, asked his business and disappeared, only to return moments later to lead him to a gilded elevator. They emerged at a third floor lounge, where he was asked to wait. Karl sat gingerly on the edge of a white leather couch. Minutes ticked by. He wondered if he ought to have come at all.

A heavy oak door opened and out came a small, fussy looking man, his head perched on the top of an impossibly high collar.

“Ah, Herr von Allenstein, how good of you to call. Always a pleasure to meet friends and relatives of Herr Gotthardt.”

“The pleasure is mine, Herr Brunner. It is most kind of you to spare the time to see me.”

“Ah, yes, I’m afraid I am not Herr Brunner. He is my cousin, but no matter. I am Herr Walt.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I assumed ...”

“As I say, no matter. Now, you are looking for a position. Well, we do have some places for the right sort of people and you do come from a good family, so I am encouraged to think that you may well be suitable. But first, let me explain the nature of our company and the business in which we are employed. Now there are three divisions and a number of sub-divisions within each of those...”

Karl tried to concentrate on all the detail and take it all in. He nodded frequently and every so often managed a brief interjection amidst the verbal barrage.

“Well, what do you think? I’m sure we could find you a place. Of course you’d have to start at the bottom and work your way up.”

“Ah ... Yes, Herr Walt. Most interesting. So much to think about and you’re so good to spare me so much of your time. I’ll give it some thought. This may be just the place for me. May I let you know in a couple of days?”

“Oh, most certainly. A bright young man like you needs to consider his options. Just remember, we could offer you security of position for life. Maybe there are more exciting places, but you can depend on us. Once you’re in, we’ll stand by you as we stand behind the Reich.

Karl expressed his sincere thanks and left as soon as politeness allowed. His legs ached.

The next visit, to Kassemeyer und Rudt, had been a touch more encouraging. At least he was invited to sit down. They would send him details of their graduate training programme.

He stopped at a café for Bratwurst, salad and a beer and glanced through the newspaper, turning reluctantly to the situations vacant. He scanned through them and was about to close the paper when something caught his eye. ‘Frankfurter Zeitung seeks sport and arts correspondent for its Berlin office. Apply in writing to ...’

Karl opened his writing pad, scribbled down the address and finished his meal. His afternoon visit to Bruchshaft Engineering drew a blank. Herr Bruchshaft was not there and the receptionist didn't think they were hiring. Karl felt quite relieved. He slung his coat over his shoulder and decided to go shopping for his football kit as he walked back to his uncle's house in Charlottenburg. It was four-thirty when he arrived and afternoon tea was laid out in the conservatory. His Aunt Meta was busy quizzing his two young cousins about their school work and didn't ask him anything about his day. He would have to rehearse a good tale for Uncle Albrecht later.

As it turned out, the evening went quite well. Uncle was delayed at work and when he arrived, ate a quick dinner and retreated to his study. Karl entertained the ladies with some card tricks, after which they took turns at playing the piano. Aunt Meta even sang some operatic pieces.

When the girls were sent to bed, Karl made his excuses and disappeared to his room. By that time he had made up his mind to apply to the newspaper. If he didn't like the work or was no good at it, then he could always leave, but it was worth a try. He probably wouldn't get it anyway. He had no experience. They'd want someone who'd been round the Berlin arts scene a lot longer than he had. He was out of touch, but his friends' enthusiasm had sown a seed.

The next morning he dressed in a comfortable loose jacket and trousers and slipped out of the house straight after breakfast. The weather was still fine and he amused himself with a visit to the nearby zoological park. He smiled to himself as he passed the big stone elephants at the gate. Nearly twenty years ago, his mother had warned him they would come and eat him up if he wasn't a good boy. After lunch, he bought a couple of sports magazines and spent a contented afternoon in the Tiergarten.

The next day was as leaden as Monday had been. Karl was in the breakfast room, when the butler arrived with a letter.

"Herr von Allenstein, your mail."

"*Danke*." Karl has assumed it would be from his mother. He was amazed to see a Frankfurt postmark and tore open the envelope.

"Herr von Allenstein. We have received your application for the position of Arts and Sports correspondent. Please submit a 500 word article on a

sports match taking place in Berlin this weekend. We shall be in touch on receipt of your work.”

Karl knew immediately the match he would write about. Hamburg was playing Berlin in the *Reich league* and he had planned to be there anyway. He was more determined as the days went by. He was going to see the seed flower. The match was a cliff-hanger. It couldn't have been better. Karl had arranged to see an old student friend immediately after the match in order to use his typewriter. The words just flew down onto the paper. Karl studied it. Read it through twice, gave it to his friend, who gave it to his fiancée, who found three spelling mistakes. Then they went out for dinner and Karl paid. It was like old times. After dinner Karl re-read his work. There was something missing, something wrong. The whole thing was wrong! He wound a new piece of paper into the typewriter and started to bang away at the keys. This time he had it. Damn! Spelling mistakes again. Two more copies and it was there. The power, the excitement, the pain, yes, it was all there!

He crept down the creaking staircase and out into the street. The trams had stopped. He would have to walk home. It was 2.00am when he arrived and let himself in. There was a note on the hall table: 'Divine service is at 9.00am. Hoping you can still join us. Love Aunt Meta.' Whoops he'd forgotten about his promise. Never mind he'd make it.

The following Friday, Karl could hardly contain himself as he left the offices of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on Mohrenstrasse. Football matches, athletics meetings, Brecht, Brahms, Wagner and so much more. Not only was it free, but he was paid to go and watch. Then there would be the interviews with musicians, writers, actors and best of all, sports stars. He would be in his element. The post-war flowering of German theatre was just beginning to get under way.

His interview with Herr Adler, the editor, had been so friendly, almost casual, and now he had a position, a future. He felt truly happy for the first time in months. There was only one thing could make him happier and he knew that was impossible.

Tuesday 2nd May

Stephen Firth closed his copy of *The Times* as his train drew into the station. His homecoming had been traumatic: three days of Baltic storms, followed a prolonged wait in Copenhagen, as the North Sea was considered too dangerous. He had been transferred to a hospital where nobody seemed to speak English or care much for his welfare. Except for a brief visit from a second consular secretary from the British Embassy, he had had minimal human contact during his five day stay. Hull was wet and the train to Huddersfield lacked heating.

Despite his ordeal, his spirits rose as he saw his family gathered on the platform: mother, sporting a hat invested with peacock feathers and a tightly rolled green umbrella, his sister in a calf length tweed skirt, matching jacket, white blouse, and tie – quite the modern young lady and to his surprise, Stuart, all the way from Cambridge. A porter helped him off the train and into a waiting bath chair. His family caught sight of him and Barbara ran along the platform as fast as her tight skirt would allow, as the others followed a little more slowly. The porter wheeled him toward them and stopped as Barbara met them and bent down to embrace her brother.

“Oh, Stephen, we’ve been so worried. It’s so marvellous to see you.”

The porter waited. “Will you be taking him from here, Ma’am?”

“Yes, thank you. Could you fetch the luggage?”

She reached into her pocket and handed him a half crown.

“Thank you Ma’am.”

He touched his cap and disappeared back down the platform.

Barbara squatted on the ground next to the chair and Stephen looked into her eyes.

“It’s so good to see you, sis., I’ve been so lonely. I thought for a time I’d never see you again and now you’re all out here in force to meet me. I don’t think I ever want to leave Huddersfield again.”

Barbara took the handles of the chair and began to wheel it up the platform towards their mother and brother.

“Oh, I’m so happy you’re here. I can hardly believe it. And I so want you to meet Albert. He’s so much fun. I know you’ll love him.”

The smoke and steam had now cleared and he could see the approaching pair more clearly. Stuart was uncharacteristically smartly dressed in a black suit; surely not just to greet his brother?

Then, they were there and Stephen saw the empty sleeve. The truth began to dawn.

His mother bent and placed a kiss on his cheek as tears began to roll down her face. She tried to speak, but nothing came. Instead, she took the handles of the chair from Barbara and began to wheel him towards the underpass and station exit.

“But mother, we haven’t introduced Albert,” hissed Barbara. She didn’t seem too hear.

Then the porter caught up with them and asked the little party to follow him, so they could cross the railway line with the chair.

Once in their carriage, Mother relaxed, dried her eyes, apologised and introduced Albert, while Tom hired a cab to carry Stephen’s luggage and the chair to Thornhill House.

“I’m sorry, dear, my behaviour was most inappropriate.” Her eyes settled on his face and darted away to find some haven, only to return moments later.

“Mother, your response is entirely ‘appropriate’. My face is a hideous mess of scarred flesh, with only one working eye.”

“I’m sorry. You said you had burns and had lost an eye, but seeing it is ... is ... oh dear, now I’m making it even worse.”

“I suppose I’ll just have to get used to it. If my own family can’t accept me, I dread to think what the rest of humanity will be like. I’ll be the Horror of Huddersfield.”

“No! Never! Stop this! You’re no horror. We love you. It’ll just take a little time to adjust.” Barbara stared into his face and gripped his knees. He winced in response and she let go. “Sorry.”

“And I love you too, dear. Your injuries make me love you no less. I was just shocked. It won’t take me long. I’m adjusting already. Can I touch your face or does it hurt?”

A smile quivered across Stephen’s face.

“I’d love you to, Mother. Just be gentle, I never quite know when it might hurt. The nerves are still tender.”

Mrs Firth turned to her son and gently stroked his face as Grace and Job clip-clopped their steady way along Halifax Road beneath a light green spring canopy.

Albert pressed his body against the diagonally opposite side of the carriage. Even Barbara was ignoring him. He had no place in these intimate family moments. Despite dressing in his Sunday best for the occasion, he still did not feel any more a real part of the family.

Stephen looked across at him, so this was his new brother. Now he could look closely, there was a marked difference between him and Stuart and not only in the clothes. His features were definitely softer: more human, less manic determination. His mother sat back in her seat, a hand still resting on his knee. He leaned forward and offered his hand to Albert. "Sorry, old man, it must be difficult for you suddenly finding you're part of a family like ours, especially with the erstwhile eldest son coming home as a cripple. It's a pleasure to meet you, Albert."

He leaned forward and shook Stephen's hand rather awkwardly with his left. It still felt strange. "Thank you, Sir, I only 'ope I won't shame t'family. S'pose I'm a bit of a skeleton in t'cupboard, like."

"Well, to start with you can stop that 'sir' tosh. We're brothers, man, and I'll be out of the army before you know it, so there'll be no more 'Colonel Firth'. I'll be a nobody. How d'you lose the arm?"

"Königsberg, ss... It were at Königsberg, during the big German push; spring o' 1915. My own fault really. Some of our company 'ad been sent to take out a machine gun. We'd taken cover in a shell 'ole, me an' a mate. Then we 'eard this 'ere shell come whistlin' towards us. We thought it were goin t' take us right out, so we ran, but it hit behind us and t'force o' blast threw me up in t'air an' shrapnel shattered my arm and cut me in bits down one side. They did their best, but they said t'arm were too far gone. I'm getting used to it, but sometimes I wake up in t'morning and think it's still there. At least I'm still alive, an' now I've found a family I didn't know I 'ad. So s'pose I should be grateful."

"I applaud you approach. I'm not sure I'll ever be so philosophical."

"Well, it's been nearly two years. Time's a good 'ealer."

"I suppose so." Stephen could think of nothing more to say and the throbbing pain in his leg was getting worse by the minute. Maybe he should have taken up the offer of an ambulance from the station.

Thursday 8th June

Karl walked casually into the suite of offices on Mohrenstrasse. His mind was lost in a eulogy to the Berliner Philharmoniker's performance of Brahms's Fourth Symphony that he had enjoyed the night before.

"Herr Allenstein, comen zei hier, bitte."

Karl was shocked out of his reverie. Herr Adler was not usually in the office so early, nor so abrupt. He swung round and entered the Berlin editor's office.

"Ah, Gut." Herr Adler's first cigar of the day had already filled the office with its sweet aroma. "We need to talk, young man."

"Yes, Certainly, Herr Adler, whenever you like. Is there a problem with my writing?"

"No, not exactly. You write well. There's a lot of energy. Sports and classical arts report an appreciative audience. No, it's on the avant-garde side of things that we're a bit worried and the political. You need to tone it down a bit, at least for a while. You're a new boy. You need to earn your spurs, so to speak. Some of our readers are less than enthusiastic about a few of your more provocative views. Let's take a couple of examples. Wagner. You like his music?"

"Most certainly, Herr Adler, he was brilliant, the melding of melodies and construction of Leitmotifs is unique; a revolutionary. The post Wagnerian orchestra was..."

"Yes, Yes, I don't really need a discourse on the great man. But, I guess you don't like his politics."

"No, Herr Adler, who would in the modern Germany? He was anti-Semitic."

"Well, not all our readers are as enlightened as you. I suggest, for the present, you stick to the miracle of the music and leave the politics. You see, people don't want politics in a music review."

"Then, there was that piece on political theatre. I let it through to test the water, but let us say, our Frankfurt office was none too happy with epistolary response."

"But, Herr Adler, that play was a most brilliant critique of public policy's failure to address..."

"Yes, Yes, Yes, so it may be to you, but to others it is Marxist propaganda and should be banned. As a newspaper, we need to take a median view and neither support

nor reject the voices we report in the world around us. All I am saying is keep your political views to yourself for the present. You are not employed as a political reporter. Stick to arts and sport and we will get on fine.”

Herr Adler drew on his cigar and smiled. “You’re a good writer. Just make yourself *great* and then people might listen to your politics. There’s nothing to stop you writing a political piece for one of the journals ... maybe under a pseudonym.”

Karl smiled back. “I understand. I’ll keep my nose clean. Anything else?”

“Just one thing that might be up your street. There’s the launch of a new political party taking place tonight at a hall behind the Alexander Platz Station. The political editor wants it covered, but it clashes with a major returned veterans function to be attended by the Kaiser at the Reichstag and they’ve got a man off sick. They wondered if we had anyone who might help out and I thought it might give you an idea of what you’re up against in modern Germany.”

“Sounds interesting. Who are they?”

“They call themselves *Der Deutsche Arbeiterliga*. Sounds socialist, but in reality it’s on the right. A couple of the more conservative populist Reichstag members will be speaking. I’m told they don’t like the press, so don’t tell them who you are and don’t take notes. Just merge with the crowd. Try to look like a railway worker or petty bureaucrat, something like that. Old clothes, if you’ve got any. Give me your piece in the morning.”

“Yes, Herr Adler. Thank you.”

“And just remember, we want to know what they think, not what you think of them. And another thing, be careful!”

“Thank you, Herr Editor, thank you.” Karl was already half way out of the office. What had begun as a dressing down, had become a real opportunity.

“And I need that piece on Brahms by 2.00pm, shouted Herr Adler as Karl disappeared down the corridor.

Once in his office, he closed the door, hung up his hat and coat and slipped off his jacket. Brahms was now going to be tough with right wing fringe politics whirling round in his head.

He settled himself, cast his mind back to the previous evening and closed his eyes. He was there. The soaring tones of the orchestra, striding over the musical landscape. What assurance. A certainty of faith and purpose in the world. A future laid

out to be grasped and lived. A God, who is with his people leading them through life's dilemma's according to his plan and purpose. The world of nineteenth century romanticism, the world of Brahms. It was easy to retreat into this world. It felt like the Junker landscape of his youth. The broad, flat fields of East Prussia. The workers bringing in the harvest. The wind tangling his wheaten locks as he followed his father through the fields and lanes talking to his tenants and workers: a square shouldered man, a head taller than any other in the district, enquiring kindly after the welfare of his social inferiors. He was doing his God-given duty to look after them, before retreating into his manor house to enjoy the privileges of land and affluence bequeathed to him by his forefathers

In fact the piece wasn't difficult to write. He was in his element and by 1.15pm he had a very adequate piece in his hands. He slipped on his jacket, hat and coat and walked joyfully down the corridor. Herr Adler was out, so he left his article on the desk and hurried down the stairs and into a chilly afternoon. Oh the simplicity of those days. People knew their place in the world and their worlds were much smaller, or so it seemed. Maybe it was just a myth. Everyone's life looked so much easier from the outside. Brahms had lived through the triumphs and trauma of Prussian aggrandisement; somehow his music traversed the undoubted questions of his own age without sinking into the illusory questioning of contemporary compositions. Maybe he was a secret Hegelian, striding forward with the *zeitgeist* of history.

He looked up at the clock tower across the street, pulled up his coat collar and quickened his pace. He wanted a few hours in the library before going home to change for his evening assignment.

Karl approached Alexander Platz clutching a hand bill he had fortuitously found on a tram seat. Two men in black leather coats eyed him suspiciously as he entered the basement meeting room, which was less than half full. He took a seat at the side towards the back. A man in mud spattered boots sat beside him and tried to strike up a conversation. Karl was determined to say as little as possible. His speech would give him away as neither a railway worker nor a petty Berlin bureaucrat.

"Gutentag."

"Gutentag."

The man held out his hand.

Karl hesitated before he took it.

“What do you do with those hands?”

“Ministry of transport. Archivist.”

“Pay well?”

“What do you think?” Karl flicked the frayed collar he’d picked up at a second hand clothes store.

“Not much of a victory was it? If it hadn’t been for those treacherous English sods we’d have wiped the Ruskies off the map. S’pose you spent the war sorting out your little papers and stuff.”

“The Marne, actually, and then in Paris.”

“Oh, so *actually* you did do some fighting. You don’t sound like one of us.”

Karl decided to go on the offensive.

“Yes, *actually* my parents died when the English took Königsberg and I just found this on a tram and thought I’d come along to see if your lot are going to do anything about those lazy Ruskies and Jew loving Poles! They’ll be taking German jobs before we know it.”

“Erm, maybe we could use some of your lot.”

The man got up and disappeared through a door at the other side of the room after nodding almost imperceptibly to one of the men on the door.

Karl waited. A few more people straggled in. There was little conversation.

Suddenly a loudspeaker mounted high on the wall burst into life with the rousing tones of *Deutschland, Deutschland, Über Alles* and everyone rose to their feet. Four black suited men filed in from a door at the back of the rostrum and took their places behind a table decked out with the German flag and a bunch of oak leaves. The music stopped and with a lot of scraping of chairs everyone was seated. The third black suit from the left rose, pressed the tips of his fingers and thumbs onto the table and leant forward, staring straight ahead. It seemed as if nobody dared move a muscle. Suddenly he straightened up, folded his arms and began to speak.

“Fellow Germans, noble workers: the future of our Empire. As we stand here today, facing the destiny of history, Germany faces a crucial decision. We can turn to the left or to the right. We can take the path of liberal socialist weakness, throwing ourselves into the world’s melting pot, where men have forgotten what it means to be men, or we can grasp Germany’s God given future. We can join the nations of Europe, following each other as enfeebled sheep into the jaws of Marxist, Jewish atheism or we

can rise on the wings of our great history and make Germany the head of an industrious and powerful Europe. What is your choice, my brothers?

Do you want good food on your tables?

“Ja!” shouted several voices.

“I cannot hear you. Do you want good food on your tables?”

“Ja!” the room responded as one man.

“Do you want education for your children?”

“Ja!” This time Karl thought it best to join in.

“Do you want justice for the German people?”

“Ja!”

Do you want a greater Germany, a powerful Germany, a prosperous Germany, a German Empire to be proud of?

“Ja! ... Ja! ... Ja!”

Several of the men were on their feet. One jumped on a chair, raising a clenched fist to the ceiling.

“Death to the liberal, socialist scum. Death to the bosses!”

Two of the men at the table exchanged worried glances. The man standing on the rostrum raised a hand and everyone took their places.

“Enough, my friends. Our time will come. Tonight we have two distinguished visitors ... two members of our Reichstag who have chosen the way of the future. Let me introduce to you Herr Dietrich Bayer and Herr Gottfried Hemmel.”

The speaker led the room in applause as each in turn rose to acknowledge the welcome. “It is our privilege tonight to hear from both these men. Herr Bayer will speak first.”

The stern, rather portly black suit to his left rose and moved to the lectern. Karl was pleased that he was not treated to another rousing exhortation to nationalist fervour. The man spelled out the condition of German society as he saw it in specific and exact detail. Bureaucracy and business had failed the Kaiser and his army. A Jewish, socialist bit had been placed in the mouth of the German nation and it needed to be torn out, so Germany could be the great nation it had sought to be in the founding days of Bismarck. He sat down to rousing applause. Herr Hemmel followed him, reiterating the same basic philosophy. As he spoke, Karl’s eye moved to the other man at the front. He couldn’t help feeling he looked vaguely familiar. Herr Hemmel finished. There was polite applause, followed by a few more rousing words from the

first suit and the meeting broke up. Karl nodded to the men on the door and escaped into the night air. He felt dirty.

It was still quite early and Karl decided to go into his office and write his story while it was still fresh in his mind. He would write a general piece, rather than allude to that night's meeting. He was curious and wanted to attend another one. Getting off his tram several hundred metres from his office and started to walk at his usual brisk pace. Crossing the street, he turned to see a man some distance away in a long black leather coat, alone, smoking. Karl felt a chill run down his spine. He decided to walk past the newspaper offices and visit a low class *bierkeller* he knew of a couple of blocks away. He settled back into an alcove at the back, where he could watch the bar. A couple of girls came by, offering to keep him company. He rejected their offers politely, drinking his beer slowly. If he was being followed, he couldn't go to his office or straight home to his uncle's mansion in Charlottenburg. He decided to make for the southern suburbs, changing trams a couple of times on the way. Then dive into some of the dark, working class alleys he remembered from his student days.

Two hours later he turned his key in the back door of his uncle's home. He'd hoped to avoid Auntie Meta, but she was talking to cook in the kitchen and broke off when he appeared.

"Oh, Karl, are you all right. We missed you at dinner. You said you'd join us as Fraulein Grunweiss and her parents were coming."

Karl apologised profusely.

"Oh well, another time, but you really must keep a diary and look at it. Social engagements are important if you want to make the right connections. You don't want to pound the pavements for that newspaper for the rest of your life, do you? Are you sure you're all right and surely you didn't go to a concert dressed in those old things?"

"No, No, just off duty, merging with the crowd. I'm really sorry, Aunt. It won't happen again."

"Well, you get a good night's rest and don't be on that typewriter too late."

Karl thanked his aunt again and hurried upstairs. It was past one by the time he crawled into bed, but at least his copy was ready for Herr Adler in the morning.

Several intervening deadlines prevented him getting down to the newspaper's archives for a further two weeks, but the face of that fourth suit had refused to leave him alone. There was something very disturbing about those eyes. During a

performance of Faust at the *Deutsches Oper*, he'd suddenly remembered where he had seen him before. It was during a visit by the Paris Philharmonic. At a reception following the concert he had seen the same man deep in conversation with the Philharmonic's director. He had thought at the time that it looked more like a business meeting than a casual social chat. Then, inexplicably, the Kaiser's foreign minister had slipped in at a side door and joined the other two. Karl had been busy chatting with the orchestra's principal conductor and when he turned to look again, they had all vanished. M. Le Directeur could not even be found for the official photographs.

Karl spent a couple of hours combing through photographs of official functions and visits of overseas dignitaries before he saw those unmistakeable eyes. He was part of a group of nameless interior ministry officials on a visit to Paris, towards the end of the occupation in December 1915. Karl noted the date and file number and left.

The next day he shared his thoughts with Herr Adler.

"Interesting, but nothing but vague supposition for the present. You need hard facts and documentary evidence."

"But can I follow the story?"

"You're sport and culture, not politics and I don't want them fishing you out of a lake, wearing concrete boots, as the Americans might say. If you do it, it's off your own bat and nothing to do with me. Just be careful. And if you're found out I'll disown you." His eyes narrowed as he stared into Karl's eager face. "But if we get wind of any more developments with this little lot, I'll let you know on the quiet."

Karl Grinned.

"Thanks. I'll be careful. I know these people aren't fooling around. Did I tell you, I think I was followed?"

"No, you didn't. You be very careful, my boy, very careful indeed."

Sunday 2nd July

"So, what did you think of the League, my young archivist?"

Karl was on a tram heading for Charlottenburg after an afternoon football coaching session in the Tiergarten.

He swung round in his seat to face the unsmiling man who had interrogated him before the meeting of the *Arbeiterliga*.

"I thought you lived in Steglitz. Gone up in the world have we? Good shoes."

“A gift from my uncle. His side of the family are doing quite well. He sometimes remembers the rest of us.”

“So, why this tram? Aren’t you going in the wrong direction.”

Karl thought quickly again.

“Like I say, he sometimes remembers the rest of us; sent me an invitation to Sunday tea. Could have made it dinner, but then I’m probably not good enough for that. No white tie and tails.”

The man seemed satisfied. “There’s another meeting you might like to go to; *bier keller*, on Kohler Platz, tomorrow night, 7.00pm. Bring a friend, if he’s like you. Our leader thinks you might be useful. We need hands like yours to go with boots like mine.

Karl got up a stop early and thanked the man.

“Be there!”

Karl worried about it for the rest of the day and had a poor night. The next morning he had told Aunt Meta that he was going to a show and wouldn’t be in for dinner. She looked sad.

“Cook’s making pheasant. It’s always so good.”

“Sorry, Aunt.”

He packed a change of clothes and set off for work. The day was spent on research, firstly reading up about a young singer by the name of Marlene Dietrich. Then he worked on his cover story for the evening; the exact particulars of his parents’ deaths and his upbringing in Königsburg as well as something about his wider family if needed. Then he mapped out some details of his wartime experience; regiment, battles, experience in occupied France. He felt more confident about that. He’d visited many of the garrisons and decided to place himself in Marseilles, under Brigadier Hallenburg.

He arrived early, bought himself a beer and sat down to wait. He really had no idea what to expect. After a few minutes three working men came in, bought drinks and disappeared through a door behind the bar. Minutes passed. Another group arrived and did the same. Karl wondered if he should try it. Then his familiar friend arrived. He looked round the *bier keller*, spotted Karl, came over and frowned at him.

“Good. Follow me.”

The man approached the bar, muttered something, was given a tankard of beer, without paying and led Karl through the door, down a corridor and into a low ceilinged

room almost filled with a large, heavy wooden table. They joined others sitting in silence. More men arrived and finally the black suited man who had opened the previous meeting accompanied by a diminutive woman with close cropped hair, carrying a small black case. The case was opened and a pen placed at its side.

The black suit stood and raised his right hand, palm outwards. "The oath".

The others, except for two other men and the woman, rose to their feet. Karl tried to rise, but felt a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"We, of the German Workers League do solemnly swear that we are men of true German blood and will live, fight and die to build a strong and victorious German nation and Empire, so help us God."

"Here's to Germany," they chorused as everyone took a hefty swig of ale. Karl joined them; he was already feeling very uncomfortable.

The black suit started to speak.

"Tonight we have met to introduce three potential members to our proceedings, Herr Amber, Herr Noistrum and Herr..." He looked at Karl

"Herr Lungar," replied Karl. It was a common name in East Prussia.

"And Herr Lungar. We welcome all new members to our party, but one of our key principles is purity. We are both of pure German blood and of inclination. The weakness in several other parties on the popular right is that they allow their message to be watered down by seeking to widen their memberships at too early a stage in their formation. It is our view that unless we maintain doctrinal discipline in the early stages of our life, then we may suffer the same fate. We therefore invite those who have shown an interest to come and hear our message in more detail and if you can concur wholly with our policy and methods, then we will initiate you into our body and its discipline. At present you are free to come and listen at our open meetings as much as you like, and to bring friends of a like mind, and if you choose not to join, that is your decision, but once you join us there is no going back. Your decision is final. Our philosophy and programme are set out in this booklet. Take it with you..."

They opened it at page one and were led through the roughly printed manifesto. Karl noted the not infrequent spelling mistakes, smudged type and divergence from the High German he was used to reading and using. There was no lack in the man's conviction, which was backed by the frequent murmurs of agreement as he outlined the various points. There was even a grotesque coherence to the whole thing.

The speaker finished and let his gaze rest on Karl. "As you will already have become aware, Herr Lungar, we have far to go and it is partially to men like yourself that we look, to explain the righteousness of our message to the educated elites from which you come."

The eyes of the men bore in upon him.

The black suit felt their unease. His fiery gaze swept around the table. "Do not fear brothers, Herr Lungar is one of us at heart. He too has felt the betrayal of the German people.

"Enough! We have homes and families to go to. It is for them, the Volk, that we work."

With that everyone rose and filed out of the room. As he left, Karl felt a hand on his shoulder. "We would welcome you, but consider carefully, it may not be easy for such as you."

Karl murmured his thanks, shook hands with the man and hurried through the *bier keller* and out into the clear air as fast as he could go. As before, he took a tram through Schöneberg and down to the claustrophobic alleys and courts where the teeming masses of Berlin's workforce lived. He dived into an unlit passageway, took several right and left turns at random and then leapt a low wall into a dim courtyard. He crouched. Dogs were barking in the distance. The sound of a man and a woman arguing came from an open window. Karl waited as his heart beat slowed.

Eventually, he crept through a low passage and out into an unknown street. A tram slowed to a halt before him and he jumped on board. He read the destination plate: Friedrichstrasse, that would do. He alighted at the station entrance and made his way towards the Unter Den Linden. The language of hate streamed through his mind. Could this really be the future of Germany? Was this her only fruit of war? The lights and music of a night club attracted him and for a while he stood debating whether to venture inside. It calmed his soul. He continued to the Brandenburg Gate, its four horsed chariot racing towards the east. He paused and looked up, before walking through the great arches westwards into the Tiergarten, homeward to Charlottenburg. The night air was clearing his thoughts and he found himself wondering what had become of Alicia.

As Karl lay in bed, he thought about his life or his lives. To his family he was a young man of Junker stock finding his feet in Berlin before he settled down to a life

either in business or on the family estates. At work he was a young arts and sports reporter on the one hand and an undercover political reporter on the other. To the German Worker's League he was a potential recruit to their nationalist cause. The rhythm of the nightclub's music lulled him to sleep.

He was at an open window. It was still dark and men in black leather coats were marching down the street to the light of flaming torches. Each of them carried a black, red and white banner proclaiming the glories of the German Reich. In the midst of them came the Kaiser, seated on a black horse, his hand raised in salute. Then they were streaming out across Germany and then Europe. The countries themselves seemed to be marching; a huge jigsaw puzzle on the move. As each piece rose, Karl noticed something else. Underneath, there were faces and eyes, tired, frightened eyes. They seemed to be trying to escape, but each time they tried, a jigsaw piece slammed itself down and blotted them out. And there was something else. Smiling faces, washed, lively, flowing golden locks, laughing and waving; his family was there, with friends and others from his youth. It was so beautiful. He wanted to escape, but there was no way out. Increasingly the pictures merged in a frenzy of activity and behind it all the refrain from the night club. Then a familiar face loomed into view. There were tears in her eyes and she filled his mind.

Karl woke. He needed the bathroom. The day was beginning downstairs and despite his dazed condition he stayed to wash and shave. He pretended to bury himself in the newspaper over breakfast and left as soon as he could. A biographical piece on Marleine Deitrich had to be completed by two o'clock. It was a struggle. He gave the article to Herr Adler. He seemed pleased.

"Sounds like she'll go far."

Karl left the offices and treated himself to *café und Kuchen*. He looked around him at the smartly dressed patrons: a pernicious vision of sobriety and good manners.

Such a contrast to his dream; could they really pull it off? They'll be defeated at the ballot box in two years time. What about that ministry official? There's something weird there. Are they really just a harmless bunch of crackpots? I'll talk to Herr Adler? He'll probably order me to keep clear. I know I'm getting in too deep, but I can't let it happen. They really are crazy enough to do what they say: re-organise Europe as a set of colonies subjugated to an extended German Empire ruled by a puppet Emperor. It isn't impossible. I met plenty of idiotic officers, in my regiment alone, who'd love this sort of thing, especially with God thrown in sanctify it.

Karl took refuge in more chocolate gateaux and coffee, before paying his bill and taking the tram home.

Aunt Meta was pleased to see him.

“Oh Karl, how wonderful, You’re home early. I was worried. We’re eating early tonight. Six o’clock. The Klassens are coming. They’ve got the most lovely daughter. A bit younger than you, but so charming and she’s studying. One of Germany’s up and coming educated ladies. Now, you’ve plenty of time to change. You could wear your dress uniform if you like.”

“Thank you. It’ll be good to spend the evening with you all. So many evenings out can be tiring.”

“Excellent. I’m so glad. We do miss you at dinner when you’re out and maybe we can cheer you up. You look so sad and serious. It must be hard making new friends in the big city.”

The evening was fun. The Klassens turned out to be a gently spoken Dutch family who had moved to Berlin in connection with the diamond trade. Fraulein Betsy was particularly interested in Karl’s time in Paris. She had been sent to learn French there as a young teenager, and they enjoyed swapping experiences and chatting in French. She sang, while Karl accompanied her on the piano. Then Uncle Albrecht closed the evening with a Bible reading and prayer, about which Herr Klassen seemed extremely pleased. It felt like old times in Marienburg.

Back in his room Karl couldn’t help feeling the evening was just an escape from reality. Out there a new world was taking shape and it might not be altogether attractive. He put some coal on the fire and picked up the old leather bound Bible from the bookcase, blowing off the dust and wiping it with his handkerchief. Finding the contents page, he searched for his uncle’s reading? Psalms? Proverbs? That was it, Ecclesiastes. Why had he read that of all things?

There is a time for everything, and a season for everything under heaven:

A time to be born and a time to die,

A time to plant and a time to uproot,

A time to kill and a time to heal,

His eye skimmed on over the words ... He paused

A time to embrace and a time to refrain,

A time to search and a time to give up,

A time to keep and a time to throw away,

*A time to tear and a time to mend,
A time to be silent and a time to speak,*

He paused again ...

*A time to love and a time to hate,
A time for war and a time for peace.*

He laid the book on the fireside table and stared into the fire; ‘a time for everything’. The flames leaped up in greeting around the new pieces of coal. Was everyone called to a destiny? Was there a time for every man? Was this his time? A time to stand up and do something. Maybe he was just being a fool, but how was he to know? Was this Kierkegaard’s existential moment? He read the passage again. Why? Why? Can’t I just pursue a little uncomplicated bourgeois existence? - work, marriage, family, church. He continued to stare into the fire. He didn’t know what he expected to happen. He’d heard of people’s ‘God moments’, but he’d never had much time for it all and they certainly didn’t sound like this. He watched the flames, each one choosing a different path from the last. Fire was fire, but each flame had a life of its own and then was gone. The images of the previous night continued to flicker in the grate. Then it was as if a decision had been made for him. He snapped the Bible shut, rose, and damped down the fire, slipping into bed with a renewed sense of peace and slept better than he had done for a long time.

When he woke in the morning he knew who he needed to contact, but not how to do so. Reinhardt and Andreas were the only people he knew who had any connections with the extremes of society. They had said they would find him, but that was months ago.

Sunday 17th September

Barbara flung Stephen’s door open and marched to the big bay window, drew back the big heavy velvet curtains, letting a stream of sunlight carve a harsh rectangle across the middle of the room. She turned to see her brother, now sharply illuminated, sitting in his nightshirt and dressing gown on the side of the bed, his one eye closed against the light.

“Close them.” His voice was soft, low and breathy.

“Why? The light’ll make you feel better. It’s no wonder you’re depressed, sitting in the dark.”

“Close them.”

“No. you’ve been sitting up here by yourself for too long. You’ve got to snap out of it and face the world.”

“Close them. It hurts my eye.”

“The doctor says your eye’s fine. You just need to start using it.”

Stephen reached for his stick, levered himself up and waddled over to the window, where he gently closed the curtains and sat down at a small table.

Barbara sat on the bed looking at her brother, defeated again. Over the last few months he had hardly strayed from his room. Newspapers and library books lay unopened. She’d tried reading to him, but after a few paragraphs he had asked her to stop and was met by silence when she suggested doing it again. Occasionally he struggled down stairs for lunch or dinner as long as they had no guests and the family was not dressing. The flesh on his neck had been too tender for a stiff dress collar and making exceptions was just another form of pity.

“You’re not helping yourself.”

“Who can help me now?”

“We can! Your family.”

“You don’t know anything.”

“Well, talk to us and maybe we’ll understand what’s going on. We do know we love you.”

Uncomfortable silence filled the room. The ‘L’ word felt empty. How could they ever understand? Barbara wanted both to go and stay at the same time. The wall clock ticked doggedly in the gloom as she waited less and less hopefully as the minutes leaked away.

“I nearly did it this morning.”

“You mean you nearly went down stairs? I wish you had.”

“No. Not that. The razor in the bathroom ... the carotid artery It would be so easy. Then no-one would ever have to see me again.”

“Stephen! Don’t! You mustn’t talk like that. It’s a sin.”

“You see, you don’t really want to know.”

Barbara sighed, pressing her lips together as she looked across at the crumpled figure and her eyes narrowed. “Maybe you should.”

“Should what?”

“Finish it. If you believe you’re so worthless, maybe you should finish what the bomber started and let them win.”

A sarcastic smile flickered across his face. “You don’t mean that. I don’t believe you.”

“Don’t I? It’s your life anyway, your decision. You don’t care what we think anyway. We tell you we love you. We say we’re not bothered by your scars, but you take no notice. You don’t care.”

“I do care. That’s the bloody trouble! I do care and now I’ve got one more brother to care about and I don’t know what to make of him, so I’ve got to stick around and make sure you’re all right.”

“You didn’t bother before.”

“What d’you mean, before?”

“When you were in the army, off on your adventures, months of silence and then a scrappy little letter or a few days of leave; then off you went again. I worshipped you: my god in a distant land, my valiant hero. And when you came back from France and had T.B., I thought you’d changed. I thought you cared about us, at least you said you did. But now I wonder. I think you only care about poor Stephen Firth, the scarred hero, sunk in self-pity.”

Stephen shifted in his chair, chewing a thumb nail. “I just can’t see any future.”

“What about all the others. You’re not on your own you know.”

“You still don’t get it do you?”

“And then ... I know you won’t want me to say it, but then there’s Albert. Whatever you think of him, he’s picked himself up and got on with life. You should have seen him when I first met him; thought he was a useless cripple heading for the workhouse.”

“But he’s ...”

“He’s what?” Barbara’s mouth fell open, as she stared at her brother. The she got her second wind, jumped up from the bed and stood, glaring down at him. “Say it! Or maybe I’ll say it for you. He’s poor and working class and had nothing, whereas you are the great Colonel Firth, privileged scion of a well to do family and hero of the Warsaw Peace.”

The gong sounded for lunch.

“I suppose mother sent you up to give me a good talking to and sort me out.”

“Don’t you believe it. She’s far too soft. She’d wrap you up in cotton wool forever and a day. Now, are you coming for lunch?”

“I’m not dressed. D’you think mother’ll cope.”

“She’ll be so pleased to see you, she’d put up with you in your birthday suit, though I doubt Mrs Benholmly’d cope.”

Wednesday 6th December

Karl’s life seemed to have returned to normal. Summer had seen him on holiday in Bavaria with the Klaassens. The Reich’s League was in full swing and the Berlin Eagles had made it into the South Berlin Youth League. As Christmas approached, the arts scene was hotting up; concerts, plays, musicals and especially church music. There was traditionally a strong sense of competition between the principal churches to produce highly polished performances of the great classics such as Bach’s Christmas Oratorio or Handel’s Messiah.

He was on his way home on a packed tram one night when he caught sight of a torn hand bill. It was unmistakeably from the *Deutsche Arbeiterliga* – German Workers Unite – Build the Volk – Build Your Future. Karl shuffled down the tram and picked up the leaflet. ‘Come to hear Oberst Messmann tell the truth about the war. Humboldt Universitat, December 8th, 7.00pm.’ Two days time. Karl looked up. He’d missed his stop. He struggled to the back and jumped off as it slowed round the next corner.

He thought it over as he walked. He was expected to cover an event at Clarchen’s Ballhaus at 9.00pm. It would be tricky, but at least the venues weren’t far apart and he could leave a bag of clothes at the Bahnhof Friedrichstrasse and if anyone was following him, that would help him to give them the slip. He felt like he was back doing the Reich’s undercover dirty work in Paris. Even then, he’d never been much of a field agent. He wished he had someone to talk all this over with.

On the evening of the eighth he changed into his old clothes at the office and took a cab to the Bahnhof, where he stashed his evening dress and then stopped off for *bier und Bockwurst* at a café in Hegel Platz. It was ten to seven when he arrived at the Humboldt. He followed several signs and found himself in a medium sized hall, already three quarters full. He recognised one of the men on the door and nodded to him sternly, but the man showed no apparent recognition. He sat down behind a row of

young men with severe haircuts and raucous voices. Karl looked at his watch. It was 7.00pm. He felt a thump on the back of his seat.

“Don’t turn round! Made up your mind?”

Karl froze. He swallowed hard.

“Not yet ... I want to come to a few more meetings. I’ve got to think about it carefully. It’s for keeps as the man said.”

“Too right. You’ve been absent a long time. Two more meetings, then you’ll know if you’re one of us, right enough. If you don’t join and keep on coming we’ll know you’re one of those pinko-liberal spies from the papers or worse the Marxists. Some of us don’t trust you, you see, not at all. Got it?”

Karl heard the man move away as a side door opened and the four familiar black suits filed in, plus a middle aged man in military uniform. They all stood for the national anthem, while Karl wiped the man’s spit out of his ear.

Everyone took their places except for the now familiar grim faced master of ceremonies, who stared unblinking around the auditorium.

“The future is here! And you are that future. Our ranks are filling. Our feet are marching. We are the vanguard of the new Germany. With our Kaiser before us, we will march with our valiant and loyal armed forces into a pure future, an Arian future, a glorious future.”

He gazed out grimly, challenging anyone to deny his prophetic certainty.

“Tonight we welcome *Oberst* Messman. A true hero of our nation, who has fought in the front line of combat, leading his men to heroic victories against the Slavic barbarians, only to be knifed in the back by our politicians and generals, to give up hard earned ground in an ignominious peace. I give you *Oberst* Messman.”

The whole room erupted in applause as the colonel rose.

“So, you too feel the pain. We all feel the pain. Germany feels the pain. Let me tell you some truths tonight. You will not hear this from our timid, lily-livered leaders, those socialist flunkies who surround our Kaiser, who imprison him with their filthy liberal constitution, who deny him his God given duty to lead Germany according to her glorious destiny..... I will tell you of the valiant souls of Germany’s young warriors whose blood has been defiled by those Jewish bankers who forced an unjust peace upon our nation.

“Let me tell you of the battle for Marienburg, that defenceless, rural town, its pretty flower gardens, its well groomed rows of two storied brick houses, its *Ratthouse*,

its neat squares, a picture of German culture, threatened by the barbaric Slavic hordes who had already devastated the ancestral home of the German people. I remember Leutnant Richter throwing his life into the teeth of the enemy as he destroyed a machine gun emplacement, so our men could break through the line. I remember the proud and eager looks on the faces of our men as they awaited the signal to launch themselves into the titanic struggle. I remember how our tired and exhausted soldiers demanded the right to press on at the end of a day's fighting to harry the enemy and capture more ground. I remember ..."

Karl too remembered the eager faces of the men under his command as they crossed the Belgian frontier, laughing as they pushed aside the fence posts. They had been carried along by the speed of their advance; Liege, Hey, Charleroi, sweeping the English before them at Mons and Le Cateau. He remembered too the exhaustion of the men, the meagre rations, the demands to stop, the pressure to keep going, to take Paris, the fear on the faces of men forced over and over again to throw themselves into the line of fire, the frightened tears and the utter, unbelievable relief at the news of the French surrender.

"We could have taken Königsberg from the English. We could have pushed the Slav savages and their pretentious Asiatic allies through the Massurian lakes. But then the bankers in Berlin and those treacherous Jewish Marxists began to sing their feeble songs of peace in the ear of the Kaiser. They said the people are hungry, the economy is collapsing. But where are your full bellies now? Where is our prosperous economy? Where is our future, our destiny? We have betrayed our sons. Let us do so no longer. Let us rise up, lift our Kaiser on our shoulders and empower him to lead us forward into a greater German future. God bless Germany!"

With that the room erupted into wild applause. People jumped onto their chairs, shouting "Deutschland! Deutschland! Long live the Kaiser. Power to the German People." *Herr Oberst* saluted, looked slowly around the hall, then nodded to the chairman and sat down. The latter rose and held up his hands to quieten the audience.

"You have heard it tonight. Let no-one doubt it. This is the future. A great future. A prosperous future. We are gathering the people from the villages, towns and cities of the Empire to present Germany once again to her Kaiser, as Bismarck did in the days of Kaiser Wilhelm I. Once again he will be crowned with power. Now go to your families, your work places and your churches. Spread the message and God bless Germany!"

Karl had heard enough, but he waited until the applause died down before joining others as they exited the hall, pausing first to look at a table spread with leaflets and booklets by the door. He took several, dropping a few coins into a box in the middle of the table and left.

He would not be going back to another meeting. He knew enough now. After taking a circuitous route back to the Bahnhof, he collected his bag and changed in the men's cloakroom.

It was nearly nine when he reached the *ballhaus*. He ordered himself a double brandy.

"Are you feeling all right Sir?" asked the bar tender.

"Oh, yes, fine."

"You look flushed."

"I'm fine, thank you. I thought I was going to be late. I wanted to hear Frauline Deitrich."

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir. She's cancelled. A head cold and laryngitis, I heard."

"Oh dear. What a pity. Thank you."

"She should be here again next week. It's likely to be packed. You could reserve a table."

"Thank you. I'll consider it. You are most kind."

"A pleasure, Sir."

Karl reached into his pocket for a handkerchief, but found nothing. He sighed, seated himself at a corner table, away from the band and dance floor and wiped his face with a serviette. A waiter approached. He wasn't hungry, but asked for another double Brandy.

"Certainly, Sir."

Karl took out his wallet. He paid and tipped the waiter. Then he retrieved the fragile paper heart, laying it in his palm, staring at it as the sights and sounds of the *ballhaus* mingled with memories of Paris nights. So much to take in, so many different shades of mood. The music ground on, seductive, but empty.

A woman sat down at his table. She nodded at the heart.

"A woman?"

Karl nodded.

"You love her?"

"Yes, very much."

“Why don’t you marry her?”

“She’s French and I’m German.”

“Does that matter?”

“Not to me, but it does to some people.”

They sat in silence for a while.

“Do you want a good time? I could make you happy.”

Karl, smiled.

“I’m sure you could, but not tonight, thank you.”

“Oh well, suit yourself. I hope you’ll be happy one day. You look like a good man.”

“Thank you. I hope you’ll find happiness too.”

The woman smiled, touched Karl’s hand softly and was gone.

He sat for some time. The waiter saw his empty glass and approached. He ordered another brandy and stared into the rich oaken fluid. Would he ever be happy? And what was happiness anyway? An old teacher had once told him that happiness was the fulfilment of faith. But faith in what, in who, in oneself? Religious faith had never seemed to lead anywhere. Where was its relevance to the world and its struggles? The *Deutsche Arbeiterliga* spoke of God, but who was their God? Certainly not a God of love, more of a triumphant sub-Christian Wotan riding on the storm clouds of mythology, leading the *Volk* towards a vacuous conquering destiny – happiness through fulfilment of twisted hope. Could this ever be called happiness? It certainly involved faith, faith in a nightmare!

Karl sat back and sipped his brandy. The warming liquor slipped down his throat. Everything seemed so far away; the dancers, the music. He stared at the heart. Alicia’s face swam back into his consciousness. Oh how he missed her. Oh how he wanted her. He had never even held her, but he knew that when he did, that would be fulfilment. She would complete him. She was his *id*. Then why didn’t he just take a train to Paris and visit her, face the old man and demand to see her? He knew the answer, or thought he did ... It was the same reason that he hadn’t turned round to face the man who threatened him in the meeting. He was a coward. He wanted to be nice to everyone, always to be at peace with them, to withdraw, rather than confront. He always hid his real thoughts and feelings.

He stared through his glass at the shapes on the dance floor, swaying and whirling to the sound of a foreign beat. Were they too lost in a disfigured culture? Was

it always going to be like this? Surely it didn't have to be? Germany had a choice. The league was so small. It hardly had representation in the Reichstag and the socialists were too strong. Why was he so worried by it all? He should just forget it and get on with his life; sport and arts were just fun. Alicia was an impossible dream and he wasn't cut out to stand up to the league.

Karl drained his glass and pulled his gloves out of the pocket of his overcoat hanging on the back of his chair. As he did so the leaflets from the meeting fell on the floor. One of them slid across the floor and under a neighbouring table. Karl rose and went over to retrieve it, apologising as he did so. But he was too slow and the man at the other table had already picked it up, turned it over and read the title; *Der Jüdisch Problem*. The man held out his hand and Karl responded.

"*Das ist gut!* A fellow believer. The future is ours. Were you at the meeting tonight? Wasn't it wonderful? If only the rest of our leaders were like Oberst Messmann. It gives you faith that Germany will rise again, doesn't it?"

"Er, yes, yes, it does," stammered Karl, holding his hand out for the leaflet.

"Oh, yes, here you are. Yes, we need to get this stuff out into the world, so others will realise what those Jewish dogs are doing to us."

"Thank you, sorry, I must go. I'm late for an appointment." Karl could think of nothing else to say and grabbing his coat and hat rushed towards a side door, leaving the man looking curiously at his watch. It was just after quarter past eleven.

He hurried away from the building. Wasn't he safe anywhere? Were they following him? He hurried to the nearest tram stop and jumped on the back of a tram, paid the standard fare and went inside. He sat and cautiously looked around him. He knew he was becoming absurd, but he couldn't help wondering how many more right wing extremists were hidden at the next table, in a bar or on the neighbouring tramway seat. Were there more than he'd imagined? His mind went back to the nameless official and the curious meeting he had witnessed.

"Leopold Platz, Leopold Platz," shouted the conductor.

Karl leaped up and jumped off the rear platform as the tram began to move off. He'd been going in the wrong direction for long enough. Now he'd have to take a tram back into Berlin Mitte and then out to Charlottenburg. What a nuisance!

It was nearly one o'clock when Karl let himself in quietly, using the kitchen door. He was relieved that all the lights were out and reached his room without seeing anyone.

The fire in his room was burning low. He stirred it up and added a few pieces of coal, took out the offending booklet and sat down to read. The first page told him just how bad it was. The supposed extent of Jewish influence over government was described in intricate and lurid detail. Every failure of the economy during and since the war was laid at the door of 'the Semitic bloodsuckers'. Karl felt nauseated. Surely no-one believed this stuff? Yet very clearly they did or made out that it was true - a means to power. He let the booklet drop to the floor, wondering at his own sense of destiny. He thought he'd made some sort of decision, but the events of the evening had shaken him. It was not only the threatening voice in his ear and the awful vision presented by Oberst Messmann. The *ballhaus* had seemed to offer a different future, an alternative to the marching *Deutsche Volk*, but she hadn't turned up. He suddenly felt very tired, undressed, put on his nightshirt and slipped in to bed.

The next thing he heard was the sound of heavy feet on the stairs and landing. Fists thumped the door. He heard the voice of Aunt Meta.

"Get out! Get out! This is my house. You have no right here."

Karl shot the bolt on the door and braced his back against it. More heavy thuds hit the door and reverberated through his body.

"Open the door Herr von Allenstein. We have a warrant for your arrest from the Kaiser."

Then something heavier hit the door – once, twice. The bolt gave way and with the next thud Karl's feet were slipping across the carpet.

He lay in the darkness. His head hurt. He touched it. It stung like mad and felt wet. He struggled to his feet, found the light switch and inspected himself in the mirror. Blood was running down from a cut above his right temple. He grabbed a towel from his wash stand, filled the bowl and dabbed it gently. The cut was very small for so much blood. He pressed the towel against the wound and sat down amongst the chaotic mess of tangled bed clothes. The bleeding had nearly stopped. He secured a handkerchief tightly in place with a pair of braces and lay down, pulling the sheet, blankets and quilt into place. Sleep, however, was another matter. Soon, light began to appear around the edges of the curtains and the early morning sounds of movement around the house filtered into his room.

Aunt Meta made a big fuss of him, which he had to admit he quite enjoyed; it reminded him of home. At the office he was the cause of a good deal of humour centred

on the question as to which young *fräulein* had given him the elbow and out of whose bed he might have fallen. Herr Adler demanded the truth and at first seemed unwilling to accept his explanation.

“You’re not getting into any political bother are you?” he asked sharply.

“No, no, nothing like that. I just fell out of bed. It really is the truth.”

Karl wondered if he should say more, but decided to leave it for the time being. He needed to be clear in his own mind where he was heading with this before talking to his boss. Herr Adler disliked introspective indecision.

Back at home, Aunt Meta telephoned her sister in Marienburg and Karl spent some time reassuring his mother that he was in good health and was not over working. The next evening he arrived home to find his aunt in fine spirits. Karl’s parents had telephoned to say that they had decided to come to Berlin for the Christmas season. By dinner time she had mapped out a schedule for the holiday; a quiet family time for present giving round the tree on Christmas Eve, Christmas morning would be church, followed by a visit to the *Tiergarten* and a sleigh ride if the snow had come. Then they’d throw a party in the evening. It would be magnificent.

“We’ll invite our neighbours and some of the church people and the pastor of course and the *Grunweisses*. I know you’ll love meeting *Fraulein* Angelika and of course the *Klassens*. You enjoyed *Frauline* Betsy so much last time and I know she liked you. Now who else...?”

“My dear, you’ll have half of Berlin at this rate and the Kaiser himself’ll be asking for an invitation!”

“Oh, nonsense Albrecht, its just a little *soirée*. We’ll have a real party when one of our girls is ready to be married. Now that will be an event to remember!”

“Can Charlotta Kohen come?” asked her daughter, Beatrix.

“Well, my dear, she’s a lovely girl, I know, but they’re not quite our sort are they. I’m not sure they’ll want to come.”

“Oh, please, Mummy.”

“Oh, all right, it is Christmas after all. We’ll send them an invitation and see what happens. Would you like to invite anyone, Karl?”

“We could invite Herr Adler, my boss. He might be quite lonely. I heard he lost his wife last Christmas to influenza. They couldn’t get enough medicine.”

“Who did you say?” Uncle Albrecht looked up sharply.

“The Berlin editor for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, you know, my newspaper.”

“Sorry, I thought you mentioned someone else.” Albrecht went back to his dinner.

“Oh, of course dear, it would be lovely for us all to meet him. Oh, it’s going to be such a happy time.”

“It’ll be wonderful, Aunt, and I’ll organise some games for the children and maybe we can have a little choir, with some Christmas carols and a few funny songs as well.” Karl was suddenly gripped by his memories of happy Prussian Christmases round the uniquely German *tannenbaum*. His initial reticence about the coming of his parents had disappeared. They could see where he worked and could meet Herr Adler. They would see what a major newspaper it was. They could go to the opera and concerts and enjoy the grandeur of *Weinachten* at the Kaiser Wilhelm Gedachtnis Kirche.

Karl spent the rest of the evening choosing Christmas music with the girls and making lists of games. Aunt Meta was busy working on menus. Uncle Albrecht was nowhere to be seen until 10 o’clock when he appeared with the family Bible and they gathered round the fire for the nightly ritual. At the end of the reading, Aunt Meta prayed for God’s blessing on the *Weinachten* festivities and Gabriele took her turn at opening the day’s window in the *adventskalender*.

It was all so lovely, so real, so natural, and so German. Karl went straight to bed feeling that all must be right with the world.

Monday 11th December

Karl woke to find it had snowed heavily in the night. His cousins were full of excitement and he promised to come home early from work and take them sledging after school. It was like old East Prussia had come to Berlin. He munched on roasted chestnuts on his way home and marvelled at how the coloured street lights made the new snow sparkle. The bell sounded on a passing tram, but he ignored it. Instead he followed the *Unter Den Linden*, through the *Brandenburg Gate* and into his beloved Tiergarten. He hurried along the now cleared pathways, so as not to disappoint the girls, but he couldn’t help stopping to admire the sparkling white vistas and snow piled branches; such precision.

It was nearly dark when he arrived home, and the girls were waiting with their family sledge. Aunt Meta looked a little disapproving.

“You said you’d be home early.”

“Oh, I had to walk through the Tiergarten. It’s so beautiful. I wouldn’t have missed it for the world. Come on girls. Let’s go to Karl August Platz and I’ll be the horsie ... Neigh!”

The girls giggled.

“Now don’t you three be late. Dinner’s at seven and you’ll need to get changed. The Bauerstromme’s are coming. You know they always dress so nicely.”

They took the side streets, which hadn’t been cleared, so the sledge could easily glide over the snow. Still, Karl was hot and out of breath when they arrived at their destination. The gently sloping grassy park had a new covering of snow and Karl helped the girls pull the sledge to the top of the slope and then pushed it off and watched them slide gently down the slope. Then Beatrix and Gabriele insisted that Karl had a go himself. Oh, how good it was to be a child again. Then they made a snowman and threw snow balls. He was a dead shot and caught both of them in the face. They spluttered and grabbed handfuls of snow. Karl made to run away in mock terror, slipped and was flat on his back. The girls pounced on him and they all rolled about laughing and giggling in the snow. Karl lay back. Oh, what utter, simple, unadulterated fun! Oh the peace of it all.

A clock tower sounded the half hour somewhere in the distance. Karl leaped to his feet and looked at his watch. It was half past six already. He ran and grabbed the rope on the front of the sledge.

“Come on girls, we better run. Your mother will be cross.”

“Oh, do we have to? Mother is so boring,” cried Beatrix.

“You know what she said, we’ve got to change,” replied her older sister.

Aunt Meta was indeed none too happy when they arrived home, but the girls were so excited and full of joy that she didn’t have the heart to scold them. A maid took the girls up to change immediately. Karl made to follow them up the stairs to his room, but his Aunt stopped him.

“Thank you, Karl. Their father never does things like that with them. He’s always so busy. I don’t know why he works so hard, or what he does with all his time. It’s good to see you happy. You often look so serious. Is anything the matter? You know you can always talk to your Aunt. They say I’m quite a good listener.

“No, no, nothing’s the matter. I’ve always been a bit of a deep thinker and sometimes I just can’t get the war out of my head. Thank you. I’ll remember what you’ve said. I better go and change.”

He might open his heart to Aunt Meta one day, but not just now.

The evening passed off happily enough, though Herr Bauerstromme was a bit too keen to talk about the war. He’d been called up as a reservist in the early days on the western front, and had helped organise supply logistics. He claimed to have been itching to get into the shooting war, but Karl could see why this rather rotund second lieutenant had been kept behind the lines.

It had been a good introduction to the festive season. The following Saturday they all went along to the Charlottenburg Weihnachtsmarkte, accompanied by both the cook and first maid to help with food selections and carry everything home. They could have walked, but Uncle Albrecht drove his Mercedes, though he stayed in the car reading, while the family did the shopping. When they returned, loaded with all manner of festive decorations and culinary delights, Albrecht was nowhere to be seen, but no-one really minded. They still had more purchases to pick up and everyone was in such a good mood. Albrecht joined them half an hour later, full of apologies that he had seen a business colleague and they had been for a drink. Only Aunt Meta didn’t seem convinced.

Karl’s Parents arrived in the week before Christmas and even Uncle Albrecht seemed to have got into the spirit of the season, arriving home on Christmas Eve with a two metre Christmas tree, which was carried ceremoniously into the drawing room and set up in the bay window. Candles, glass ornaments and various edible treats were carefully attached, while members of the family brought carefully wrapped presents to place at its foot.

It proved to be a marvellous evening, only spoiled for Karl by Mother bringing his ceremonial dress uniform and sword and pleading with him to wear them for the evening. The look on her face was so beguiling that in the end he gave in and decided he would play the soldier, if it made them all happy. Wearing the sword turned out to be a considerable nuisance and he managed to dispense with it later when no-one was looking.

Apart from this, the three day celebration was a great success. In fact Christmas 1916 was a great success across Germany. After the rigours and insecurity of war, it

was really the first Christmas of the new Germany. Families were completely reunited for the first time since the summer of 1914. Despite the success of the war in France, the failure to deal effectively with the Eastern threat had sown a deep sense of unease in the German soul. The old sense of self-belief had been severely dented. Christmas was an opportunity for gathering again around the traditional icons of German culture. Karl was not the only young man who attended church on Christmas day in his army uniform. It would be his last time. He insisted that his parents take it with them, when they returned to Marienburg after two weeks in the big city.

Several Hundred miles to the north-west, the hard working people of Yorkshire were also gathering in their homes and churches to celebrate the festive season. Stephen still had many dark days, but a new feeling had begun to stir him, with the dreadful realisation that he would have to make an appearance at the Firth Christmas Eve gathering. It was the closest they ever got to a party: tea-total of course and plenty of hymn singing, but Mrs Benholmly put on a sumptuous spread and many of the great and the good of Huddersfield society made an appearance. Mother would certainly expect him to be there. She was still trying to convince him that his disfigurement and other injuries were purely on the outside and he was still the same inside, but Stephen knew this was just not true. What use was he now to anyone? He had lost too much.

A gnawing question also ground into his being. Why had Anna not come to see him? Had she heard about his burns? He'd been in St. Petersburg for long enough. Simon Devlin had visited him in hospital twice in the early days. His jaw had been wired at the time, so he had not been able to ask him about news of Anna. Maybe he had warned her off the ruined English Colonel or maybe Mrs Postovsky was right, she was a flighty dancer and not worthy of him. Yet none of this helped. He longed to have her touch his scarred face and to hear from her lips that it was all right..

Barbara breezed into Stephen's room, wearing a long cream gown, with a green sash. The green represented her latest passion for all things wild, and the cultivation of nature's bounty. She had adopted hitherto unused parts of the garden at Thornhill House, with a view to the family growing all its own vegetables. Her mother was dubious and declared that nothing would stop her patronising the three green grocers in Lindley village.

“Are you ready?”

"I suppose so. Better to face the hordes, than suffer Mother's well intentioned pity."

"Come on. You'll have a marvellous time. So many people want to see you ... I mean want to meet you. You're quite a celebrity. Little old Huddersfield has never spawned an international peace maker before."

Stephen picked up his stick and let Barbara help him to his feet. She turned to him. "You look magnificent. How does it feel?"

"Bearable. Becky helped me. I understand she's getting married in the spring. I'm so glad Jimmy Sugden made it."

"Yes, isn't it super. Mother's going to put up a marquee on the lawn. We only heard last night, but she's already planning the whole thing."

"Is *he* here?"

"If you mean Albert, no. He'll be arriving later. His shift only finished at six and he had to help close up for the Christmas break and then go home to change. Mr and Mrs Baraclough are bringing him. You know, he is your brother. I wish you'd try harder to like him. Everyone else does. Even the other workers have accepted him, even though he's part of the boss's family."

Stephen sighed, but then smiled at his sister. "I'll try. There's just something about him. I saw it sometimes in the army – sly, crafty men, who seem like the salt of the earth, but when you got to know them they were just out for themselves."

Barbara looked straight at him. "Now just stop it. He's not like that. You were in the army too long. You must start trusting people again and whatever you say, nothing is going to ruin this evening, so just put away your neurotic melancholia for tonight at least, and let's have some fun. Stuart telegraphed to say he'll be coming up from Cambridge and will be with us about nine o'clock. It'll be the first time we've all been together for Christmas since Father died. We're going to have a good time."

As they emerged onto the landing they could hear the sound of voices from downstairs. Stephen let Barbara lead him forward, but made her pause at the top of the stairs. "Do you really think I look alright? Is my bowtie straight?"

Barbara hugged his arm and placed a tender kiss on his cheek. "You look just wonderful; a true hero. They'll all love you."

He limped his way down, steadying himself against their ornate wooden banister. Stephen wanted to shrivel up and find a dark unoccupied corner in which to hide, but despite his inward dread of this event, he knew it was an opportunity to deal

with his demons and come to terms with the world or at least this little part of it. As it happened, he need not have worried. His entry into the sitting room went without incident; everyone was so engrossed in their own business that he made it half way to the fireplace before he was noticed.

“So this is what thee gets for bringin’ peace to Europe!” said Harold Fairfield. “There’s a right lot o’ evil folk in t’world if you ask me, a right lot. We’d have been better keepin’ our nose right out o’ it all and lettin’ ‘em just slog it out. We’ve got an Empire to see to wi’out seein’ to Europe as well. We’re right proud o’ you, right proud.” Harold sailed on after giving Stephen a firm handshake and affirming nod. Stephen thanked him, but he was already gone.

His next task was to tackle the non-alcoholic mulled punch and ladled himself a generous glass. Meanwhile Barbara had been captured by Mrs Agnes Fothergill, chairwoman of the Methodist Choir. He spied a vacant chair by the heavily curtained bay window. Three strangers of about his age greeted him heartily on the way to his temporary sanctuary. They made no attempt to introduce themselves and addressed him as Colonel Firth, almost as if he was a venerable institution.

Mother drifted over.

“How are you doing, dear? It can’t be easy for you. I’m proud of you.”

“Don’t be, Mother, I’ve faced much worse enemies in my life. I think I can face anything Huddersfield can throw at me.” He grinned at her.

She stroked his head and smiled back. “That’s more like it. I just wish your father were here.” A dreamy look passed across her face, but then Mrs Benholmly appeared at the door and she made her excuses, bustling off through the throng.

Stephen sat taking in the occasion. He could hear very little specific above the general hubbub, yet he had little doubt about the general content of the conversations. Portly men of substance stood, a glass of punch in one hand, clutching the lapels of their jackets with the other, as if engaged in addressing some gathering of similarly exalted gentlemen. The quality of this year’s Australian clip, the market rate for a piece of fine worsted and its inherent value over the inferior manufactures of the surrounding towns were no doubt the primary subjects of conversation.

Mrs Benholmly’s sons, Richard and Stanley, engaged specially for the occasion, were carefully navigating their way towards the window with fresh tureens of punch. Becky and her younger sister, whose name Stephen had forgotten, were circulating with plates of canapés. Tom, dressed in his Sunday best, was diligently stoking the fire using

a pair of brass fire tongs. Mother was leafing through some sheets of music with two elegantly dressed ladies of a similar age. It was all very comfortable and comforting. It might as well have been 1913. Stephen felt relaxed. Maybe he had finally come home. Maybe the New Year would be a new beginning. He could visit the mill. After all he had every right to be there. Mother would be happy. He could work with her and begin to take on his role as Father's oldest son. Coming back from overseas, he would have a new perspective, new ideas. Firths would need to change anyway. It was a new world. Change had been on the cards even before the war, but the old Edwardian world was now crumbling in haste. The working classes had supported the war, but now they wanted their pay-off. The unions were flexing their muscles. He would start reading the papers again.

Stephen levered himself up and made his way back towards the punch table. Mother smiled at him, proceeding through the throng into the hall. He re-filled his glass and rested it on the table, while he consumed a sausage roll, pleased that everyone seemed happy to ignore him. He picked up his glass and turned to see Albert and his Mother, arm in arm, framed in the doorway. Her face was a picture of satisfaction; his was a mixture of awe, fascination and horror. Barbara bounced up to them and after a short exchange, relieved Mother of her prize. Before Stephen had regained his chair, his brother and sister intercepted him.

"Oh Stephen, are you coping? Sorry, got caught up with the Meredith twins. Doesn't Albert look splendid?"

She hugged Albert's arm and gave him a broad grin.

"How are you brother? Must be a bit tough getting dressed up and coming out to a do like this after a ten hour shift."

"Oh, comin' out ain't a bother, but I fair got some stick from t'lads about this 'ere penguin suit," he replied tapping his stiff shirt front, "I don't know 'ow y'put up wi' it several times a week."

"Trappings of privilege. I suppose there has to be some cost. You'll get used to it, you'll see. If you want to be a full member of the family, you'll have to. Mother has her standards."

"Aye. Don't I know it. She checked my finger nails when I arrived. Fortunately, I'd given 'em a good scrub. Your Ma's a grand lady, but she can't 'alf be a bit of a dragon."

"Our Ma," cut in Barbara.

“Okay, as you keep tellin’ me, but it ain’t ‘alf a shock livin’ for twenty-seven years wi’out a ma, an’ then suddenly findin’ your attached to the grand Mrs Firth of ‘uddersfield.”

“I dare say, she can be a bit of a Tartar, but she means well.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. She’s been grand to me. There’s many as wouldn’t ‘ave wanted to know me. I bet there’s been quite a cost for ‘er.

“You’re right there, Albert,” replied Stephen, “I’ve been noticing which ladies have been calling and certain members of local society have been conspicuously absent, the ladies from the Choral in particular. Mother’s thinking of leaving.”

“Oh, no, she mustn’t do that. She loves it. It’s nearly as much of her life as the Society of Friends. Maybe I should join, just to encourage her. Miss Dickinson, at school’s been dropping hints for a while.”

“Aye, but that said, t’ girls an’ women up at t’ mill are mighty proud on ‘er. At first there were some coarse jokin’ , till folk ‘eard t’ full story. They say she’s a real saint. Old Broomfield gets a fair amount of back-chat, but if Mrs Firth asks folk to do some’at there’s not a word.”

“I doubt mother has any idea.”

“Well don’t you be goin’ an’ telling ‘er will you?”

“Our lips are sealed.” Barbara giggled. “It’d only make her feel even more unworthy and she’s bad enough already.”

“I here you’ve been off to the meeting, though,” continued Stephen, beginning to feel more relaxed with his half-brother than he had ever been before, “it must seem a bit strange. We were brought up to it.”

“Aye, well, Ma asked me t’ go along. She said I didn’t ‘ave to, but I thought I’d take a look. First time, I didn’t know right what t’ make on it: folk just standin’ up at random and readin’ and prayin’ like. I thought I maybe should do like them, but then I saw there were some as never said a word. Same time, there were some ‘at kind o’ real about it, an’ most o’ folk who go are pretty plain spoken, not lardy-da, like. Generally, I don’t hold wi’ religion. Them as brung me up sort to that. Catholics, they were: smells, bells and God o’ hell fire, but you Quaker folk do seem to ‘ave some ‘at goin’ for you. I’m just bidin’ my time and no-one seems to be pushin’ me to join awt.”

“Why don’t you move in here? We’ve got enough room. We don’t dress up every night!” Stephen was keen to change the subject. He’d avoided Sunday Meeting attendance since his return.

“Stephen, I think Albert’s had enough questioning for one night.” Barbara frowned at her brother and made to pull Albert away.

“It’s a fare question. I don’t mind answering it: might seem as I don’t rightly want to be part o’ t’ family, like. Ma asked me, when I first come. I said as it didn’t seem right. I’m a working man, an’ not just that, bottom o’ t’ ‘eap. But now I’m getting’ respect. I’m learnin’ a trade an’ I have a position, a place like, wi’ my own folk. They know I’m part o’ t’ boss’s family, but I’m well liked. They don’t shut me out, ‘cause I ain’t put on airs and graces and pretended to be some‘at I’m not, so staying in a damp cottage, wi’ no electricity and an outside loo will suit me fine for t’ time bein’.

Stephen nodded. “You’re a wise man. I didn’t want to put you on the spot, but I do want to make sure you feel welcome here. We should meet and talk more.”

“Yes, I think you should!”

Barbara nearly jumped out of her skin and wheeled round to find Mother directly behind her.

“Now what are you three doing, plotting together in the corner? You’re supposed to be helping me host this event, Barbara Firth. Now go down to the kitchen and find out how dinner’s coming along.”

Mrs Firth turned to her two sons and Barbara knew she was dismissed.

“I’m so pleased to see you two talking together. I’ve been very worried you weren’t getting on.”

“Mother, one day you’ll worry yourself into an early grave and no amount of your fretting will create brotherly love. Isn’t that right, Albert?”

“Aye, Ma, it takes a while t’ bring two worlds together, but we’ll make it through. Steve, ‘ere’s not so bad for them army officer types.”

“Enough of that, brother. I’m plain Stephen Firth, now. There’s no more army for me. I don’t say I didn’t have some great times, but as Mother, here might say, I’ve seen the error of my ways.”

Mother smiled. “Well, well, that’s some progress at least. Now let me introduce you both to Mr and Mrs Wiggins. He’s just recently started as French master at the Boy’s College and they come with very good recommendations from the Meeting in Middlesbrough.”

Mrs Firth glided off with the two brothers following in her wake.

All in all, the evening was a great success. The only disappointment had been Stuart's appearance just before nine o'clock. He arrived in a shabby, rumpled suit, claiming that he had been working on a paper for the Royal Society, with no time to change. He gave Mother a peck on the cheek and scanned the assembled company, launching himself towards the only face he recognised, fluidly collecting a glass of punch on the way. His erstwhile friend was deep in conversation with a young lady and was somewhat cool about being interrupted.

When the gong was sounded for dinner, Mother somehow failed to steer Stuart into his appointed seat and he ended up sitting next to the Reverend Peel, from Oaks Baptist Church. The result was a rather voluble discussion on the merits of science versus religion, which those seated nearby would have preferred not to hear.

However, the sumptuous and elegant repast overshadowed everything else. The carol singing between the main course and dessert proved to be a much appreciated intermission, which helped the assembled company prepare themselves to do battle with Mrs Benholmly's steamed fruit pudding, Yorkshire trifle and meringue glacé.

As the last guests made their way to waiting cars and carriages, Mrs Firth let Tom Benholmly close the front door and retired to the sitting room to sink into her favourite armchair beside the glowing embers of the fire. Stuart was already a rumpled wreck, snoring gently on the window seat. Steven had disappeared to his room and collarless Albert was sprawled on the settee in his shirt sleeves. He was staying over for Christmas. Barbara was down stairs in the kitchen, helping Mrs Benholmly and the others, who were all staying the night in the usually unused attic rooms. All seemed well with the world.

"Well Ma, you certainly know how to put on a good spread. I never ate so much in all my life. I'm fair burstin'."

Helen smiled as she viewed two of her three sons; so alike and so different; divided by education, class and temperament, yet difficult to tell apart at a glance, except that Stuart seemed to be losing weight. She would have to speak to him about it. His visit was a rare and valuable opportunity. It was the first time since June that he had made any contact with the family. In fact she had a lot to say to him and she was determined to say it, but she feared his reaction. She didn't want to push him away any further than he already was. She wrote to him weekly, trying not to complain at his lack of response, but it hurt.

“Anyone for cocoa?” There was a thump on the other side of the lounge door and Barbara breezed in looking as fresh as a daisy carrying a tray of delicate china mugs.

“Oh darling, I don’t know how you can keep going,” said Helen, putting her thoughts aside for the time being.

“I’ll be dead beat tomorrow morning, but you know what a night owl I am.”

“Are the others still busy?”

“No. I sent them off to bed. We can all help clear up in the tomorrow.”

“Good. It’s time we were all in our beds, but thank you for the cocoa. It’s a lovely thought. See if you can stir up the sleeping beast by the window. I do wish he would smarten himself up a bit. I don’t know how he survives in Cambridge. I’m sure they must have standards to keep up even there.”

Barbara grinned. “I’m not sure he knows where he is half the time. His head seems to be in another world. I overheard him talking to Miss Dickinson about mass and the speed of light. The only Mass she’s ever heard of is divine service at St. Patrick’s.”

Helen laughed. “Oh, don’t be cruel. I’ve told you about that sense of humour before. Now go and wake your brother.”

Barbara took a sip of cocoa, but found it still too hot and went to the window seat. “Come on Stu., wakey wakies, you’ve got a bed upstairs.” His eyes sprang open and his legs swung round onto the floor. “Some hot chocolate.”

“Oh, thanks, Sis., my favourite. Really miss things like this in hall. No-one to make it.”

He looked round at his family and rubbed his eyes with his knuckles, not realising he was still wearing his glasses, which flew onto the floor, scraping his forehead as they went. He retrieved them from under an adjacent table, nearly knocking over his drink.

Mother looked worried. “Come and join us round the fire. We’re all tired, but you must be exhausted after your journey and then meeting everyone.”

“Well as least they’ve all gone now. Hell, I’d forgotten what a lot of dozy peasants they all are. I don’t know how I managed to get enough education to get out!”

Barbara gripped the arm of her chair and Albert’s mouth dropped open.

“Stuart Firth! Remember where you are. I’ll not have language like that in this house. Those are our friends and they’re honest, hard working people. They may not have degrees from Cambridge, but they deserve respect.”

Oh, I’m sorry Mother, but it was more than I could bear: that old Reverend regaling me with first cause theory like I’m some kind of Sunday school child. Newton and all that; it’s so old hat. I always felt it was wrong, even at school. Do you realise what’s happening? We’re on the verge of a new world, a new understanding of the universe, of everything, and people like that are just going to be left in the dark ages. It’ll be like the church and Galileo all over again, except this time we’ll win all the rounds.”

Stuart’s eyes blazed with joyful intensity. Then he picked up his mug of cocoa and strode towards the door.

“Stuart ...” began his mother.

“Stuart!” Barbara was on her feet and blocked her brother’s way. “We’re not your undergraduate students, we’re your family. You can at least say goodnight properly. Give Mother a kiss.”

Stuart kissed his mother’s cheek awkwardly. “Goodnight Mother,” and made to leave.

“Now me.”

“Goodnight Sister.” His lips barely brushed her face.

“And what about ...?”

But he was gone. Only the creaking upstairs boards betrayed his presence.

Albert couldn’t believe it. He’d never seen anybody behave with such forthright rudeness in the presence of the redoubtable Helen Firth and her family. Didn’t he realise who and where he was?

1917

Thursday 18th January

By mid-January 1917 Karl was well and truly back at work, though in fact the latter was a bit thin on the ground. The Football League was going strong, but everything had been said about the artistic offerings of the Christmas season. Karl made his first trip back to *Clarchen's Ballhaus* and toured some of the other cabaret bars and clubs to find some material for his regular columns. It was during one such visit to a fringe avant-garde *bier-keller* that he bumped into two old friends.

"If it isn't Karl von Allenstein, up and coming editor of *Frankfurter Allgermeintag*?"

"Mind you, if he'd carried on the way he was going, he wouldn't have lasted long?"

"Conservative bunch over there in Frankfurt. All they think about is money."

Karl swung round from the bar to face a very playful Rheinhardt and Andreas.

"Wow, I've been wanting to see you chaps. Why didn't you call in at the office, if you knew which paper I was with?"

"Let's just say we're keeping our heads down. We're not too popular in the smarter parts of town," replied Rheinhardt.

"What've you been up to?"

"Oh just this and that. You know, breaking and entering, the odd bank job, picking a few pockets oh and loitering with intent to think!" Andreas broke into another broad grin.

Karl joined them and shook his head. "You two are just impossible. What's really going on?"

"Buy us some beers and we'll tell you, but no blabbing to your paper."

"Come on, we're friends aren't we and I'm sport and arts and a little bit of society gossip. I'm banned from writing politics, as I think you've gathered. What'll it be?"

"Can't you remember, or were you too drunk?"

"Just being polite. You might have changed your tastes." Karl turned to the barman. "Two Buddweiser and another Kaiserbrau for me. We'll be in the far back corner, away from the singer."

Karl led the way.

“Now, come on, why couldn’t you come by?”

Rheinhardt spoke first, after checking to see if anyone was listening. “You see we’ve been to a few rallies.”

“Far left rallies, he means,” chimed in Andreas.

“Yes, I think he knows that.” Rheinhardt had lost his grin. “Now, we’re not quite sure of all the groups on the far left at the moment. It’s all quite different to 1914. We’re checking it out before we sign up to any one of them. Anyway, we know we’ve been photographed with some pretty hard nuts and the word on the street is that we’ve joined the Socialist Brotherhood, which is allied to Lenin’s Bolsheviks. They don’t know our names or where we work, so we’re being careful, but we hear that several members of the Socialist Brotherhood have simply disappeared.”

“If I can do anything to help I...my family could...”

“Your social connections wouldn’t help us at all, even if we wanted them to,” continued Andreas. “It’s not the government, its certain elements in the police and army. They’re bent. You don’t know who to trust. There’s a whole lot of low level violence going on that doesn’t even reach the papers. The right and the left getting at each other, tit for tat, sort of, but from what we hear, the right’s winning. They’ve got more people in positions that count.”

“Like we say, police, army, local councils, even doctors and some of the judges. You see they feel let down by the system.”

“Reckon the politicians let them down. Pulled the plug on the war, when they were winning, or so they say. No thought for all the lads who’d been forced to fight to a standstill.”

“Or those who’d have died doing their dirty work,” added Karl.

“Exactly, so there’s a lot of bitterness about and a few half crazy sods who just like picking a fight. It’s sport for them. So, we’re keeping clear of politics and right away from the papers, but you’d be proud of us. We’ve formed a football team at work.” Rheinhardt grinned slapping Karl on the back.

“Well, at least there’s some good come of it all. Back in the beautiful game! Can’t be bad. Who’re you working for?”

“Siemens, making radios.”

“And they’re training us in radio technology. Not a bad lot, for bosses. We’ll put in a word for them when the revolution comes.”

"If ever," added Karl.

"Oh, Rheinhardt, do I detect a new self confidence in our budding Junker reporter? You just watch and be prepared. Just look at world trade and the consolidation of production in the hands of the bourgeois plutocrats. The wheel of the historical dialectic is turning. Marx was right: first prophet of the material age."

"Have it your own way. We'll see, but that materialist analysis of society is still just too simplistic for me."

"Better, than that Hegelian *zeitgeist* tripe. You know religion is just holding..."

"Look I don't want to get into this again for now," said Karl raising his hand to forestall further discussion, "there's something I need to ask you two about and it's not philosophy or football. I've come across this political party and I wondered if you two knew about them."

"On the left or the right?"

"The right. Very much on the right. They call themselves the *Deutsche Arbeiterliga*."

"Them! We certainly have," replied Rheinhardt, "You remember Wilhelm Robarts from Thuringia?"

"Oh course I do, he won the *Priz Ludorum* for philosophy in my year."

"Well he was murdered two weeks ago by some of their thugs. He was at a meeting of a workers' collective. They broke it and killed Willy and another of the guys."

"How do you know it was them?"

"Oh, no doubt about it. They scratched their initials on the bodies before they left."

"How terrible."

"Yes and the worst thing is they seem to be able to do what they like and no-one stops them."

"What about the police?"

"Oh, your bourgeois belief in equality before the law! It seems there's some in the legal apparatus who think they have the right to decide who is above the law."

"Like Andreas says, this lot are very dangerous. How have you come across them? I hope you haven't been to any of their meetings. They're not safe. Once you go, if they want you, they try and draw you in and if you join you can't escape. If they take

a dislike to the way you look or speak, you could be in for a very tough time. Don't have anything to do with them. They'll chew you up and spit you out."

The other two listened, while Karl quietly described his experiences and suspicions.

"Phew! You've been so lucky. You could be dead meat now you know, but all the same, what you say about this Interior Ministry character is very interesting and the man at the *Ballhaus*. Maybe they're bigger than we think. Just keeping a low profile, until they're ready to move. Very interesting." Andreas frowned bitterly into his empty glass.

Karl looked from one to the other. He'd never known them to be lost for words.

"Well, what's my next move?"

"Your next move is to do nothing. We don't want to read about your body being fished out of the Spree," responded Rheinhardt, wagging his finger at Karl, "we'll talk to some people."

"But I just can't..."

Karl stopped mid sentence, lowered his head and whispered, "I think I'd better go."

"Why, what's the matter?" replied Rheinhardt.

"Those two men at the bar. The big fellow is the number one black suit from the Worker's League. I'd know those shoulders anywhere. The man with him is that mysterious ministry guy. I remember the swatch of grey hair above his left ear."

Karl half rose to leave. Then thought better of it as the men turned away from the bar to find a table, sitting down some distance away, at the edge of the dance floor. A singer was just getting into her stride as several dancers smooched in a leisurely fashion to her inviting tones.

"Think we best just stay put. I'll get some more beers," volunteered Andreas.

Rheinhardt and Karl stayed put as their friend ambled as casually as possible up to the bar and returned with three glasses of a frothy golden brew.

"Thought we'd try Dreher's Austrian Lager, after all he is a Social Democrat."

"Shush! Don't attract attention," hissed Rheinhardt. There aren't many people here."

Karl tried to distract them by talking football, but the conversation soon petered out, as they sipped their beer quietly.

The black suit was counting something off very deliberately on his fingers, while the other man seemed to be writing. None of them could see what was happening very clearly. The man stopped writing, laid a pen on the table, folded the paper and tucked it into a jacket pocket

‘What you need is something concrete, not just suspicions.’ Karl heard the words of Herr Adler.

The official reached into his breast pocket, took out a long manila envelope and laid it on the table under the tips of his fingers. The black suit made to pick it up, but the other pinned it to the table.

Karl rose and made for the bar.

The suit squared his shoulders and began to raise his voice, but his interlocutor motioned for him to be quiet. A waiter drifted over and their bodies relaxed slightly as they waved him away.

Karl ordered three steins.

The suit took out a more bulky envelope and laid it on the table under the flat of his hand. The two hands began to move across the table in opposite directions.

Karl knew it was now or never. He began to walk unsteadily across the edge of the dance floor towards the two men, still absorbed in their clandestine transaction. As he reached them, he pretended to trip, lurching to one side and let his three heavy beer stains crash onto the table as the men leapt backwards. Karl threw himself forward to try and grab the envelopes, but by now the floor was a flood of beer and his feet slipped, bringing his body down heavily onto one side of the table, which toppled over under his weight. Unfortunately Karl’s glasses had slipped off his face as he fell and he could no longer see any sign of his quarry. Both envelope’s seemed to have disappeared. He felt sure they must be somewhere on the floor. His eyesight wasn’t that bad.

His heroic efforts had come to nothing. He felt a firm hand on his upper left arm, pulling him to his feet as he slipped again on the wet floor. A hand gripped his other arm and he felt himself being pulled away. Words of apology filled his ears and he saw the waiter helping the black suit to his feet. For a moment their eyes met. Then his friends were pulling and pushing him up the cellar steps and they were out in the cold night air running as fast as they could down the street. They ducked into an alleyway and continued to run. Karl was breathless. A sharp stitch bit into his side, but

he kept on running. They clambered over a wall and ran through several courtyards and out onto the corner of a main street. A tram slowed and they jumped aboard.

Each sat in silence, trying to catch his breath. Reinhardt paid their fares and turned to Karl.

“You bloody fool.”

“Magnificent,” said Andreas as he shook Karl warmly by the hand. “You could have got yourself killed – martyr to the democratic cause!”

“But I failed. Stupid, I am. Trying to be some kind of hero and I might end up in court or worse. Did you see the look that man gave me? He recognised me. They’ll be hunting me down. And it was all for nothing.”

“Was it?” said Reinhardt and Andreas in unison as they produced manila envelopes from their pockets.

Karl stared in wonderment. “How did you do it? They’d disappeared. I couldn’t see them anywhere.”

“That’s because clever Andreas here saw what you were doing and we were behind those two dozy, self-obsessed clots and swiped the envelopes as the table went down. Then I gave your hefty black suit a little help onto the floor.”

“What about our official friend?”

“Somehow Andreas’ fist connected with his nose at about the same time as the envelope disappeared, funny that! Anyway, you better take these and look after them. We don’t want incriminating evidence in our possession.”

They stuffed the envelopes into Karl’s jacket pockets and then looked out of the window to see where they were. It was dark and had started to snow. The tram’s bell sounded and it slowed to a halt.

They all peered through the window.

“The Reichstag – home of democracy,” shouted Reinhardt.

The tram started again. They were going west. The conductor came round again.

“*Fährt diesen strassenbahn nach Charlottenburg?*” asked Andreas.

“Ja.”

“Gut. Danke.”

“We’ll see you home Herr Hero, and then find our mean hovels on the south side of the city.” They got off the tram at Savigny Platz and walked Karl home. He was still in shock.

“Thanks, guys, you really have saved my life. I don’t know how to thank you. You’re amazing.”

“Oh it’s nothing. We were just in the right place at the right time. Would’ve done the same for any revolutionary brother in need, wouldn’t we Reinhardt? Now just be careful who you show that stuff to, whatever it is. You don’t know who you can trust.”

Karl let himself in at the kitchen door. He had hoped to get in unseen, but cook was busy over a pan of stewed apples. She greeted him and gave him a strange look.

“Are you all right, Herr von Allenstein?”

“Yes, Frau Brunnehof, I’ll be fine, just a rather eventful evening.”

He reached his room without further incident, shut the door quietly, switched on the light and gasped as he saw his image in the mirror. No wonder Frau Brunnehof had been concerned at his torn Jacket, stained trousers and generally dilapidated appearance. And what of his hat, gloves and coat? At least they did not have his name in them. A sharp pain creased his side and he lay down on the bed. The pain intensified and he gritted his teeth, slowing his breathing until it subsided. His collar had already come loose and he pulled off his tie. His hands were shaking and he felt cold. He eased himself off his bed and into the fireside chair. A china mug of milk sat on the hearth next to some biscuits on a matching plate. Karl reached down gently, the milk was still warm. It reminded him of when he was confined to bed as a child and his mother brought him hot milk and honey and read stories from the Brothers Grimm or the Bible. Oh the beauty of the bourgeois life! I could have been killed. He sipped the milk. It was sweet and warming. I could still be killed, if they find me.

He sat wondering what to do. He might have to leave Berlin or even Germany. He took in the comforting features of the room: family portraits, a plain cross above his bed, other pictures more suited to a child’s room. He glanced at the books on the small bookcase by the fire. Why had he never realised it before? This room must have belonged to his cousin Lukas, who had died of diphtheria, some ten or twelve years ago. Oh, Aunt Meta, I’m sorry.

Karl raised himself carefully, took the two crumpled manila envelopes from the bed and returned to his chair. He felt the thicker one and ran his fingernail carefully along the top. As he expected, Reich Marks. He counted: fifty Mark notes, a hundred of them. Something was very valuable. He put them back in the envelope and pushed it into his inside pocket.

He slit open the other one. It contained three sheets of paper. The first was headed 'Consignments as agreed.' Down the left hand margin there were twelve dates from March to September. For each one there was a six figure number and then the name of a railway station, usually in Berlin. Karl turned to the next sheet. It was typed, like the first, and contained what seemed to be the surnames of ten people, each one above an address in a French town or city. After each address there was the name of a bird written in French. The third item turned out to be two thin sheets of lined paper, containing a long list of names, each one next to the name of a town and city, this time in Germany. Each person was also identified as belonging to a profession or holding a specific civic responsibility. Karl took a deep breath and felt a stab of pain in his side.

He replaced the papers in their envelope and made for his bed. A wave of tiredness enveloped him. He struggled into his nightshirt, placing the envelopes under his pillow.

Movement was getting more painful as the shock of the evening's events worked its way out of his system. He turned off the light, got carefully into bed and lay on his back listening to the sounds of the night. The wind was getting up and the oak tree was rattling its branches against his window. Aunt Meta had apologised for it, saying they would get it pruned in the spring. Karl wondered what the two men from the *bierkeller* were doing now. Had they already started to search for him?

He had not expected to sleep for so long or so easily. When he awoke, the sun was shining through the oak tree branches, making patterns on the curtains. He turned over to look at his clock. Ouch! Eight thirty already. He'd have to get moving. Herr Adler had said he needed an article of some kind for the arts page by two o'clock. Karl tried to swing his legs over the side of the bed and get up. Pain tore through his left side and down his leg. He rested back against his pillow. It was impossible. He raised himself gently on one elbow and slowly brought his feet down onto the floor. He leaned forward, with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. He had to get dressed, breakfasted and out to work without making a fuss. If he was questioned, he'd say there was a fight in a *bierkeller* and some drunken guys thought he was involved and attacked him, but he was all right. He gripped the edge of the mattress and forced himself to stand. Suddenly the room took on a strange aspect. The fireplace and window changed places and the crystal light fittings began to perform a strange dance as Karl's legs gave way and his body slumped towards the bed, missing it and falling heavily to the floor.

Then, Aunt Meta was fussing over him as two of the male servants lifted him into bed. Karl vaguely remembered Dr Koffler making a visit. In fact he'd visited every day for a week and they had nearly taken Karl to hospital, but it seemed that Uncle Albrecht had been particularly against the idea. He did remember being very hot and Aunt Meta bathing him. At other times there was a nurse at his bedside. There were running feet, falling tables, oxygen masks, needles and faces, always faces. Sometimes his family, but there were others, friends, whose names he couldn't remember and who shouldn't have been there. He found himself playing football in a park with Herr Adler and there was often a grim face, with haunting eyes.

Friday 26th January

Karl opened his eyes and looked into the face of his Aunt. She smiled and kissed him.

"How do you feel, dear?"

"Pretty sore. What happened?"

"You tell us. That's what we've been wondering. You nearly died."

"I'm sorry. I thought I'd be all right. Let me think."

"Yes, I remember it now. I went to a bit of a rough *bierkeller* ... looking for... a story ...

Aunt Meta kissed his forehead and left the room. A few minutes later the nurse took her place.

It was several days before Karl was allowed to sit up in bed and take some solid food. The nurse brought the tray and fed him with a spoon. She was very kind. When he'd had enough she disappeared and Aunt Meta returned.

"Now, dear I think you better tell us what happened. You said you went to a *bierkeller*."

Karl wondered how much to say.

"Yes, there were some men started fighting near where I was sitting. They were drunk and grabbed me and started hitting me. Eventually I managed to get away and ran for my life until I got to a tram and jumped on board and came home."

"It must have been very frightening. You should have told me when you came in. We've been so worried."

Tears crept into the corners of her eyes and she sniffed, getting out a small lace handkerchief.

“Are you sure there isn’t anything else you should be telling us?”

“No, that’s all. I just ran and had to leave my hat and coat and those lovely gloves behind. You know the ones you gave me for Christmas.”

Aunt Meta looked very sad.

“Oh, Karl, you see we know there’s something else, because we found some envelopes under your pillow. I wish you’d tell us. You mustn’t keep secrets. It’s a sin. If you’re in some kind of trouble, please tell us.”

Tears now began to flow down his aunt’s face.

He took her hand.

“It’s all right. It’s nothing bad, or at least not the sort of thing you might be worried about, but I think I should talk to you and Uncle Albrecht together.”

“I knew you were a good boy, but we were very worried. Some of your student friends are, well, what should I say? Not quite our type of people and newspaper men can be a little less than savoury.”

“You know Aunt, you should meet some of them. They’re different, with shocking ideas sometimes, but they’ve got good hearts and want the best for people.”

“I know, I know, I’m sure I’ve a lot to learn. I’ll speak to your Uncle when he gets home and we’ll both come and hear all about it this evening. Now, you get some more rest. You’re not through it all yet.”

Aunt Meta left and Karl pulled up his quilt. His tightly bandaged torso still hurt with every movement and the short interview had tired him more than he realised. He was soon asleep.

He woke several times during the afternoon with a very dry throat and lifted himself up to swallow a few mouthfuls of water before falling asleep again. The nurse returned at dinner time with a bowl of soup. Just as he finished Uncle Albrecht appeared.

“Well, young man it’s good to see you making progress. You’ve given us all great cause for concern. Your Aunt said that you wished to explain the cause of your rather extreme condition, plus the reason for some rather interesting envelopes being in your possession. Under normal circumstances I would have delivered them to the police, but I decided I should await your explanation before taking what might be, for you, a perilous course of action ... I also thought it better to speak alone”

Albrecht stared with a serious paternal air into his nephew’s face.

Karl took a drink of water and began to tell his story, while his uncle sat oak-like, his eyes fixed on Karl's, uttering the occasional grunt. At the end he was very solemn. Without a word he rose and walked to the window. He ran his finger round the inside of his collar and then stood holding the lapels of his dinner jacket. The minutes ticked by under the tyranny of the mantelpiece clock.

Eventually Karl could stand it no-longer. "Have I done wrong? Do you think they'll catch me? Will you have to go to the police?"

Uncle Albrecht swung round. "Oh course you haven't done wrong. You've done the bravest thing I've heard about since the beginning of that absurd war! I'm just thinking how we're going to get you out of this and save your life."

"Do you think I should leave Berlin?"

"Without a doubt young man, if not Germany, at least for a while ... We'll see."

Two and a half weeks later Karl found himself on a train headed north-east to Marienburg. His mother was ecstatic. Uncle Albrecht had thought it was best his parents knew nothing of the real circumstances of his change of heart. Karl did not like it, but he could see the sense, both for him and them. If the league did indeed have sympathisers throughout Germany, Karl needed to be very careful.

His departure from Berlin had been handled with the utmost care. Albrecht had written to Herr Adler explaining that Karl had been involved in an accident and was returning to East Prussia to recuperate. The editor had replied that his job would be open for his return whenever he wished. Albrecht had made a courtesy call on him and collected Karl's few belongings.. He also made arrangements with a trustworthy police official to register Karl's presence in Marienburg, without his needing to go in person to the police station. Karl had himself written to the Captain of the Berlin Eagles, saying he would be in touch with them as soon as he was well enough. He hated not being honest with the team.

Karl shared the compartment with his Aunt and another man who appeared to be in his mid-thirties, and was introduced as Herr Neubauer, one of his uncle's most trusted managers. He would take care of all practical arrangements during the journey. Aunt Meta appeared not to know him, but seemed unconcerned. There were a lot of new people at the company. Life was changing so fast these days; one just could not keep up with it. For a while she kept up a flow of conversation, but despite the freezing

weather outside the compartment soon became hot and stuffy. As the city receded into the distance, both Karl and his Aunt were asleep.

Saturday 14th April

The harsh winter continued to keep Stephen at home until the middle of April, but his mood had turned a corner. Two things had helped. The first was the behaviour of his younger brother. Despite the fact that he had not experienced the early Christmas morning tantrum, he had watched his brother during the evening, with growing concern. Stuart left on the twenty-eighth of December, earlier than anyone wanted him to go, but by then he was like a tightly wound spring, pacing the house and garden.

Despite this, Stephen did manage to spend some time with him. He too had had to escape the confines of home and had hoped this might help him reach Stuart. He also wanted desperately to talk to him about his own condition. Yet after three attempts to rekindle their old teenage bond, he gave up. Stuart was too absorbed in himself and his work. Yet the whole experience told Stephen one thing: he could not allow himself to be lost in his own pain. His mother and the family needed him.

The second helpful development was a growing friendship with his half-brother. The man did seem honest enough and did not appear to be in any hurry to take advantage of his new-found connections, in fact, quite the opposite. When mother had called at his cottage one Thursday afternoon due to reports that he was sick, he received her politely, but sent a respectful message through Barbara that he would prefer it if she did not call again. However, in January and February he had started to make regular calls at Thornhill House to spend time with Stephen. Initially the latter had invited him through Barbara, but by the end of January, Albert had organised a short shift on Saturdays and was spending his increased leisure time in the Firth household, mostly with Stephen. Barbara was still struggling with the fact that he was forbidden fruit and felt quite hurt at first with her exclusion from these tête-a-têtes. After a couple of weeks she made herself scarce after luncheon, so there would be no awkwardness when he Albert arrived. Helen said very little, but was privately very pleased how things were developing. Albert usually joined the family for afternoon tea, but left before dinner, though by the end of April he had ventured to bring his 'penguin suit' a couple of times to stay for dinner. Mother had made it clear he didn't need to be invited.

Her visit to Albert's cottage had had one important spin-off. She had noticed how cold and damp the place was and that the fire was not lit, although it was a cold and bleak afternoon and Albert was coughing badly. A visit to Doctor Sykes was immediately prescribed. She had also asked Barbara to make some subtle inquiries about the lack of heating and had found out that the men only had enough coal to light the stove in the evenings, when they cooked their meal. Further enquiries revealed that many families were short of coal to keep themselves warm and healthy. The result was the institution of a winter coal allowance, paid monthly to all the workers on production of receipts from a coal merchant. Barbara quietly told her mother that her own visits to Albert's cottage were subsequently much more comfortable.

Albert invariably arrived at Thornhill House with a small duffle bag slung over his shoulder. When he was leaving on Saturday afternoons or on her visits to his cottage, Barbara would try to find out what he kept in it. Her curiosity was driving her mad, as all her efforts were proving ineffective. It was not until the middle of April that she got her first clue about what might be happening. They were all sitting in the lounge, waiting to be called for dinner, when Albert reached forward, picked up the *Telegraph* and settled back to read the front page. A smile quivered on Stephen's lips, but no-body said anything. The gong sounded for dinner and they all went in. Barbara had been pretty sure Albert could hardly read; after all he hadn't been to school as a child. Two weeks later, she was coming down stairs for tea to find Stephen giving Albert a book. He looked up and hurriedly rammed it into his duffle bag.

"Albert, aren't you staying for tea?" She felt rather hurt that he was making off without saying goodbye.

"Sorry lass, me and some o' t' lads are goin' t' new picture 'ouse down Queensgate. You can come if y' like. I'd 'ave come and told y', but me an' Steve got chattin' an' I don't wanna keep t' lads waitin'." He took her hand and gave her a peck on the cheek and her heart melted. He usually kept his distance, as he knew she was struggling with the nature of their relationship.

The next day, Barbara bounced into Stephen's room on her return from the Sunday meeting, full of the plans for Jimmy Sugden and Becky's wedding.

"D'you know what Steve?"

"No, but I'm sure you're going to tell me."

“It’s Becky. She wants me to be her bride’s maid. Oh, it’s so exciting. I’ve never done it before. I know I’ll be so nervous. Of course I said yes, but oh, all those people watching me, I’ll probably drop my bouquet or something.”

“No, you won’t. You’ll be fine.”

She went over to the window and looked down on the lawn, ringed with trees only just coming into bud.

“Imagine it! Our lawn covered with a huge marquee and all those people.”

She glanced down at Stephen’s desk. “What are these? It looks like children’s writing.”

“Nothing...um... I was just seeing if I could write with my left hand. My right sometimes aches a lot these days.” He stood up with remarkable rapidity and came towards her.

She stepped back. “That’s not true is it?”

“Why not?”

“Because I know you too well. You’re lying. This is Albert’s writing isn’t it? Now I know what you two’ve been doing all this time. You’ve been teaching him to read and write. Oh, Steve, you’re wonderful!”

He snatched the papers from her. “Not a word! Not one word from you. If you say anything, he’ll be so embarrassed.”

“Cross my heart and hope to die! I won’t say a word to anyone.”

“Not even to Mother!”

“Especially not to Mother! It’s our secret, but I’m so proud of you, you’re a gem.”

Barbara heard her mother calling and went to see what she wanted, while Stephen continued to stand by the window, looking down at the sheets of paper in his hands. He had to admit Albert wasn’t doing a bad job for a right hander. It was a bit shaky, but very legible. Maybe Stephen Firth still did have some purpose in life.

He looked out of the window and down onto the front lawn. The shadows of the branches made ever changing patterns on the grass. He suddenly wanted to know if it looked the same from down below, and hobbled back to his dressing table to fasten his collar and tie. Then he buttoned his waistcoat, slipped on his jacket and picked up his stick. A few minutes later, he was outside on the front lawn, looking up at the sunlight through the trees. It was the same sun, but everywhere different: from the harsh burning sky of the Rajasthan plains to the brooding light of the Baltic. Strange, how he’d never

thought about all this before. Did his single remaining eye give him more acute vision than the two he'd previously taken for granted? He made his way up the front steps and into the hall, parked his stick by the front door and went to read the newspaper in the lounge.

Wednesday 23rd May

Stephen had been driving up to the mill regularly for the last month. Once the snow had cleared, he had felt steady enough to manage the uneven cobbles of the mill yard and he enjoyed driving Father's little car. Tom had been lovingly caring for it since the death of Mr Firth, having taught himself to drive and the basics of car mechanics. Mrs Firth had on a few occasions even allowed him to drive her in it.

Stephen drove into the yard and parked by one of the old stables. He opened his door, put the end of his stick in the corner where four of the cobbles met, shuffled round and levered himself out. He then opened the back door, picked up his hat and made his way into the mill office.

"Morning, Colonel Firth."

"Good morning, Mr Broomfield." Despite all Stephen's efforts, the mill manager refused to drop the military title.

He greeted the two secretaries and the accounts manager, entered his father's old office and settled into the comfortable old leather chair behind the well used wide oak desk. Portraits of previous Firth notables stared down at him from the walls, together with the framed and sealed charter of incorporation of Firth's Fine Woollens. Even with his door shut, he could hear the rhythms of the mill. The old steam engines reliably fed power to the looms as intricate machinery clanked, whirled and hammered, with a hundred shuttles slamming their ways backwards and forwards between a multitude of fibres to turn out the much prized worsted cloth.

Even in the short time he had been back at the mill, it was clear to him that big changes would have to be made. Studies of the accounts had shown him that orders were beginning to fall off. The traditional solid, dark Yorkshire fabrics were still in demand, but since the end of the war, new, lighter and more interesting cloth was coming in from France and Italy. He had also read of the boom in textile machinery exports to Russia. With its vast reservoir of cheap labour, heavy competition from new, efficient operations was just around the corner.

The first thing would be the replacement of a hundred years of steam power with electric looms, which worked faster and with fewer workers, which meant lay-offs and Firth's never laid-off, even in hard times: short time, but no lay-offs! There was a knock at the door.

"Come in."

"Mr Broomfield said you asked to see me. Is everything all right?" Albert entered the office, cloth cap in hand.

"Yes, Yes, of course. Come in. Come and sit down."

Stephen led his brother to one of the four deep, leather armchairs in the middle of the room and settled himself in the one opposite. "I wanted to talk to you here because it's business."

Albert nodded slightly, but said nothing.

"I've been thinking. You've got a lot going for you. Your quiet determination has impressed me...."

"Don't patronise me!"

"I'm not! I wouldn't dare. You're too straight talking for that. What I want to say is I think you have a great future with this firm and this family and I don't just mean work. I think we need you. We're an old family, with old ideas and we need new blood, otherwise we'll just stagnate and die. The world's changing fast and we need to move with it and I've an idea you could be part of our bridge into that world."

"I won't be used by no-body. I'm my own man. I'll run if I feel I'm bein' put under anyone's will, I'll be off. The Cradocks couldn't bind me, nor could anyone else, not even t' army. That's how I survive. If you're askin' me to move to t' big 'ouse and be all lardy dar, then t'answer's not changed. I'm a workin' man."

Stephen sighed. "It's because you know exactly who and what you are that I think so much of you. I'll tell you straight, I didn't trust you one bit when I first met you"

"Why not?"

"The army. Recruits. You learned to watch and wait, to see who can be trusted and which ones need to be tempered and bent to the army's will. We're suspicious."

"And now?"

"I'm impressed. You could have pretended to become one of us, to have moved in and become middle class. Mother would have loved it. But you didn't. You held off

because you know who you are and you won't surrender to anyone. That makes you a leader."

"So, what do you want?"

"I want you to stick with what you're doing, but get some training and start working in the office some of the time and get used to the other side of the business. Do you know the Workers' Educational Association?"

"Aye, you mean down at t' Mechanic's Institute on Northumberland Street? Some o' t' lads go on an evenin'."

"Well, they run a course in accountancy and book keeping, which I think would be useful, if you want to understand the business." Stephen handed Albert a leaflet. "No pressure. Think about it. Of course there are lots of other courses as well. You may find something else more to your liking. Talk to Barbara."

"I'll pay my own way."

"I'm sure you will, but think about it. I'm not trying to push you about, just offering you an opportunity."

"I know Steve. You're a good man. You've 'elped me a lot. It all takes time. I were crushed so bad as a kid, I don't rightly know 'ow to take it when folks is good to me."

Stephen rose and extended his left hand. "We all have our scars."

Albert grasped it firmly and grinned. "You're all right. You've got a right lot o' respect out there, y' know."

Stephen grimaced, turning his good eye towards his brother. "Well, you best be getting back to work, before they think you're getting above yourself, spending too long with the bosses."

"Too right!" Albert flicked his cap out, pulled it down onto his head and was gone.

Stephen sat down at his desk and turned to look out of the window into the back yard of the mill, which was now bathed in sunlight, except for the shadow cast by the colossal mill chimney. A man in cloth cap and braces sat on top of an old mounting block, stuffing tobacco into his pipe. The sun picked out the rough lines of his face and neck. Stephen wished he could draw or paint. Such sights would be lost to the next generation.

Saturday 26th May

Anna Pavlevna opened the stage door of the Opera House and stepped out into the street. She was the last to leave and the street was deserted. She pulled her coat around her. It was quite cold, but not very dark: the famous St. Petersburg ‘white nights’ had already begun. She could still feel the music of the ballet within her. It was that which sustained her, enabled her to leap and twirl, swoop and dive – Stravinsky’s Firebird – rising each night from the ashes of her life. When she slept each night she was still living the dance, but with each morning she seemed to sink lower into a slimy pit of self hatred.

She looked both ways to check that the street was empty and began to walk down towards the Neva. She still loved the white nights. The thought of them kept her going through the winter and walking by the Neva, surrounded by other fellow travellers helped her forget that terrible winter night when she’d helped set the detonator on the bomb, which so nearly killed her kind English colonel and half the Russian government. She felt so ashamed. She hadn’t even been brave enough to go and see him in hospital, because she had known she would break down and tell him everything. She knew Simon was afraid she would do just that. For several weeks after the event, he had met her at the theatre and been very loving and taken her for dinner and then stayed over at her apartment. He said he’d been to the hospital and that Stephan had only mild injuries and was being sent back to England. He had not asked for news of Anna. He must have guessed something.

She reached the Resurrection Church of the Saviour, pausing to marvel, as ever, at the intricate mosaics and spiral domes. The church seemed to be a substantial echo of her music. It lifted her. At the Neva, she stopped. Lights shone out at intervals over the dark forbidding waters. She rested her crossed arms on a wall and her head on her arms. The music was still there, calming her, along with the night air. She felt safe. There was no danger that Simon would find her. He had suddenly vanished and when she contacted the embassy, she was told he had left.

Anna felt a hand on her shoulder and a voice in her ear. “So this is where you are, my little Firebird.”

She froze. Those lilting Irish tones made her feel sick. “Thought I’d left did you? I heard you’d contacted the embassy. They think I’m back in Dublin. Thought I’d

just keep a low profile for a while. You did very well you know. Lenin was very pleased with our little effort.”

Anna turned to face him. “Leave me alone. I’ve left the Party. I don’t want anything to do with you.”

“I heard about that. No-one leaves the Party. You know that.”

His arm slid down to her wrist. He gripped it and led her away from the river, through the near deserted streets.

“Let go of me, you Irish bastard.”

He said nothing, as he led her back to her apartment. At first she refused to open the door, so he reached into her bag, found the key, opened the door and pushed her inside, locking it behind them and pocketing the key. His next moves were obvious. There was no point resisting. He would only hurt her and then she might not be able to dance. When he’d finished, he breathed in her ear. “You see, we still need you, at least one more time.”

Wednesday 30th May

Philippe had agreed to meet his friend Antoine at one of the cafés outside the Gare du Nord immediately on his arrival. The massive building loomed ghost-like out of the fog as the train crawled towards the platform. He was rather apprehensive. This was his first visit to Paris since the day his mother had kissed and hugged him tenderly before he had left, along with thousands of other sons and fathers to face Germany in the great titanic struggle. For most of that time he had had no photograph to remind him of his family. His faked death had demanded that he leave all his possessions behind. He was no longer Philippe Benningstein, but David Montasse, a petty official at the Banque de France in Lille.

He threw his kitbag out onto the platform and joined the flow of travellers along and out into the station concourse. A slim, well-dressed woman in black sat outside the station café, holding a grey Siamese cat. As Philippe made to pass her, she rose and advanced towards him.

“Monsieur Montasse?”

“Oui, Madame.”

“You are to come with me. Arrangements have changed.”

“But what of Antoine?”

“Enough for the present. We will take the Metro and all will be explained later. Come.”

The woman made a ninety degree turn and strode vigorously towards the metro stairs. Philippe was caught in a moment of indecision.

She half turned at the top of the stairs and was gone. He had no choice, shouldered his bag and plunged after her. He was supposed to meet Antoine and go to a safe house, where he would be reunited with his family. Then he would be able to explain his disappearance. It had all been so cruel, but it was all been for his beloved France.

He caught up with her at the ticket counter. She thrust a ticket into his hand and strode on and down the stairs. Her cat lay like a stole around her neck. They alighted at the Bastille, took the escalator to the surface and handed their tickets in at the barrier. It was raining and the woman stopped briefly, while the cat disappeared into her shoulder bag. They proceeded down *Le Boulevard Henri IV* and it was only when Philippe saw the Paris Prefecture that he realised something was seriously wrong.

He stopped.

“Madame, please tell me where we are going.”

“Monsieur Montasse, you have nothing to worry about, as I said, arrangements have changed. You are to meet Antoine at the Prefecture.”

“But why, Madame? It doesn’t make sense. What is going on?”

Her eyes blazed. “Lieutenant Benningstein, you are under orders to accompany me. It is your duty.”

It was two and a half years since he had left that name behind at the Marne, but his eyes betrayed him.

“I’m not Benningstein any..., I mean who do you mean?”

“Come quietly and you will not embarrass yourself. Deserters are always discovered and punished. If you come without a fuss and show remorse, you may save your life.”

She almost sounded like a kind old aunt gently reproving her nephew for some minor misdemeanour. Philippe saw his chance. He threw his kitbag at the woman and darted across the road and down the Rue de Sully. She staggered back, slipped and fell. Her cat jumped out of her bag and hid under an adjacent bench, but from her belt she took a whistle, fixed it between her teeth and blew three times. Gendarmes converged

from several directions. One came to the aid of the now furious woman while the others sprinted after Philippe, whistles between their teeth.

He ran like never before. If he made it to the Rue de L'Arsenal he might have a chance of losing them in the alleys that ran between the shops and offices. At the Rue de Mornay two soldiers, pistols in hand were running up the street.

"Arret!"

Philippe threw himself in front of a horse and carriage. The horse reared and he made it to the other side of the street, but he had missed the Rue de L'Arsenal. He pelted down the street and into a side alley, turned left and then right and saw some cellar steps. He'd be able to hide. Thank God, the cellar door was open. He closed the door and stood bent double, gasping for breath. He thought his chest would burst. As he calmed down he could just make out the round shapes of wine and beer casks. He felt his way across the cellar, found a door and opened it carefully. It led into a passage which ended in a flight of steep stairs lit from above. The cellar must belong to a bar or a wine and beer merchant. If he could sneak out unseen and might be able to make it to the Gare de Lyon or hide until dark. It was a chance. He closed the door and tip-toed through the darkness. He was halfway along when he heard the sound of heavy boots on the steps ahead. He knew he'd passed another door, quickly backtracked and found it. His hand swept across the door and found the handle. Yes! It was open. He slipped inside, and turned round. Four sets of eyes pinned him to the door. He stared, mouth open at the card players, red wine and a heap of coins and notes in the middle of the table.

"Well this is something of a surprise, gentlemen, a young visitor. And what brings you here, to our little game?"

"I ... I was sent down to see if you require any more wine."

"Strange that," broke in another of the men, "I would have thought looking around here, you'd see that we have more than enough to drink."

Philippe glanced around at the bottles lining the walls and swallowed.

"You see," continued the first man, "we were told we wouldn't be disturbed, which makes me think you might be disturbing us for some unwelcome purpose, which we would not like."

"I'm sorry, I was just looking for a place to hide and I came in. I'll go. I'm sorry to disturb you." Philippe couldn't think of anything else to say and made to open the door and escape into the passage. As he turned a horny hand closed around his wrist

and another man rose from the shadows by the door and pushed Philippe's face against the wall, forcing his arm up his back until he cried out.

"I'll take this creature up stairs and we can continue our business when I return."

The others grunted their agreement and Philippe found himself being forced through the door, into the corridor, up the stairs, out into the middle of a crowded bar, through the customers and up to the counter.

"*Eh! Patron!* We found this down stairs. Deal with it!" He stared grimly at the man behind the bar and thrust Philippe forward and up onto the bar. At the same moment there was a sharp crack and pain seared through his arm and torso.

A man in a grey overcoat, produced a red, white and blue badge from his pocket.

"I think we can deal with this. I just heard the prefecture had lost something like this and were very keen to find it."

"As you like, he's nothing to do with me," replied the *patron*.

The man from the cellar let go of Philippe and disappeared through the throng, while the newcomer produced a pair of handcuffs, applied them to Philippe's wrists and hauled him off the bar and into a chair. By this time Philippe was howling with pain and tears were running down his cheeks.

"Oh stop howling, you pussy!" he said as he brought the flat of his hand down hard on the side of Philippe's face. "You'll have more than a little broken arm to worry about by the time they've finished with you. Now come on."

He pulled Philippe out of the chair and led him from the bar, up the street and pushed him into the back seat of a black car. He lay immobilised as he felt the car begin to move. Pain racked his body at every turn and bump. Thankfully they came to a halt after only a few minutes. A door opened and slammed shut. He waited. Then the back door opened and he was pulled out and forced up the stairs into the Paris Prefecture, past a desk, through double doors, along a corridor and down a long flight of stone steps.

"I want to see a doctor," he managed to mumble.

A steel door was opened and he was dumped face down on a hard, narrow bed. He did not know how long he lay there as the worst of the pain ebbed away. He found he had wet himself. His situation numbed and horrified him. What could be happening and why? His mind was a whirl of possibilities and desperation.

Eventually the door opened. Philippe heard two voices.

“We need it cleaned up and made presentable. Let us know what you need to deal with the arm. We’ll get it some more clothes when you’ve finished. And make sure you get rid of that smell. She can’t stand it if they smell.”

“You’ll have to take the cuffs off. I can’t set his arm with those on. And then we’ll have to take him for a shower.”

“As you like, but I’ll have to stay and they’re on again if he starts any trouble.”

Philippe heard a couple of clicks as his wrists were released. He was then helped to sit up and saw for the first time that one of the men was wearing a white coat.

“Are you a doctor?” he said weakly.

“Not quite, I’m just a medical orderly, but I can set an arm, if you co-operate with me. It’s for your own good.”

“Yes, I know. Thank you.” Philippe had no intention of not co-operating and the man had kind eyes.

“He really needs an X-ray,” said the orderly.

“You’ll have to do your best. It’s not to be moved from here. It’s caused enough trouble today already. They’re steaming mad up on the fourth floor.”

The orderly peeled Philippe’s shirt off and inspected the arm. It hung limply from its socket. He smiled. “This is going to hurt like hell, but it’ll be much better afterwards.” He turned to the other man. “I want you to hold him really tightly.”

“Now, Monsieur, just lie down and we’ll sort this out. It’s not broken, just dislocated. Scream as loud as you like. It’ll help.”

Philippe dressed himself in a shirt, loose jacket and trousers and although he was given no collar, tie or shoes, he was beginning to feel human again. Despite the freezing cold water, the shower had been good. The warder had wanted to make him wear leg irons and cuffs to go to the bathroom, but the orderly had made him relent, though the cuffs were fastened round his bloodied wrists again before they left him sitting on the edge of the bed.

Eventually the harsh light went out and he curled up. It was cold and he slept only fitfully. At last the light came on again and soon after that a flap opened at the bottom of the door and a plate bearing a cup of coffee and a hunk of bread was pushed

through. The coffee was nearly cold and the bread was stale, but at least it was something.

He sat staring into his cold cup. Keys jangled in the door and two grim faced warders slid a pair of leg irons across the floor, motioning him to put them on. At least he could control their tightness. They beckoned him forward, applied the cuffs and he shuffled out of his cell, down the corridor and into an elevator. As they exited the elevator, his feet embraced a deep piled carpet. They proceeded down a corridor and he was shown into an interview room, containing a table and two chairs. There was no carpet. He was hustled into a chair and his hands were cuffed behind him. The door closed. Moments later a hitherto unseen door at the opposite side of the room opened and in came the stately woman who had met him at the Garde du Nord, minus her cat.

“Well, Monsieur Benningstein, I believe you have some reparations to make regarding our relationship.”

“Madame, I apologise if I caused you any injury, but I believe you placed me in an impossible position and I am trained to resist capture in such situations. And, as I believe you are aware, my name is not Benningstein, it is Philippe Montasse of the Banque de France in Lille.

“Maybe you should tell me your story.”

“Well, certainly, Madame...”

“Maillot is my name. As for yours, let us see if we can come to some satisfactory agreement. Tell me about yourself.”

Philippe drew some comfort from a weak smile that briefly strayed across her lips and began to describe the life of David Montasse.

“I have been at the Banque de France in Lille for just over two and a half years. Before that I was in Caen, where I grew up.”

“Ah, so maybe we can contact your parents and sort out your identity.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible, my mother died of tuberculosis when I was five and my father was drowned at sea when I was twelve. After that I was looked after by the Brothers of St. Bernard until I was sixteen when I got a job as a post office clerk.”

“And how was it you arrived in Lille?”

“I answered an advertisement, and was interviewed by Monsieur Barbeau, the bank manager.”

“And where did you reside in Lille?”

“With Monsieur Barbeau and his wife.”

“Mmm, the bank clerk who lives with the bank manager. Interesting. And were you happy with the Brothers of St. Bernard? It could have been a little restrictive for a young man, grieving for his father.”

“They were strict, but gave me good Catholic instruction and a place of safety. It was there that I really learnt to love my country.”

“I see, and what of your spare time activities. Football? Rugby? Did you go to the beach? I’ve heard the Normandy beaches are very beautiful.

“Between our studies and the offices of the day we had little time to relax and play games. Occasionally the brothers took us to a beach, but I can’t remember the name.”

“Did you like the beech?”

“Oh, it was lovely?”

“And you can’t remember the name. Well, sometimes it happens I suppose.”

Madame Maillot continued to write in a hard-backed notebook resting out of Philippe’s sight on her knee. A smile flickered across her lips again.

“So, you have not visited Paris before yesterday?”

“Non, Madame. I had hoped to do so one day.”

“Curious. Well, we will see. Maybe some mistakes have been made. We will look into this, ‘David’.” The word slid out through her thin lips like a statement of treacherous complicity. “That will be all for now.”

She stood up and smiled again. “And I don’t think those uncomfortable accoutrements will be necessary, do you?”

“*Non, Madame.* I would appreciate it if they could be removed.”

“I will see to it.”

Madame Maillot reached the nearly invisible door in three strides and was gone.

Philippe waited uneasily for some considerable time, until a guard arrived, removed his cuffs and leg irons and took him back to his cell, where he found a hot cup of coffee, a pen and paper, four books, including the Bible and two blankets.

“Enjoy! Looks like you might be out in a couple of days.”

“I hope so. Thank you.”

Philippe sat down and savoured his coffee. He then turned to his books. He laid the Bible aside and looked at the other three titles. *Jeanne d’Arc* by Jules Michelet, *Les*

Miserables by Victor Hugo and *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius Loyola*. He picked up the Bible again, opening it at the Psalms.

*Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked
or stand in the way of sinners
or sit in the seat of mockers.
But his delight is in the Law of the Lord
And on this Law, he meditates day and night.*

He preferred the words in Hebrew and had managed to procure a Hebrew Old Testament while he was in Lille, but this would have to do. As he read on he reflected on his life since August 1914. His enthusiastic response to the war, desperate struggle for survival during the retreat, his flight into the unknown and his two and a half years of almost monastic existence living and labouring under the nose of Monsieur Barbeau. He had neither attended nor tried to seek out a local synagogue. Did he in any sense ‘delight in the Law of the Lord’? Was he in fact the ‘wicked’; one of those who would never stand before the Lord or be in the ‘assembly of the righteous’. Oh God what a fool I have been to think I could set you aside for a time. In the absence of a skull cap he placed a hand on his head, repeating a prayer of confession from the *Mishneh*. Tears rolled down his cheeks. Oh what have I done with my life? What have I done to my family? And now this. What’s happening? He closed the Bible, pulled the blankets around him, and lay, overwhelmed by his anguish.

There was a jangling of keys, the door opened and a tray of food was placed on the floor.

“Bonne Appetite.”

“Merci.”

The door banged shut.

He slid off the bed and picked up the tray. Roast pork, potatoes, gravy, vegetables, a glass of milk and an apple.

“His stomach rumbled. Pork. It couldn’t hurt one more time. He’d eaten pork enough times at the Barbeau house. It tasted good. Maybe things were beginning to look up, though there was still too much unexplained. After eating, he turned to Victor Hugo and found a degree of solace in the life of Jean Valjean and his struggles with the legal authorities.

Some hours later the guard returned to retrieve the empty lunch tray and replace it with a steaming hot chocolate, a baguette stuffed with salad and a piece of apple

cake. This time the man said nothing. Philippe continued to read for a while, but was beginning to feel bored. He'd heard of prisoners taking up exercise routines and decided to start running up and down in his cell and doing press-ups. He reached the door in four strides, so decided to run two hundred strides and do fifty press-ups before reading again. He repeated this routine before the warder returned and he was taken out to empty his toilet bucket and complete his ablutions for the night. When he returned the cell was in darkness. The door closed quickly behind him and he had to feel his way into bed. Even with the blankets it was cold.

He slept fitfully and was quite pleased when the light bulb sprang into life again. Breakfast and hot chocolate arrived promptly. He was just settling down to Victor Hugo, when another guard arrived to take him to the interview room. He was surprised to see Madame Maillot already seated at the table.

“Bonjour Madame Maillot.”

She said nothing, but just stared at him, while resting her chin on her hands.

“Are they looking after you well?”

“Yes, thank you Madame, very well.”

“Well, maybe you would like to reciprocate and treat us in the same manner – an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth - as they say. I am sure you are familiar with such a saying, *Juif!*”

Philippe had not noticed the guard behind him and the blow to his face was a complete surprise. His chair slipped from under him and he landed on his still painful shoulder. The man stood straight and stern, hands clasped behind his back as Philippe struggled to his feet, picked up the chair and sat down at the table.

“Well, now maybe we can begin again. You are a Jew, are you not, Philippe Benningstein?”

“I am David Montasse,” he replied weakly, trying to staunch the blood flowing from his nose.

This time the blow came from the left, leaving him once again sprawled on the concrete floor, blood flowing down the side of his face. He was picked up roughly and returned to his chair. His head throbbed.

Madame Maillot cleared her throat. “As I said, you are Lieutenant Benningstein, a Jew, ... a Jew who eats pork.” The word seemed to float in the air between them.

“Which of course is of no concern of mine. Now, maybe we can disregard yesterday’s fabrications and talk about Lieutenant Benningstein and September 1914.”

Philippe lifted his head slowly. “My name is David ...”

He threw his head back and screamed as his injured arm was wrenched up his back and nearly out of its socket once more.

Madamme Mailot sighed. “I do hate the noisy ones. Now, it seems that you disappeared from a region to the east of Paris on the night of 10th September 1914 and your re-emergence in Lille only came to our attention late last year. Now *baba Philippe* better just dry his eyes and tell the truth before *Mama Maillot* gets angry again. Can you explain this disappearance of an officer on active service?”

The guard let go of Philippe’s arm and resumed his statuesque pose as Philippe tried to wipe his eyes and staunch the blood flowing from his nose on the other sleeve of his jacket.

“I think you know the truth, ... because you know my pseudonym, and about Antoine.”

“Well let us see if your version of the truth agrees with ours – what is truth, after all?”

“All right. I don’t know which day it was exactly, but one night I was taken by a French officer and put on a truck. Eventually, we arrived at a big old Chateau in a forest and I was told that I had been selected to be part of a secret military force that would work undercover during the German occupation and be ready to rebuild France when the occupation was over. I was kept there for about a month and then given new papers and details of a new identity, before being taken to the railway station in Caen, where I purchased a ticket for Lille. At Lille I went to the house of Monsieur Barbeau, as instructed, and he took me to the Bank de France, where I was to work.”

“And what did you do there?”

“For the first three months, I just did simple ledger work – keeping accounts, that sort of thing. I couldn’t believe what I was doing had any purpose in the revival of France. Then I received a letter, which led to a meeting with a man called Antoine, a captain in the cavalry and he gave me instructions about my new role at the bank. I was involved in authorising all the payments of accounts involving our German customers. I was shown how I could inflate each of these payments by a small amount and forward this extra money to numbered bank accounts.”

“Mmm, very strange. A young bank clerk, like you, a boy, given so much authority. Can you explain that?”

“I was confused at first, but I felt very proud that I had a role in continuing our fight against Germany. I thought maybe they gave the job to me to protect important people like Monsieur Barbeau. If someone found out, they could blame it on me. I didn't mind. It was for France.”

“So you say! You Jews seem to have a strange approach to truth. Let me suggest what might have really happened. Let us just imagine that night in 1914. You were selected to help take out a machine gun emplacement, but you never got there. You let others give their lives to achieve that vital goal and in the noise and darkness, the rain and the smoke, you and another young officer abandoned your men.”

“No!”

“You hid through the next day in an adjacent forest and then at night, you split up and you made for the north, slipping through the line in the confusion of defeat. You stole some civilian clothes and mixed with refugees on their way back to see if there was anything left of their homes. You travelled by night and hid during the day. But we know you risked a daytime appearance in Guise on 25th September”

“How? I mean...”

“So, I am on the right lines, am I?”

“No, you're confusing me. It's all lies. I didn't run away. I was taken, ... by an officer.”

“So what is this?”

Madame Maillot produced a small blue booklet from a folder on the desk.

“It's my old bank savings book. Where did you get it? I left it behind.”

“Have a look at September 25th 1914. Is that your signature?”

“Yes, but,... I mean it looks like it, but,...”

“And where was the money withdrawn?”

“At Guise, I suppose, but,...”

“Now we're getting somewhere. Let me make a note. The prisoner, Lieutenant Benningstein admitted that he withdrew 150 Francs from his savings account on 25th September at Guisse.

“And maybe that is where you contacted your German friends, or at some other point before you reached Lille, for they were your friends already, weren't they? Friends of the young Lieutenant Benningstein, the Jew of German extraction, the

pretended French patriot who volunteered for the army in 1912, and joined the artillery taking additional training in signalling, so he became expert in both radio and Morse code operation.”

“It’s all lies. I volunteered because of my love for France. I could see a war with Germany was coming and I wanted to fight for my country.”

“Many people have wondered at the rapid German advance in 1914, but now we know we were betrayed by you and others: supposed French patriots who got themselves into positions from which they could betray their country to the enemy. It is so curious that they knew where to engage us to their greatest advantage. We had superior artillery, but the Germans knew our weak points and pressed their greater numerical strength into those positions. At that key point in the Battle of the Marne, when we might have stopped the advance and saved France, they knew just where to place their reinforcements and break through our lines. And there it was that you met your officer, but not a French officer, a German, who led you through the line and into a safe little hide-away. You see we have your accomplice. He has told us everything. So don’t try and pretend your ‘truth’ anymore, *Juif!*”

“But Madame, I have never been a spy and I will never betray France. It ...”

“Enough, get back to your cell. You have paper and pen. Write your confession and we shall discuss your future tomorrow. Maybe you can still be spared.”

Madame Maillot hurriedly snapped her note book closed, picked up the file and turned to the door, which opened as she approached, clicking efficiently behind her. Philippe felt a strong hand around his upper arm and he was taken to his cell. The light was off and he had to feel his way to the bed. He guessed it must actually still be night. There was no way of telling. He felt completely numb and drifted into a troubled sleep.

When the light came on he kept his eyes closed and curled into a tighter ball until the warder came and he had to slop out for the day. For most of the next few days he sat on his bed hugging his knees. Meals entered through the hatch at the bottom of the door. Plates etc. were collected in the morning. Otherwise he saw no-one. The exercise routine had been short-lived and reading was beyond him. He sat in solemn silence; a vacuum of consciousness. He forced himself to eat. They had taken everything from him. At least he would take their food.

The lined pad of paper beckoned from the floor. At first he wanted to rip it up in fury, but then realised that he might receive similar treatment in return. The gesture wasn’t worth it. On the third day he picked up the pen, lay down on his side and began

to write. He described his family and the few relatives of which he had any knowledge, his childhood and the joy he had had growing up in Paris, surrounded by the history and architecture of France. He made a point of saying why he loved France so much, its literature: Balzac, Maupassant, Mauriac and the thinkers, Voltaire and Montesquieu, the River Seine and the broad inviting countryside. He wrote at length of family trips out beyond Paris and tram rides to the Bois de Boulogne with his little sister, where they would have a picnic and he would pretend to be her horse, while she was a dashing prince, saving France from the barbarous Germans. Finally he described his version of events since August 1914 and signed it; loyal and obedient servant of France, Philippe Benningstein. As he did so the light was extinguished. He felt his way to the corner bucket, relieved himself and curled up on the bed, pulling his blankets around him.

He woke several times and on two occasions lay awake for what seemed like hours, staring into the pitch blackness. Yet, despite this, he felt a peace that had escaped him for several days. As far as he was concerned his conscience was clean. Eventually the cell was flooded with light once more. A guard entered, placed a tray on the floor, snatched up the paper and pen and was gone. Philippe squinted at the tray. A small pot of jam had joined the bread and hot chocolate. He scrambled off the bed, eager not to miss this rare treat. He pulled the slice of baguette apart and poured in the jam, smearing it along its length, eating slowly to savour the fruity flavour and crisp bread, downing it in sips of hot chocolate. As he finished he heard the keys in the door and slithered off the bed, ready to go to the interview room. To his surprise Madame Maillot stood framed in the doorway.

“We treat you with consideration, Jew-boy, and this is how you repay us. Do you think we are gentile fools”? Her eyes blazed with a cold fury as she threw Philippe’s manuscript into the room.

“But, Madame, every word of it is true, I swear it.”

“Maybe your mind, your twisted traitor’s mind, could believe such a pack of lies. If you are so stupid that you will not let Madame Maillot help you to spare your neck, then we will have to see what the court says about your lies. You are a stupid, stupid boy. Madame La Guillotine will not be so forgiving.”

The door swung shut and Philippe heard the click-clack of shoes on the tiled floor disappearing down the corridor. He sat on the bed in stunned silence for a long time. Soon he was rocking backwards and forwards. Somehow it relieved his sense of isolation. Was Madame Maillot really offering to help him, or was it just a trap. If he

went down that road it meant perjuring himself; admitting to things he hadn't done. He folded his arms, tucked his head down and rocked faster. If only he could talk to Maria and his parents. He saw only too clearly now that the army had been an empty answer. His parents' bourgeois little lives had seemed so meaningless, so trivial: his father's photographic business, his mother's eternal round of luncheons, teas and dressmakers. And then there was the synagogue: a closed world ruled by old men, living in the past. What did it matter for the health of the world if they cooked meat and milk in the same kitchen? And all those prayers to learn, and day after day pointlessly memorising Hebrew Scriptures. What a waste of his time!

But now he wanted it. Oh how he wanted the comfort his family and culture offered. He cast his eye around the bare whitewashed bricks of his cell and shivered. Not even a chair and table. Slowly he stopped his rocking, got down on his knees and retrieved his disembodied story, carefully putting the pages in order and read it through. Whatever happened next he needed to be clear about his story. He mustn't allow them to trick him into saying something that was untrue. He had to cling to this. It was all he had; his story, as he had written it and believed it.

As he went over the facts of his life in Lille, he realised there was something missing. He had just wanted to describe his life as a patriotic journey, to convince Madame Maillot to he was no treacherous deserter. Yet it was in Lille that he had first been aroused by feelings for a woman. She didn't really fit into the story, but she was part of his life and he wanted her now. Not just because she was young, pretty and entertaining, with an enchanting smile, that made him forget his serious work and his duty to France. She had sat close to him and taken his arm as they walked by the river. She had kissed him suddenly when they were in a quiet secluded spot under some trees and he had responded and taken her in his arms. His memory of the soft contours of her body aroused and comforted him. Why had he not thought about Giselle before? Was he so pre-occupied with himself that he'd forgotten about Giselle? What would she be thinking now? He had said he'd write from Paris. Could she not help him? They had met over dinner at the Barbeau house, where Giselle and her parents had been invited for dinner. Hearing them talk of their love for France, had encouraged Philippe to visit and tell them his story, in the hopes of being allowed to spend some time in the company of their daughter. The visit had been very successful and Philippe was invited to come again. From the spring of 1916 he had a firm friendship with Giselle and her

family. He found a blank sheet of paper and began to write a letter to her parents. They could testify to his love for France. Then he wrote to his own family.

Sometime in June

Philippe's days became routine: light on, slopping out, breakfast, lunch, dinner, light out. One day, he was taken to the interview room again and met two men in crisp suits. They questioned him carefully about his story and then asked him about his family, his upbringing, education, interests, political beliefs and religion. They talked quietly together and seemed about to leave, but then asked Philippe to repeat his story again. Seemingly satisfied they bade him a friendly farewell.

He had written his letters and given them to a warder to post. He had taken them without comment and despite his questions, Philippe had had no replies. As far as he could tell, three weeks had passed since his detention had begun, but with the lack of daylight, it was difficult to know for certain,.

He had gradually managed to organise his each day around reading, writing and exercise. After slopping-out and breakfast, he turned to the Bible, beginning with the book of Genesis and followed that with writing his daily journal. The pad of paper had soon run out and he had requested a note-book, which had promptly been provided, again without comment. Writing was followed by daily prayer – he had requested a skull cap, but without success. Then he did his first exercise session of the day, followed by reading. Victor Hugo was finished in no time. He had tried to make it last longer, but he was a fast reader and the pages seemed to turn by themselves. Then he turned to Joan of Arc, which proved to be remarkably interesting and he became particularly absorbed in the later parts, which were full of speculation on her state of mind as she was waiting to die. Unfortunately it led him down a rather morbid path and he had forced himself to turn to exercise to lift his spirits. As for Loyola's Spiritual Exercises, he found them dull and uncreative. He preferred his own prayers from the Jewish tradition. With some trepidation, he had dared to request some more reading matter and received four more books from the French classics, plus Don Quixote.

He quite often disappeared into moods of introspective contemplation. What was happening? Am I going to be kept there forever? I could be. No-one knows Philippe Benningstein was still alive except for my parents and they have no idea when or how

to contact me. Or am I to be tried? On what charges and when? At times, these questions whirled around in a cyclical dance like black crows in mental delirium and he lay for hours in the darkness, unable to sleep. Twice he wrote a letter to Madame Maillot asking to see his parents and to be given a lawyer. There was no response.

Then one morning, he had just settled to reading *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* when he heard the keys in his door. A soldier stomped in, threw a uniform on the bed and commanded him to dress. As he did so, his belongings were stuffed into a kitbag. As he was finishing a captain in a neatly pressed uniform marched into the room.

“Attention,” shouted the first soldier.

Philippe stopped and stood stiffly by his bed.

“No time for that Lieutenant Benningstein. Get yourself out of here at the double and follow me.”

Philippe buttoned his ill-fitting tunic and pulled on his boots, which were at least one size too small. He was immediately all fingers and thumbs. Military discipline was a thing of the past.

“Come on man, pull yourself together. You’re a lieutenant in the French army aren’t you or have you forgotten since you deserted.”

He spat on the cell floor and turned to the other soldier, “cuff him and bring up the rear with his belongings. The truck is in the yard. We’re trying to avoid the newspapers.”

They exited at a smart pace, turned left down the corridor, ascended a steep flight of stairs and came out through a heavy door into a cobbled yard, where there were three trucks.

“Which one, Sir?”

“The one on the far left. They’ll all leave together, but will take different routes, so we can try and avoid being followed. The high-ups are furious word’s got out before they’re ready.”

“Ready for what, Sir?” shouted Philippe.

“Ready for your trial, of course. You’re for the chop, you daft Jew.”

“When?”

“I don’t know, they’ll tell you when you get there. Come on. Hurry up or it’ll go even worse for you. Madame won’t be kept waiting.”

Philippe was hoisted into the back of the truck, blindfolded and made to sit on the floor, with his back to the cab, surrounded by four members of the military police.

Moments later he felt the truck rumble slowly over the uneven surface and turn out into the street. Then there was the sound of shouting and banging on the sides of the truck and louder intermittent thumps from what he thought were rocks or other projectiles. Then he heard the chanting.

“Juif! ... Juif! ... Juif!”

Philippe cowered on the floor and his guards put on their tin hats in case anything tore through the canvas.

Then they slowly began to gain speed and left the ruckus behind them.

“See what trouble you’ve caused, Jew,” said one of the men, kicking Philippe’s thigh.

“Hey, lay off, Simon, he’s got a hard enough time coming up,” said a fair haired corporal who then turned to Philippe. “You know if you’d just kept your head down a few more days you’d have been de-mobbed with the rest of them and gone home to your family. Why did you desert when it was nearly all over?”

Philippe raised his head. “I never deserted. I don’t know what’s going on, but I never deserted.”

“You don’t expect anyone to believe that do you? How did you end up in Lille, then?” continued the corporal.

Philippe told them his story as they rumbled and bounced through the Paris streets. With every raucous comment and jeer he became less sure of its veracity.

“You can’t be serious? And you a Jew as well,” said the first man.

“What’s my religion got to do with it?”

“Everything! ‘The tale of a patriotic Jew,’” began one of the others in a mocking tone. “One upon a time there was a Jew-boy who loved his country more than money

...

“and all the other Jews got together and threw him out of the synagogue,” chimed in the first man amidst howls of laughter.”

“It’s all true, every word of it,” shouted Philippe.

“Well, you’re going to need a bloody clever lawyer, when they put you on trial next week.”

“Next week!”

“Didn’t you know? They’ve been playing you very carefully. I reckon you haven’t a hope of getting off, my friend. Guilty or innocent, you’re for the chop.”

The truck lurched round a corner, accelerated again for a few seconds and came to a sudden halt.

Amidst lots of shouting, Philippe was marched into an arched quadrangle, where he was made to stand to attention, while the another captain inspected his ill-fitting uniform.

“We’ll have to get you looking a bit better than this for the trial. Have to make sure the papers know we’ve been looking after you all right won’t we?”

Philippe said nothing.

“Won’t we?” The tone was menacing.

“Yes, Sir.”

“That’s better. Now is there anything else you have to say?”

“Yes, Sir. When can I see my family and I believe it is army regulations that I should be assigned a lawyer.”

“As to the second, very true and arrangements have been made for you to see your legal counsel this afternoon, but what good it will do you, I don’t know. As for seeing family, it’s no go. A new law has been passed in the national assembly, forbidding foreigners and Jews from access to military establishments, so I’m afraid our hands are tied ... sorry. Now, let’s get you to your quarters, then a shave and haircut. At least it won’t look like you’re on the run. The civilian authorities haven’t got much of an eye for military standards, have they? ... Follow me.”

The small group crossed the quadrangle and descended a short flight of stairs into a wide corridor, with cells on each side.

“Ah, here it is.”

The captain stopped in front of one of the cells, motioning Philippe inside to join his kitbag which lay on the bed.

“Sir, could these cuffs be removed, please.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Corporal! The cuffs.”

Philippe sat on his bed, examining his once more bloodied wrists and looking round the room. He was pleased to see that although he was below ground level he had a window, which allowed him to see a small patch of sky. He also had a small desk and chair. He emptied his belongings out of the kitbag. Everything which he had come to treasure was there, including his civilian clothes.

A soup and bread lunch was followed by a regulation haircut and shave. An older man in civilian dress came and measured him and shortly afterwards another

uniform arrived, which fitted much better than the first one. Another identical one was placed on his bed. Once he was suitably dressed he was marched down the corridor to an interview room and told to sit. His escort took up a position by the door. Philippe half expected to Madame Maillot to emerge from some secret doorway, but instead a few minutes later the door behind him flew open, the escort barked “attention,” and in walked three officers; two colonels and a captain. Philippe pushed back his chair and stood with his hands to his sides, as straight as a ram-rod. The three newcomers formed a line on the other side of the desk and stared unblinking at the young Lieutenant.

“So this is what all the fuss is about. You wouldn’t think such a small package could do so much damage,” began the bespectacled colonel in the middle.

Philippe made to open his mouth.

“Lieutenant, you will speak when we are ready.”

“Now,” began the second colonel, opening a brown folder he had placed on the desk, “we are here to charge you formally with espionage and treason against the French State and People. We will then leave Captain Armand to talk with you and determine how he might represent you in court.”

He shuffled his feet slightly and continued.

“I hear-by charge you, Lieutenant Philippe Benningstein, of the 15th Field Artillery Regiment on three counts of breaking army regulations. Firstly, that on the night of September 10th you deserted your post in order to serve the interests of the enemy. How do you plead?”

Philippe’s eyes began to fill. Blinking back the tears, he swallowed hard and said as strongly as possible “not guilty, Sir.”

The colonel made a note in his file and continued, secondly “that you had previously been involved in giving tactical information to the Germans before and during August and September 1914. How do you plead?”

This time he met the colonel’s gaze directly. “Not guilty, Sir.”

The pen struck the page again.

“Thirdly, that subsequent to your desertion, you continued to consort with the German military, sending funds from French businesses to military bank accounts in Germany.”

Philippe could hardly believe his ears. “Not guilty, Sir,” he barked out.

“In that case, he is all yours, Captain. Your trial will begin on Monday and may God help you, because nothing else will.”

The sergeant standing at the door saluted as the colonels left and the door clicked shut.

The captain looked uneasily at Philippe. "Well, we better get down to work Lieutenant. My name is Captain Armand. You may sit."

"Thank you, Sir." Philippe sat stiffly.

"At ease, lieutenant. You can relax with me. I'm your counsel, but I don't know what good I can do. They're all baying for your blood. From the evidence I've been shown, it's an open and shut case. Everyone's looking for scapegoats for our defeat and you're just perfect for them. Have you any idea what's going on out there?"

"Nothing, Sir. I don't even know what day or date it is."

"You're pretty young aren't you, 21? 22?"

"23, Sir."

"And you're certain you're innocent ... I mean I have to ask you, because your best defence might be your youth and ignorance or that you were forced into it or blackmailed in some way."

"Sir, I joined up in 1912 because I loved France and I could see a war was coming and wanted to help my country. I have never been a spy and would rather die than be a traitor to France. That's the honest truth."

"I think you better tell me your story and I'll see what I can make of it."

Philippe described his life from joining the army in 1912 until his arrest.

"And you've no idea who this officer was who took you away from the battlefield in September 1914 and he wasn't German?"

"No! He wasn't German. Don't you even believe me? You're my counsel, for God's sake!"

"Calm down. I just have to be certain, because they'll try and trip you up in court. Did you see what rank he was?"

"It was so dark and he was wearing battle dress. I would say he was a colonel or higher."

"And you say you were taken to a chateau in a forest near Caen?"

"Yes, Sir."

"And this Monsieur Barbeau, the Bank Manager, he instructed you about your work?"

“Yes, initially, but once I started working on the German accounts I hardly saw him at work. I thought he probably didn’t want to get involved. Then he could deny all knowledge if anyone found out what was going on.”

“And you weren’t suspicious?”

“No, it was a clandestine operation, so I expected this type of secrecy.”

“And what about Giselle? Did you talk to her about your work?”

“No, but I did tell her parents, because I could see that they were French patriots, and so they would let me walk out with their daughter.”

“Do you have an address for this Giselle?”

“Yes, of course. She lives with her parents at ‘Les Bourbons’; they’re staunch royalists you see, Avenue du Lac, Lille. If her father would testify, he could clear my name.”

The captain looked thoughtful. “We’ll see. I’ll ask for the trial to be delayed, while we investigate these possibilities. Is there anything else you want to tell me?”

“No, but can you get a message to my parents? They used to live on the Champs-Élysées. My father was a fashionable photographer before the war. We had a first floor apartment, but I heard the Germans requisitioned all those apartments for their officers and my family moved to a place near the Rue du Temple. My friend, Antoine, found out for me.”

“Do you have their address.”

“No, Antoine said it wasn’t safe. He took my mail to them himself.”

“Ah, the mysterious Antoine?”

“Yes, I was supposed to meet him the day I was arrested. He was going to arrange for me to see my parents.”

“And I don’t suppose you have any way of contacting this ‘Antoine’?”

“No. He was my only connection with *La Revanche*.”

“*La Revanche*?”

“Yes, that’s the organisation we were working for; *La Revanche*. We were all working to make France strong again.”

“And you trusted him completely.”

“Of course. We were in the army. He showed me his army identification card. He was a captain and I learned to obey my superiors, Captain, Sir.”

“As you say, Lieutenant. Well, I will see what I can discover for you.”

Captain Armand strode to the door, nodded to the guard and left.

For the rest of the day Philippe found it difficult to keep up with his routine. He had so many questions. His world seemed to have imploded: his whole purpose for living had become the cause of his impending demise. And what had happened to Antoine? Was he just part of this weird and wonderful game that somebody was playing. He tried exercising, reading and reciting a few familiar prayers, but darkness was closing in around him. In the end he just pulled his blankets around himself and curled up on the bed as misery overwhelmed him.

Le Gaulois

June 21 1917

Le Plus Grand Journal Du Matin

Jewish Traitor Awaits Justice

It is with great relief that the French people can at last begin to understand the inconceivable defeat of our glorious army in September 1914. Le Juif, Lieutenant Philippe Benningstein is now awaiting trial on charges of espionage against the French nation. Our correspondent has seen documents held by the Ministry de Justice, which reveal just how this traitor's activities did critical damage to our valiant resistance to Germany's barbarous assault on the French nation and people. We now know that as Frenchmen were giving their lives for our nation, this traitor was sending coded signals to his friends behind the German lines, revealing the positions of our troops and artillery. Not only did he cause the deaths of thousands of our fathers and sons, but also must be held personally responsible for the tragic loss of General Joffre, who could no longer face life in the face of defeat. Once again La France is under attack from those to whom it has offered a home. They have been called the blood suckers of Europe, preying on the defenceless as they did upon Christ himself. Now one of their number has brought France to her knees.

Riots tear through Jewish quarter

As rumours leaked out from the Paris Prefecture and the Ministry of war yesterday regarding a Jewish traitor in our midst, crowds gathered outside Jewish owned shops and businesses. Trouble began around midnight, when

appeals for calm by the Paris Gendarmerie had proven useless. Despite appeals from M. Le Mayor, rioters smashed windows and ransacked shops and offices throughout the Jewish quarter. Fire fighters were called as petrol bombs were thrown into a synagogue, where twenty-five Jews died, and more than fifty were injured. A nearby Jewish school was also attacked and ransacked. Monsieur Le Mayor said that while he recognised the anger of the French people, we need to await the outcome of the trial.

La Revanche

Voters will have noticed the recent arrival of a new voice in French politics. Proclaiming itself as the voice of France's future, this new party has registered candidates across France for the forthcoming elections for the Assembly Nationale. Early indications are that it stands well to the right on major political issues and will make much of the Benningstein treason trial.

Strong New Measures to Defend the Republic

In advance of November elections, the provisional government is facing pressure to strengthen the penal code. Measures proposed include new laws to investigate and punish those who profited under the German occupation. Those working within the financial sector, especially people of foreign origins will be especially targeted. The reintroduction of public executions, banned under the occupation, is also under discussion.

Friday 22nd June

A man wearing a heavy coat and black trilby turned out of the Rue de Birague and into the Rue St. Antoine. At the Place de la Bastille he met two similarly dressed men and together they walked down the Boulevard Henri IV until they reached the elegantly dressed window of a photographic salon. The first man produced a key and they all went inside. A few minutes later, they emerged carrying two ladders and commenced the removal of the name board above the window – ‘Benningstein Portrait and Artistic Photographic Studio’. This done, they remained in the building until after dark, when a figure emerged and disappeared into the night. A few minutes later a truck arrived. The three men filled it with boxes, after which it was driven by a circuitous route to an alleyway off the Rue de Birague.

“Oh, Joseph, I thought you were never coming back. You do frighten me,” cried Hannah as she flung her arms round her husband’s neck.

“The riots last night must have destroyed the telephone wires. Now we must get the truck emptied and back to Monsieur Lesser before it’s too late. There are Gendarmes on the streets, but I don’t know if they will protect us.”

Joseph disappeared down the front steps into the street and together with his friends spent the next half hour filling the downstairs hallway with storage boxes and photographic equipment and then disappeared once more into the night. Maria was in bed when she heard her father’s heavy tread on the steps and the sound of the bolts on the heavy oak door. Hannah had rearranged the boxes as best she could so that the occupants of the downstairs flat could get to the front door. Joseph squeezed through, climbed the steep stairs and slumped into a fireside chair in the kitchen.

Hannah squeezed his shoulders. “Do you think it’s enough? Will we be safe? Do you think I should send Maria away to Aunt Naomi at Melun? She’ll be safe there.”

“No Jew is safe at the moment anywhere in France. It’s happening again. The son’s and daughters of Abraham will never be really safe anywhere.”

“Why is it such a hard thing to sit in the palm of God’s hand?”

Joseph turned to look up into his wife’s moistened eyes. “I don’t know my dear. I don’t know.”

“But we have so many gentile friends. They are good people. They will help us. Monsieur and Madame Veilon will take her and keep her hidden till it’s safe.”

“We must hope so, but even good people find it hard to stand against the mob. Anyway, my dear, I haven’t eaten since this morning and if I’m to die it’ll not be on an empty stomach.”

Hannah took two plates of chicken casserole from the oven and set them on the table. Tears glistened in her eyes.

“Oh Joseph, you mustn’t joke like that.”

He put his hand on hers and smiled as she took her place at the table. “When you can’t joke, what is there left in life?”

The couple ate in silence for a while.

“Do you think he did it?” asked Hannah, laying her knife and fork down on her plate.

“I can’t talk about him. I don’t understand.”

“But, Joseph, *I* must. He’s my son and yours. He’s going to be tried in a few weeks and then probably executed. The newspapers say they have the evidence and we’ve hardly heard from him since the war started. We don’t know what he’s been doing. Do you think he’s guilty?”

Joseph continued to chew his meat thoughtfully, but his colour was slowly rising.

At last his wife threw her napkin down on the table. “Answer me, Joseph Benningstein, answer me! You can’t hide all your feelings away any longer. You owe it to me, your wife and to him.”

Joseph placed his knife and fork together carefully on the plate, picked up his chair and moved round to the other side of the table, putting his arm round Hannah’s shoulders. “My dear, you know I love you and you also know I am a man of few words. I honestly don’t know what to think. To be treated like this by our only son. He goes off to the army with the love of France in his heart. He disappears and then we have a few notes from him over the last two and a half years saying he is well and working for France, and then this. I think to myself, how can a son treat his parents like this? We’ve kept quiet as he asked us to. Has he cheated us and France? And then I remember Dreyfus. They haven’t forgotten that that Jew was innocent and they have always wanted revenge and now I think somehow they have found a way to use our son to exact that revenge, so that people will say they were right all along and we Jews are really treacherous criminals, selling the Republic to the hated Germans.”

“We must help Philippe. You must go and tell them they are wrong. You must tell them he loves France and they must not hurt him. Oh, Papa, you must go tomorrow. They will believe you.” Maria had run from her hiding place in the corner of the room and flung her arms around her father’s waist. “Oh Papa, you will sort it all out and Philippe will come home.”

“Oh Maria, you naughty girl, you should be in bed. Mama and Papa are having a private conversation, now please go back to bed and I will come up and see you. I told you to stay in bed,” replied Hannah, half rising.

Joseph gently touched her knee and she resumed her seat. He stared seriously into Maria’s trusting face. “Mama is right, sometimes we have to talk about serious things that may not be good for you to hear about, but seeing as you have heard us talking, I will explain a little. Some people think Philippe has done something very bad which has helped the Germans and they are very angry and want to hurt us and our friends from the synagogue, where we go to pray to God. We will try to help Philippe, but for the moment we need to stay very quiet and not go outside or we may get in trouble and make things even worse for Philippe. Now you come with me back to your bedroom and we’ll say a prayer for Philippe.”

Joseph folded his strong arms around his daughter and took her back to her room, while Hannah scraped the remains of their meal into the bin and washed the dishes. The floor boards squeaked as he returned to the kitchen.

Hannah turned and smiled. “Thank you. It was for the best and she trusts you so much.”

“We can’t shield her from everything. We’ll have to explain carefully, so she doesn’t get frightened too much, but she won’t be able to go out and play like she used to. It’s going to be difficult.”

“Do you think we should go away, maybe to England?”

“I think we should just keep our heads down for the present. We need to be here to help Philippe if we can. In the mean time, I need to bring those boxes up here.”

“Joseph, don’t be silly, you hardly slept last night and you’ve been working all day. Pascal is coming in the morning, you can do it then.”

Joseph turned and kissed his wife on the forehead. “You’re right as always, but I’ll just bring up the box of lenses. I can’t afford to lose those.”

“Well, just make sure that’s all.”

“I will. I promise.”

Saturday 23rd June

The door scraped its usual way across the concrete floor as the warder entered with the staple soup and bread. Philippe stood to attention, thanked the man and saluted in the required manner. A military police officer, lolled in the doorway tapping his swagger stick against his right boot. The warder left without looking at Philippe and the door clanged shut.

He sat down at his small desk and continued reading *Le Compt de Montecristo*. Although he was hungry, he didn't want to look too eager to eat. He could tell they often watched him through the spy hole in the door for a few minutes after the food was delivered. When he heard the quiet clink of the cover falling into place, he lifted the soup bowl and spoon. As he did so, his fingers felt something under the plate. His heart began to beat faster. What if they were still watching? He returned the bowl to the table and consumed the rest of his dinner, polishing the inside of the bowl with his last morsel of bread. He wondered how to handle this unexpected event. With shaking hands he picked up the bowl, turned his back to the door and made for the toilet bucket in the corner, slipping his hand under the bowl to retrieve the package. He stood for a few minutes by the bucket, as if urinating and then returned to his table and replaced the bowl. He was pretty sure he was safe, but he didn't want to take a chance. With the tiny parcel clutched in his hand, he began his usual exercise routine, up and down the cell fifty times. Finally, he rested, his back to the cell door and opened the package to find a carefully folded, paper thin lace skull cap and a note – '*Vous n'êtes pas seul,*' plus a very short prayer in *Yiddish*.

Philippe wanted scream, jump on his bed and run round his cell for joy. Instead he stuffed the cap and note into his pocket and sat down. Slowly he retrieved the two precious gifts, placed the skull cap in the palm of his hand and pressed it down on his head. His hand didn't quite cover it, but he hoped that anyone looking in wouldn't notice. Having said the prayer three times, he decided the cap was too dangerous to use except at night. Now the darkness would become his friend, his liberty. He felt so happy. Only the faces of Maria and his parents could have made him happier. Someone outside knew and cared.

The police let the violence continue for three nights until they used water cannon and batons to stop the thugs. The next night everything was quiet. Joseph's salon had

been ransacked and the Cohen family, living upstairs were stripped, beaten and made to run for their lives. Joseph, Hannah and Maria lay in their beds in their darkened apartment. Despite help from friends, they did not know how the wider Jewish community might be responding to news of Philippe's treason. Somebody might give them away. The next day notices appeared in the streets warning Jews of a new Paris by-law proscribing the presence of Jews on the streets between the hours of ten o'clock at night and six in the morning, 'for your own safety and protection'. The Cohens moved in with the Benningsteins and Joseph spent the next few days helping several of the Jewish shop keepers to repair their shops, while Hannah stayed at home to teach Maria and the Cohen children. They had taken the name of Linz to protect their identity.

After seven days cooped up at home, both Maria and Hannah pleaded with Joseph to let them go out with him.

"They can't possibly tell we're Jews. We just look like everyone else."

"But we might give ourselves away, somehow. I won't risk it, not yet."

"Please, Papa! I'm a big strong girl and I'm going crazy at home. Please, why can't you take us out?"

Joseph pushed his upper lip up in a grimace and frowned horribly, staring out of the window across their narrow alleyway.

"All right, but just for a short time. We'll walk down to the river and along the bank and then back. It'll do us all good to get some sun. Put on your best clothes. Let's go out for a Sunday afternoon stroll, like any other French family."

Maria had never been so pleased to be dressed in her best cream dress, coat and hat, as she drank in the fresh September air and danced along with her parents. The sun had a sparkly freshness about it. When they reached the Seine, a Bateau Mooche was gliding by, its passengers waving happily to the passersby on the banks of the river. Maria ran ahead, trying to keep up with the boat.

"Oh, Joseph, isn't France a beautiful country? Why would anyone betray it?" said Hannah quietly to her husband, when they were alone. Joseph let her take his arm.

"I don't believe any of it. And not just about Philippe. It just doesn't make sense. There's some very nasty politics behind it. You remember Dreyfus. It's just the same, but I'd have thought we'd have had more friends now. There are influential Jews amongst the socialists."

"Monsieur Benningstein?"

Joseph and Hannah froze for several moments before they half turned.

“*Excusez moi, Monsieur. Je m’appelle Linz, Monsieur Jean Linz. Au revoir, Monsieur,*” replied Joseph, a phrase he had practised a hundred times in case he was recognised.

The young man before them wore a turned down collar and a shabby, but respectable suit.

“*Shalom*. May the face of God rest upon you and give you peace.”

Joseph stared, as if he didn’t understand the words. “I think you ...”

“*Monsieur*, if you are trying to trap us and hurt us, we will call the *gendarmes*. At least they will protect us at this hour,” interrupted Hannah defiantly.

“Who are you?” said Joseph, recovering the initiative.

“My name is Simon Reinard. I am an army prison warder at the barracks where your son is being held. I am a non-observant Jew, so my racial origin is unknown to the authorities. Your son is safe for the present and I will do what I can to help him. If you want to send him a message, leave it at Levi’s *boulangerie* on the Boulevard du Temple. Now, Monsieur, do you have a light? It will explain my approaching such a well dressed couple, if anyone is watching.”

“Yes, certainly, here ... here you are,” stammered Joseph as he fumbled with his lighter. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

Monsieur Reinard touched his cap and was gone.

“Oh, Joseph, this is the best day I’ve had in weeks. It’s going to be all right. I know it,” cried Hannah, smiling into Joseph’s still perplexed face. He put his hand in hers and smiled.

“I hope so, my dear. I hope so. We will ask the Rabbi to come and say prayers for Philippe at Shabbat.”

“Who was that, Maman? Why are you looking so happy?”

“Oh, no-one, my dear. He just reminded us of Philippe and that made us happy.”

“Thinking of Philippe always makes me happy,” replied Maria as she once again skipped on ahead.

Saturday 21st July

Barbara raced down the beech in pursuit of her sunhat, leaped over a child's sand castle and splashed her way into the still cold North Sea water, grabbed the hat, shook it and plonked it on her head.

"It'll make your hair go frizzy," said Stephen as he emerged from the water in front of her.

"Who cares? We're on holiday."

"We must keep up appearances, my dear."

"She doesn't sound like that," replied Barbara through her laughter.

"I should hope not too ... I'd be really worried."

Stephen gave her a peck on the cheek and took her hand as they walked back to their beech hut. Barbara held her hat firmly on her head with the other.

Stephen still hadn't been keen to exhibit his injuries at Scarborough, but with Barbara's encouragement he overcame his fears and joined the family for their summer holiday. It was the first such expedition since the idyllic days of 1914. Even Stuart managed to join them for the whole week, though it turned out later that the Master of St. John's college, where he held a junior fellowship had insisted that he take some leave. However, he threw himself into the holiday and delighted Barbara by giving her intensive tennis coaching every morning after breakfast. Albert had at first been reluctant to join the family, particularly as it meant dressing for dinner every night, but mother eventually brought him round. The week was a great success.

For Stephen, it was his first opportunity to try out 'his new toy', as mother called it, not unkindly. She was relieved to see more signs that he was 'settling down'. He had bought it on an impulse, walking through Huddersfield's Imperial Arcade one Saturday morning. Altogether, the tripod and camera had cost him five guineas. Once he'd started of course, there was more expense. He had to kit out his own darkroom in one of the old attic bedrooms and there would be the on-going cost of chemicals and photographic paper, but it was the first time he'd been excited about anything since leaving Russia.

News that the government had fallen only intensified his excitement. Winston Churchill had left to Liberal Party and crossed the floor of the House of Commons to join the Conservatives, taking fifty-three Liberal Party members with him. The issue was the old Liberal Achilles heel: home rule for Ireland. The result was that Asquith's government lost its majority and would have lost power immediately, but no-one wanted a summer election. So the women's suffrage bill was rushed through in readiness for the autumn. At least there was cross party support for that. It also meant the longest

election campaign the country had ever faced. Stephen was elated at the prospect of catching it all on one of his new cameras – he had three by the end of the summer and was feeling quite modern, especially since acquiring one of the new 35mm Leica from Germany.

Many miles to the east, Alexander Feodorovich Kerensky posed for photographs with the other members of his government outside the walls of the Kremlin in the warm August sunshine. He was still limping slightly and easily became breathless, but was determined to spend some time meeting the people of Moscow. Complaints had been heard that the new government was as remote as the Tsar, so Kerensky had taken his entire cabinet out into the heartland of Russia to meet the people of Muscovy and beyond. As a result Kerensky was starting to be called the People's Tsar. He disclaimed the title in public, but was quietly contented, though his greatest test was still to come. He and Brusilov, his closest political advisor, ambled unhurriedly towards the Kremlin gates. They had nothing to fear: the Imperial Guard and Moscow police were maintaining strict surveillance.

“Alexander Feodorovich, you can't be serious, after all we have achieved!”

“Aleksei, there is no other way, either we become a liberal democracy, with full freedom of speech and political opinion or we remain an oppressive autocracy. We have to take the risk.”

“But we know that Lenin and the Bolsheviks were behind the atrocity that nearly cost you your life. He has no commitment to liberal democracy. Do you think he'd let the Constituent Assembly sit, if he took power?”

“We don't know that Lenin was behind the bomb. It has never been proven in a court of law and it is there that we must put our faith. Constitutional law is our only refuge.”

“Oh, you are such a romantic idealist. Russia needs time to let our reforms take effect. Our government is in its infancy. There is so much to do. You have been fêted for your land reforms and industry is booming. The Rouble is steady. The banks are falling over themselves to lend to the industrialists. Why risk everything for the sake of you political ideals?”

“You have already said it yourself, precisely because I am an idealist. I believe in the democratic ideal and I cannot hide behind a sham. And we must have an eye to the future. Unless the people demand a republic, which I doubt, in nine years a new Tsar

will sit upon the throne. We must ensure that democratic freedoms are embedded in the life of the nation long before he reaches his majority. If we fail the democratic principle, the Tsarina will use it against us.”

“But a year or two won’t make any difference. Please reconsider, for the sake of your friends, for the sake of Russia!”

“It is for Russia. You must see it my friend. You worry too much. The people have bread, the workers have bonuses. The slums of Petrograd are being cleared and new workers’ villages will be rising by next spring. This is not the time of revolution. Lenin’s words will fall on deaf ears. You mark my words. Lenin will fail. Anyway, it is not for me to decide. When the Assembly meets, it will vote on the new constitution. The people will decide.”

Friday 24th August

Barbara was trying on a dress her mother was making for her. For year after interminable year, the end of August had meant preparations for a new school year, but not this year. Barbara had passed her Higher School Certificate and been granted a place at Manchester University, reading Political Economy.

“No! No! No! He can’t do it. He’s a fool.” Stephen stormed out of the breakfast room, newspaper in hand, through the sitting room and into Father’s study, slamming the door behind him. Half an hour later he re-emerged, a long white envelope in his hand, put on his hat and coat, picked up his stick and left the house. Barbara made to follow him, but her mother pulled her back. “Leave him, we’ll find out what it’s all about later and I haven’t finished with these sleeves.” They heard the soft chug of the Austin Seven going down the drive.

An hour later, Barbara and her mother were just finishing morning coffee when Stephen returned and slumped down on the sofa. Mother poured him a cup and he drank it greedily.

“Thank you Mother, I needed that.” He looked at them as they regarded him enquiringly. “I suppose you want to know what that was all about.”

“It would be nice,” offered Barbara disapprovingly.

“I’m sorry, but I just couldn’t control myself. Kerensky and the Russians are going to let Lenin and the Bolshevik leadership back into the country. It’s madness. They nearly killed me for God’s sake! Reading about it just brought it all back. It’s like

letting the Irish Republican Army lose in London. I just had to write to him. He's such a fool, such a romantic fool!"

Stephen went upstairs for a few minutes and returned with camera and tripod in hand, disappearing out into the garden to photograph some of the birds before they began their autumn migration.

Karl had been surprised how quickly he had settled back into life in East Prussia. His mother fussed over him a lot and refused to let him get involved in work on the estate until she considered he was quite ready. "You must give yourself time to recover from such a serious accident." His sister had married two years previously, but with no grandchildren on the way, she was lacking an outlet for her motherly instincts.

However, the advent of summer weather had allowed Karl to accompany his father around their estate, meeting the tenants and other workers and familiarising himself with his role as assistant to the estate manager, which his father thought would give him a good grounding. Within the first few weeks he had begun to compile a list of work practices, which would have to change, if the estate was to remain viable, but after one minor suggestion was firmly rebuffed, he decided to hold back and watch for a while.

What his return to the land did allow for were opportunities really to appreciate his surroundings. Apart from his beloved Tiergarten, Berlin had afforded him few opportunities to indulge his love of nature. Once he was fit enough, he took to rising early, saddling a horse and riding out across the undulating plains, spurring his horse to a gallop. When he was well away from any sign of people, he would bring her gradually to a stop by a small wooded copse, or water meadow and draw out his field glasses to survey the terrain. There he would sit immobilised, watching a kite or hawk swooping down on some hidden prey. He had surprised himself as to how well he had adjusted to the country life. It was only since he had stopped that he realised how hard he had actually been working and he was pleased to be able to bury himself in obscurity for a while and avoid any politically sensitive eyes. His injuries had also been a good excuse for avoiding the sort of trivial social occasions which he had hated even in his youth. In addition, despite parental objections he had grown a beard.

His announcement that he was returning to Berlin was therefore greeted with great consternation and not a little anger.

“But it’s the middle of harvest. We need you here. You must decide if you’re going to live here or Berlin. You cannot live in two worlds. We thought you were happy here.”

“Father, I am, but I’ve had some news, in a letter yesterday. Please, I do love it here and I want to stay, but I have something I must do; some unfinished business.”

“And I don’t suppose you can tell us what it is.”

Karl stared down at the floor for a few moments.

“It is to do with my accident. I have to go. I will tell you everything on my return. I promise.”

“I knew there was something you weren’t telling us. You must be honest with your parents. We can help. We know people. Are you in some trouble?”

“No. No. No, there’s nothing you can help with. Please, I’ll take the night train tonight, and will tell you everything when I return. Trust me. I love you both and I will be back, but I have to do this.”

Karl felt a dull ache in his back, and involuntarily rubbed it. His father had turned away, but his mother noticed the movement.

“Are you all right, dear? You look hot and flushed. Sit down. I’ll ring for some coffee.”

“No, Mother, please. I’m fine. I just pulled a muscle riding. I’ll be all right. I must pack. Please, just believe me. I’ll be back in a little while and everything will be fine.”

His father turned from the window.

“Well, if you feel you need to go, I suppose you must, but don’t play games with us, boy. Come and stay or decide to leave us and I’ll make other arrangements for the estate.”

“Thank you, father, I promise I’ll be back as soon as I can, but trust me. I really do want to come back and live here.”

Karl settled into his private compartment on the express sleeper to Berlin, and took out Alicia’s letter. He had met their village *postbote*, riding out to deliver the mail early the previous morning, and had offered to relieve him of some of his burden. The man had been reluctant, but Karl had insisted and sent him on his way. He dismounted and rested his back against a fence. Ouch! He rubbed his back and wondered how he could have strained it. He thumbed through the mail; mostly estate business for his

father or the manager. There was hardly ever anything for him. Then his heart began to race. French stamps and a hand that he had only seen once. He ripped open the envelope and read...

Dear Karl

I hope this letter finds you well. No doubt my silence has made you forget me or maybe hate me, but if there is any room in your heart, please read on.

My father is sick and I found your address and the letters he had kept from me amongst his papers. I am writing now, because we are in terrible trouble and I have no-one else to turn to. No-doubt you have heard about the treason trial of Philippe Benningstein, which has made many French people turn against the Jewish minority in France.

You would not have realised, but my family are Jews, but although we have lived in France for four generations and do not formally practice the Jewish faith, we were forced to leave our house by an angry mob. My father had been unwell and on the day of the attack he was hit on the head by one of our persecutors and was seriously injured. He is now in a hospital for the poor and destitute and because he is in a coma, I am dependent on the help of a friend of mine from my school days. Because we do not have any connections with the synagogues in Paris, we have no support from the Jewish community.

If you still have a spark of love for us, please send some small assistance to the address below.

With my loving devotion

Alicia Languere

Apartment B, 256 Rue Franquet, 15^e Arrondissement, Paris.

The train arrived in Berlin in the grey city dawn. Karl lifted his case down from the luggage rack, negotiated the train corridor and climbed down the three steps to the platform. He refused the help of a porter and made straight for the station forecourt, his

hat firmly down over his eyes and his collar up. He cast around for a motorised cab and was about to move, when a uniformed chauffeur approached him.

“Herr von Allenstein?”

“Ja.”

“Your uncle sent me collect you.”

Karl was immediately suspicious.

“But my uncle didn’t know I was coming.”

He looked about him and was about to make a run for it, when the man held out an envelope.

“He asked me to give you this.”

Karl tucked his suitcase safely between his legs and took the envelope, still eyeing the man cautiously, and read the note. ‘Your father telephoned us and asked me to take care of you in Berlin. He is worried. This is Herr Wallendorf from my office. He is safe. I know about Alicia.’ Karl stared in amazement.

“Herr von Allenstein, we need to move. They may have seen us and be suspicious.”

“Who? ... Yes, all right. Thank you.”

Karl nodded slightly, the man seized his suitcase and they headed off back into the station, past the ticket office and out of a side entrance, where a green Mercedes Benz and another chauffeur were waiting.

“Get in. We mustn’t be seen and followed. We don’t believe they have traced your identity yet, but this could be all they need.”

He threw the case in the front and they both piled into the back seat.

“Take a circuitous route to Herr Gotthardt’s residence in Charlottenburg. We best be on the safe side,” said Herr Wallendorf to his chauffeur.

“By the way, the uniforms were your uncle’s idea. He thought they might help avoid detection. Not sure, myself. Dieter Wallendorf. I work with your uncle Albrecht. It’s a pleasure to meet such a brave man.”

“Or a stupid one,” replied Karl, as they shook hands.

“Well, maybe, but you’ve done a great service to Germany. Albrecht will explain.”

Dieter looked round at the cars behind them. There were only two. At that time of the morning, it wasn’t busy.

“Take the next left and then a right whenever you like. We’ll see if either of them follows us.” They turned out onto Grunerstrasse, travelling north-east.

“Good. We’ll hold this for a while. Then, if it seems we’re in the clear we’ll double back along the north side of the Spree and take Franklinstrasse down to Charlottenburg.”

He then turned to Karl. “Oh, by the way. Meet Wilhelm Baader. He’s never lost anyone yet.”

“Gutenmorgen, Herr Baader.”

“Gutenmorgen, Mein Herr.”

A few more minutes elapsed before Dieter Wallendorf relaxed.

“You can take the next left now, Baader, and make for Herr Gotthardt’s place.”

“Thank you for the precautions, but I did have a plan and with the beard I should have been all right.”

“We understand, but you’ve rattled a pretty nasty cage and we know they’re covering the main stations round the clock. There’ve been sightings of you as far a field as Frankfurt and Hamburg, as well as Marienburg. They don’t know where to look, but they’re certainly looking hard.”

“So, what ...”

“Your uncle will explain. I don’t know it all as well as he does, so I’d rather leave it to him.”

They continued in silence until the car swept into a drive and drew up at the imposing front door. Karl thanked the driver and made to get his case from the front seat.

“Leave that. Baader’ll bring it. We’re already late. Your uncle will be worried. He’s very fond of you, you know.”

Aunt Meta was first to greet them, flinging her arms round her nephew, before greeting Herr Wallendorf formally. Uncle Albrecht shook hands with them both and looked relieved. He and Herr Wallendorf then disappeared into his study, asking the maid to bring coffee. Aunt Meta monopolised Karl, leading him into the breakfast room for a full-scale breakfast and inquisition about his parents and life in Marienburg. Karl hardly knew any up to date news of the people she questioned him about. Half an hour later Uncle Albrecht returned.

“*Gut*. I see you have eaten well. You have done a marvellous job for the German nation, my dear,” he said turning to his wife.

“I don’t know what you mean. I’ve just fed my nephew, not the German army. Now let him go ...”

“Plenty of time for rest later, we need a little talk while Herr Wallendorf is hear. Come!”

Karl was ushered across the hallway and for the first time entered his uncle’s study. It was rather larger than he had expected, with an oak desk in one corner, a map table in the middle and four large leather chairs arranged round a glass topped coffee table near the fire, which despite the time of year was already lit. Given the amount of paperwork on the tables and the look of the fire, Karl wondered if his uncle had actually been to bed at all. A glass of brandy was pressed into his hand and he was motioned to a chair.

Karl opened his mouth to speak, but his uncle raised his hand to forestall him.

“Yes, I know you want to know what’s going on and especially how I know about Alicia, but let me start at the beginning. Now, I told you before that I do a little work for the security department of the Imperial Government’s Department of the Interior. I was a little economical with the truth in this regard; actually that is my main work. The company is a cover. It is a real company and does very well, but actually Herr Wallendorf runs it for me. I take a passing interest, so I can talk knowledgeably about my business interests and the wider economy at social functions. As I said before, your aunt knows nothing of this. In fact there are only two people in Germany who do. One is Herr Wallendorf, here, and the other is my immediate superior at the Ministry of the Interior, where I go by a different name. A perfectly legal name, I may add. I am enrolled to vote by that name and have a baptism certificate from the Nicholai Kirche. You don’t need to know it and it is better that you don’t.

“Now, let me say I am extremely grateful to you for risking your life in the way you did. You may be responsible for saving Germany from herself, though we could still be out-witted. Nevertheless, you gave us the information we needed at a time, when we seemed to be getting no-where. Before the war, the Kaiser, and much of Germany, was strongly influenced by a movement that sought the enlargement of German influence and territory well beyond her present borders. The Treaty of Warsaw frustrated those aims, but forestalled all out revolution through the alliance of capitalist and moderate socialist interests.”

“Yes, Uncle, I am fully aware of all this, and I realised that the *Workers’ League* was part of that expansionist movement. I did study political philosophy at university.”

“Quite so, quite so. I do not mean to demean your intelligence. I’m just filling in the background, so I can be certain we are all on the same page, so to speak. Well, this movement believes that continued economic growth is dependent on the expansion of empire, which of course fits well with the Kaiser’s own militaristic creed. We had strong suspicions that there were groups seeking to undermine the constitution and eventually stage a coup d’état using the Kaiser as their figurehead, but we had no idea who was involved and how far reaching it was. The list of German professionals and administrative officials you supplied us with, was both very useful and alarming. We have been able to watch these individuals and perceive how extensive their influence has become.”

“So you haven’t arrested anyone.”

“No, no, we’re playing a waiting game and we need the evidence of outright sedition before we can act. You may remember there was a list of consignments of goods from France, supposed to arrive at various German railway stations. We put out a discrete watch for these, but your actions, must have caused a change of plan, for the consignment numbers never materialised. However, over the last few months a number of packages containing missing art works from France have been discovered. These are interesting for two reasons. Firstly, when these were returned to France, several of the institutions concerned claimed ignorance that they had ever lost them. This suggests some degree of collusion. Secondly, two of the consignments were delivered to members of the *Arbeiterliga*, and when they were arrested, documents were found at their homes relating to private individuals to whom these works of art might be sold. Of course they have denied any involvement, but several of the names are known to be active adherents to right wing political philosophies. Members of a certain famous Bavarian musical family were also on the list.”

Karl had sat nodding seriously, but smiled at the last comment. He wasn’t surprised. “What about the third list?”

“Now there we have a problem. As you realise, I’m sure, we do not have terribly fraternal relations with the French at present and we do not know who to trust, but it is very curious that the *Arbeiterliga* should have contacts in France, unless they both have some community of interest. We have investigated the names on the list and they do not seem to be of any particular importance. They are ordinary local functionaries in financial and public institutions. The only name which stands out is this Philippe Benningstein, who the French are accusing of being a German spy.”

“Do you think he is?”

“Well, not on any list we’ve seen, but who knows what the army may have been running? You were in the intelligence corps, did you have anyone in Lille?”

“Not to my knowledge, but it wasn’t my area and I was only a captain. Have you tried the high-ups?”

“Difficult! We’re internal security, so it’s not our patch. They don’t like us snooping around. We’ve done some quiet digging, but nothing’s come up. It’s wait and see for the present. Anyway, that’s where we are. What brings you to Berlin? Hardly the safest place.”

“This.” Karl handed Alicia’s letter to his Uncle, whose brow furrowed as he struggled his way through the unfamiliar language.

“May I show it to Herr Wallendorf?”

“Yes, yes of course, but how on earth do you know about Alicia? By the way, I’m booked on tomorrow afternoon’s sleeper to Paris.”

“Oh, interesting one, that,” continued Albrecht. “You’re a bit of a marked man, you see. Some of your superiors seem to have had some doubts about your commitment to the *Reich*. A few less than patriotic remarks about the Kaiser it seems, and a definite preference for escaping by yourself out of uniform when you were off duty. Then of course your highly developed ability in French could be taken two ways. Finally, you were found to be consorting with the enemy, so to speak – Alicia, I mean. There was a file on you. It was closed when you left the service, but one of those Black Eagle characters saw an article of yours praising French artistic finesse or something, unearthed the file and asked us to take a look at you as a potential French spy.”

“Me, a spy? Why do they think I’d want to bother?” Karl turned angrily to his uncle. “You know, I’ve just spent four months back in our beautiful Prussia and I’ve loved it. Why can’t we German’s just sit back and enjoy what we’ve got, instead of being lost in this neurosis that someone’s going to snatch it from us. And then there’s the Kaiser and his right wing crack pots. Can’t they see they’ve got a massively endowed country? Instead they want to snatch even more of Europe and a few other places thrown in. Will we never learn to be at peace with ourselves?”

Karl had risen and was looking out of the window.

“Sorry, Uncle, ... Herr Wallendorf, I just can’t understand my own people sometimes.”

Karl rubbed his back and sat down.

“You know, Karl,” began Herr Wallendorf, “you can’t really blame them. You’ve got it made, with generations of Junker tradition behind you. Your uncle and I are rich successful examples of bourgeois self-made families, but so many others are struggling or are only one generation away from poverty and terrified of returning there. The Empire has given them a kind of security. Do you wonder that that’s where they put their faith and also that its all too obvious failings are the source of their doubts and fears?”

“But what about the army? Why can’t they just enjoy the peace?”

“Oh, they’re the most anxious of the lot. ‘Peace is always at the point of a bayonet,’ as they say.”

“Well said, Dieter,” interjected Uncle Albrecht, “I’m sorry Karl, the answer is hidden in the tortured German soul and it’d take a life-time or more to find it. Anyway, for now, let us deal with your next move. You’re going to Paris, and then?”

“I’ll find Alicia and her father and organise a place for them to stay, where they can be safe.”

“A German in Paris, is that wise?”

“I’m not going as a German, but as Xavier Duferier, a resident of Paris, whose family moved from Alsace in 1870. It was my alias. I still have all my papers.”

Albrecht rubbed his chin, with a questioning look?

“The beard? I’ll shave on the train.”

“At least that’ll please your aunt. She won’t like it that you’re going so soon, either. She has someone lined up for dinner tomorrow night.”

Karl suddenly felt tired and got to his feet.

“I think I better rest. The journey’s tired me more than I expected. It’s been a privilege to meet you, Herr Wallendorf. Will I see you later, Uncle?”

“Dinner, tonight. We’ll talk more after that. I have some suggestions to make and maybe you can give us a little help, while you are in Paris.”

“I’ll do as much as I can. *Auf Wiedersehen*, Herr Wallendorf.” They shook hands warmly and Karl left the room, nodding briefly to his uncle.

He opened the door to find his aunt fussing over some flowers in the hall. He had hoped to avoid her and get straight to his room for a rest.

“I expect you’ll be wanting a good rest, dear. I’ve put you in your old room. Luncheon will be at one, but just ring for the maid to bring it up to you if you prefer. I

hope you'll be joining us for dinner as the Klassens just happen to be free to join us. I thought it would be nice."

"Thank you Aunt Meta. It will be a pleasure to see them again, but I really must go and rest. It's difficult to sleep well on those trains."

"I'm sure dear. The terrors of modern life."

By the time Karl reached his room, he felt exhausted. Whether it was the brandy first thing in the morning, his journey or having to digest so much information or all three of them, he didn't know, but his head was spinning as he collapsed onto the bed. His stomach was also feeling uncomfortable. He loosened his collar and tie and closed his eyes. Maybe he wasn't as strong as he thought. Anyway a good rest would no doubt be enough to sort him out. As he tried to process the events of his arrival, sleep overcame him and he disappeared into a troubled and confused world.

He found himself once again in a meeting of the *Arbeiterliga*, but his uncle was sitting with the black suits. Then in came his Aunt, well-meaningly offering everyone café und kuchen, for which there were no takers. Then the whole scene exploded into trench warfare. There were other less well defined episodes forming a seamless and unmemorable mix and finally Alicia and her father emerged, walking in an unknown park. Karl gradually surfaced into consciousness and lay thinking about his mission

His stomach pain had gone, to be replaced by the dull ache of hunger. Reaching for the bell, he caught sight of the time: four o'clock. Why do I sleep so well and dream so much in this room? He pushed the covers down and realised he couldn't remember actually getting into bed. His collar and tie lay on the floor. He bent down to pick them up and felt the nasty twinge in his back again. Someone had unpacked his case and laid out his evening clothes. Strange how he hadn't noticed earlier. As he stood in the bathroom shaving, he couldn't help noticing a faint yellow pallor about his eyes. He straightened up, dried himself and marched briskly to the bedroom. In twenty minutes he was downstairs in the drawing room reading the *Deutsche Tageszeitung*. It was good to read a Berlin paper again after the provincial press in East Prussia.

Dinner was delicious. He ate copious helpings of pheasant, but despite Aunt Meta's protests he rejected all but a small serving of vegetables. The company of the Klassens had obviously been procured at the last minute as they were late, pleading that they had been kept late by an earlier engagement. Still, they were good company and Karl was able to relax. Fraulein Betsy was rather envious of Karl's opportunity to return to Paris and keen to hear more of his plans, so he was not unhappy when Herr Klassen

announced that they would have to leave early. As the front door was closed, Karl felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Come, my boy, we need to have a talk.”

“Oh, Albrecht, can’t you relax for a moment and let us all sit down together as family. I’ve hardly heard anything about life in Marienburg. Oh I do wish we could go and visit. I don’t see why the company has to take all your time.”

“I’m sorry, my dear. There is just something I want Karl to take to some of our French clients. It won’t take a moment.”

“I know you men. Your moments become hours and before we know it, it’ll be bedtime. I’m sure it can wait until the morning. This is my house and my opportunity to catch up with family news.”

Karl had never seen his aunt so determined and decided to play the peacemaker.

“Uncle Albrecht, maybe we can talk later. I slept nearly all day and you said it wouldn’t take long.”

Albrecht sighed. “Well it seems I’m out numbered and the business kept me up all last night, so let’s say I’ll see you two in the morning and you can have some time together now.

“Oh Albrecht, I do wish ...”

“No dear, I’m too tired for chit chat. I’ll see you in bed and as for you my boy, we’ll take breakfast in my study at seven-thirty sharp.”

He pecked his wife briskly on the forehead and plodded up the wide stairs and along the upstairs landing, the creaky old floorboards responding to his heavy tread. The bedroom door closed with a thud.

Aunt Meta’s eyes followed his progress, as a tear rolled gently down her cheek.

Karl smiled at his Aunt and put his arm around her shoulder, leading her back into the drawing room, where the maid was clearing the coffee things.

“Can you bring us some more coffee and some cake and biscuits.”

“Certainly, Mein Herr.”

The girl curtsied and left them.

“I’m sure he loves you, he just doesn’t know how to show it. He wants so much to make sure you have the sort of life you’re used to. That’s why he works so hard. Remember, his family were hand loom weavers two generations ago. They don’t have the history we have and the position,” said Karl as they sat down together on the sofa.

“I know. I know. He’s a good man, but he didn’t used to be like this. It’s all since Herr Wallendorf joined the company. I don’t really know what he does. I don’t trust him. It’s almost like Albrecht has two lives: there’s the company, but there’s something else. I know he’s keeping something from me. He sometimes seems to be in another world. He used to talk about the company and his aims and goals for it, but then he suddenly stopped. It was like he wasn’t interested anymore. When people ask him about the company it seems like he’s play acting.”

“Maybe he’s just over-worked.”

The maid returned with the coffee and cakes.

“Oh, thank you, dear. Now you better get off to bed and you can finish off in the morning. Oh and please thank cook for a lovely dinner. The pheasant was beautiful.”

“Thank you, Ma’am,” the girl said, smiling.

Aunt Meta let the door close and waited a few moments.

“No, it’s more than just hard work. And don’t try and stop me talking now I’ve started. I’ve no-one else to talk to.”

Now the tears started to flow more freely.

“Oh, Karl, I’m sorry, but I’ve got to talk to someone.”

She pulled out a small lace square from her sleeve and dabbed her eyes rather uselessly. Karl offered his own carefully laundered white handkerchief, which she gratefully accepted, and blew her nose.

“Oh, I know I shouldn’t, but sometimes I even wonder if ... if he’s seeing someone else. You know, I’m getting a little more matronly and maybe he wants someone younger.” She paused and took a sip of coffee. “And he doesn’t seem to want to be intimate with me anymore. Oh, I know I shouldn’t be telling you this, but I have no-one, no-one to talk to like this. You’re so much like your mother. Oh, I’m sorry. I know you’re a man, but I feel I can talk to you like I used to talk to my sister. We used to chat for hours.”

“It’s all right.” He squeezed her clasped hands where they lay gripping the handkerchief on her knee.

“It all seems to be since that man Wallendorf came along. Now I know it’s wrong to think like this, but I can’t help feeling there’s some Jewish blood in him. He’s different. Not like us.”

“You know Aunt, there may well be some Jewish blood in a lot of us, even you and me. There have been Jews in Germany for centuries and throughout Europe. Their

culture may be a bit different, but their blood is as human as ours, so you shouldn't be talking like this. Didn't God make us all?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm sure you're right, but they say ..."

"Some people say a lot of things about Jews, which are quite wrong and we Germans and not just Germans, everyone in Europe, and beyond, needs to stop seeing Jews as different or we're going to get ourselves into a lot of trouble. I don't want to lecture you Aunt. It's not my place, but you see I once had a dream in which a lot of Jewish people were being killed. There were lots of soldiers and long lines of people being marched into darkness. It's haunted me ever since. It was terrible."

"How do you know they were Jews?"

"The star of David. They were all wearing it. So, if there's one thing I believe in, it's stopping all this anti-Semitic nonsense. Differences are good. They make us all stronger. It's the way nature works."

Aunt Meta sat for a long time, her head bent over her hands. Then she straightened up. I'm sure you're right. I'll try. She was about to get up, but Karl stopped her.

"About Uncle Albrecht, I'm sure you have nothing to worry about, but I think you need to talk to him and make him listen. Just tell him what you've said to me. I think you'll be surprised."

She looked directly at Karl and her eyes narrowed. "You know something don't you?"

"Yes, but I can't tell you. It wouldn't be right."

His aunt looked up at the portrait of her husband, on the opposite wall. Then turned determinedly to Karl.

"You are quite right. You mustn't break a confidence. Thank you for listening to an old woman! I do feel relieved, but I will get the truth out of your uncle. Now I think we better be going up. We all need our sleep. You do look tired. I don't like your colour. I wish you'd eat more vegetables."

Saturday 25th August

Karl had not felt at all tired, but fell asleep without delay. Still, he woke at six and was at his uncle's study door by seven-thirty. He had decided to dress formally in case Herr Wallendorf had been invited, but was relieved to find his uncle alone. They

sat by the fire, which was not unwelcome as the weather had changed dramatically, suggesting the forthcoming change of season.

“Some coffee?” began Uncle Albrecht, handing Karl a small cup of deep black liquid. “Nice tie. We’ll ring for some bratwurst later and then we can talk more generally. For now let’s just deal with the business ... I think this Duferier alias is a good one. But I’ll give you another persona, just in case. Here’s something I procured for you: Gustave Farber, of Dresden.”

He passed Karl a passport and outline biography. “By the way, it’s a diplomatic passport, so if you’ve any problems we can step in more easily. You can go to the consulate, when you arrive, see our man; his name’s with the passport. He’ll get you the right stamp ... As I say, only for emergencies. You probably won’t need it. This Duferier should do. There’s only a skeleton staff at the consulate. Also, there’s no German presence outside Paris. We really don’t know a lot about what’s going on beyond the papers. Nearly all our sources have gone to ground. It’s just not safe. So anything you can glean would be very helpful. Just keep it under your hat until your return. We’ve heard rumours that letters from Germany are being checked. Did Alicia’s look all right?”

“As far as I could see, but then I wasn’t expecting it to have been opened.”

“Then it’s probably a false alarm, but still I wouldn’t trust the post as a general rule. Now, there are two other jobs I would like you to do for us.”

“Look Uncle,” broke in Karl, “I’m happy to help if I can, but Alicia and her father come first. I can’t do anything that might risk their safety.”

Uncle Albrecht sighed, turned away and drank his coffee. They sat in silence for several moments.

“I’m sorry Uncle. I didn’t mean to ...”

“No. No. You’re quite right. It’s your mission, not ours, and this girl and her father come first. If you don’t help them nobody will. It’s just like that poor wretch, Benningstein, who’s going to help him? You can only do so much, help this one or that one. I can’t ask you to save the world on your own.”

He smiled and poured some more coffee.

“You know Karl, my trouble is I’m an idealist and I’ve got this ideal of Germany in my head and it’s not the Kaiser’s Empire. It’s deeper than that. It’s the Germany of Luther, Schiller and Goethe, something with a soul and I wonder if anyone else cares about it anymore. It almost seemed to get left out of the mix in 1870. Bismarck didn’t

really care about Germany; just empire. And I'm worried my boy, I'm very worried. The old empires won't last. They never could. Austria-Hungary's breaking up, Russia's on the cusp and even Britannia's looking wobbly – India will be her own master in less than twenty years. What I'm worried about is what will come after them. There's something new on the rise and it's dark and ugly, a bare, ungilded power, divorced from the soul of society. You've seen the beginnings of it here and it seems to be on the rise in France and Italy. Russia might have headed it off, but Spain and Portugal are struggling to find their future."

Despite Albrecht's tiredness, there was a light back in his eyes.

Karl smiled at him. "Thank you, Uncle. Tell me what you want me to do. I'll try if I can, but no promises."

"Here's an envelope. In it you'll find the list of French names you procured for us, plus some others we got from the *Arbeiterliga* and a couple of similar groups. They're mostly in Paris. Just keep an eye open for the names, but don't take any risks."

Karl took the envelope and slipped it into his breast pocket.

"You said there were two things you wanted me to do."

"Yes, now this is a bit more official, there's an up and coming moderate socialist leader, a Jew, called Léon Blum. We haven't heard much of him lately. I reckon he's keeping his head down, while this Benningstein business is on. We had a few quiet dealings with him during the occupation; a reasonable man. He's minister of Labour in the Provisional Government. We'd like to make contact with him, so we can share information on possible right wing contacts, but nothing direct will work. He can't be seen to be talking to the Germans, but Monsieur Duferier might be able to make contact and share some useful information."

"I'm not sure I can remember my training, Uncle, and I was never much of a field operative."

"No, that's just it. You're not. You look so normal, nobody will suspect you. Pretend you're a freelance journalist or something. Give it a try if you can. His details are in this envelope, but whatever you do, don't leave it around. If anyone in France sees it, it'll be the end of him."

Karl took the envelope and tucked it into his pocket. "Shall we have breakfast? There's something else we need to talk about and it's not about my mission."

Albrecht raised an eyebrow and pulled the bell cord.

"What time's your train?"

“Three-thirty. I’ll have time for luncheon.”

“Then I’ll drive you to the station.”

There was a knock at the door and in came two steaming plates of Bratwurst, bacon and fried eggs, accompanied by some thick hunks of bread and another hot pot of coffee. The men moved to the map table and dug into their meal enthusiastically.

“Well my boy, what else can I help with? If it’s advice over women, I’m afraid you’ve got the wrong person. I’ve never understood them. Your aunt did the running where we were concerned. I’m a bit slow.”

“Yes, that’s just it. That’s the problem. I know it’s none of my business and I’m your nephew and nearly thirty years younger than you and don’t know the ways of the world and have no right to poke my nose into your business, but ...”

Albrecht had stopped eating and was going red in the face.

“Whatever you’ve got to say lad, spit it out! We’re Germans aren’t we? We say what we mean, straight to the point. We don’t beat about the bushes like the English!”

Karl swallowed and took a swig of coffee.

“It’s Aunt Meta. She knows there’s something going on. She’s not stupid. She can see you’re not working for the company any longer; that you’ve got another life. You need to tell her what you’re really doing. She’s worried you’ve got another woman.”

Albrecht’s face broke into a broad grin and then he started to laugh uncontrollably. Karl had never seen anything like it. He stood up and marched from one side of the room to the other roaring with laughter. His face turned red and he had to loosen his collar and tie, eventually he sat down again and dissolved into fits of coughing as the door burst open to reveal a very worried looking Aunt Meta, together with her two daughters.

“Oh,...oh,... that’s the funniest thing I’ve ever heard. Oh, that’s just too funny. Me and another... Oh, that’s too much,” and he dissolved into another fit of coughing.

“My dear, Karl just told me; to think that I could ever even think of looking at anyone else. Me, who couldn’t even talk to you without spilling my drink! Oh, Meta my dear, you are just my dream of perfection. That’s all I can say. You’re my perfect wife.”

“Off you go girls, everything’s all right. Karl just told your father a funny joke,” she said as she hesitantly crossed the threshold, stood next to her husband and kissed the crown of his head. He threw his arm round her, pulling her to his side.

“I’m so sorry my dear. We’ll have a good talk when Karl’s gone. Come in, shut the door and I’ll ring for another cup and some more bratwurst.”

Karl packed his shaving apparatus away and settled back into a seat in his private compartment, rubbing his freshly shaven chin. It did feel good to be without his much maligned beard. Mother would be pleased. He knew she regarded it as a kind of adolescent hang-over. His clean-shaven look fitted his chosen persona: a young man returning from a business trip. He was wearing a suit of clothes he had bought in Paris, which was smart, but a little more flamboyant than its German counterpart. He had also booked his ticket in the name of Duferier in order to avoid any problems at the border.

Sullen black clouds sped angrily across the sky as rain dribbled down the carriage windows, but the first class carriage was heated and Karl had a copy of Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* on his knee, a gift from his uncle. Could there be anything better than reading a book in the quiet of one’s own compartment on a long rail journey? Added to this was the conspiratorial romance of his mission. Karl had to admit he was enjoying it. Yet, despite it all and the power of Goethe’s prose, he was soon asleep.

Monday 27th August

The train pulled into the Gare de l’Est at exactly 12.30pm. The weather had changed. Autumn was definitely on its way. He carried his own case along the platform, out into the arched concourse and down to the Metro. What a joy to be back! Nothing had changed. The Napoleon III carriages ran excitedly along the rails, through their wide tunnels. He stopped at the Pernety metro station and hurried up the steps into the fresh air. After consulting his *Guide Michelin*, he hailed a cab and gave the address.

He was excited beyond belief. Finally, after all that time of separation, to see Alicia, to be free to hold her, to share his whole heart with her. To know that she was Jewish was to feel that his destiny, his soul, was somehow entwined by fate with hers. He did not have the freedom not to love her. Even the few times they had been alone together had assured him that she was to be his and he was hers: not her father, not

politics and certainly not race could separate them. He felt like he'd been preparing for this moment all his life. He would save her from the evils of politics and history. He was Siegfried; she, Brunhilde. He would turn the Wagnerian tale on its head. What the god's of empire had meant for evil, he would turn into the glorious passion of righteous love. The cab let him out at the door of 256 Rue Franquet. He paid the driver, joyously sounded the knocker and waited. He had visions of Alicia sitting anxiously at the window, his telegram in her hand and hurrying to the door when she heard his knock. He waited, but there was no response. He tried again, realising that she must be careful about opening the door to strangers. He descended the steps, and looked up at the anonymous window panes, returned to the door and tried again. Eventually, he thought he heard a light tread and the door opened a few centimetres, revealing a petite nose and mouth below a timid eye.

"Oui, Monsieur?"

Karl removed his hat, inclining his head politely.

"Bonjour, Mademoiselle, my name is Xavier Duferier, I believe Alicia Languere is staying here."

"We know no-one of that name. Au revoir, Monsieur."

"Maybe she has given you another name, Karl? Karl von Allenstein?"

The door closed and he heard the sound of a door chain.

"You better come in. Quickly, Monsieur, it is not safe. The police are questioning those who help the Jews."

Karl followed her up a narrow staircase and into an empty salon.

"Please take a seat, Monsieur. I will tell the maid to prepare a room for you. She is a good girl and I don't want her to get hurt, so I am answering the door for the present."

She seated herself in a wing backed chair by the fireplace, pressed a small button and waited.

Karl opened his mouth to speak, but she raised her finger to silence him. A moment later there was a knock at the door and a neatly dressed young girl entered.

"Oui, Madame?"

"Can you bring coffee and cake for Monsieur ..."

"Duferier," interjected Karl.

"For Monsieur Duferier. He is a friend of Mademoiselle Languere and will be staying. Please prepare the spare room for him and light the fire."

“Oui, Madame. Your mother is awake and is asking for you.”

“Please tell her I have a visitor, but will be along soon. Can you prepare her medicine before you do the room?”

“*Oui Madame, certainement.*”

“Where is Alicia?” asked Karl, as soon as the door was closed.

“Monsieur, I am very worried. The sisters from the *Infermerie de St. Jean*, where her father was being looked after, sent word that a mob had broken in and abducted all the Jewish patients. They were in a special ward, so the priest would not give them the Holy Sacrament. She left immediately and I have had no word of her since. I cannot send Celestine. She is a Jewess. And I cannot go myself, as my mother may need me at any moment. She had a stroke three months ago.”

Karl rose abruptly.

“I am sorry, Mademoiselle. I must go to find her immediately. She may be hurt.”

“*Monsieur!* Please sit down! You look very tired. Please drink some coffee. And by the way, it is *Madame*, not *Mademoiselle*. My husband was killed at the Marne. I believe you were there.”

Karl froze, went back to his chair, sat down and sighed as he contemplated the delicate design on the carpet.

“I am sorry. Please forgive my inconsiderate behaviour. I have not even asked you your name.”

“I quite understand your urgency, *Monsieur*. I have loved, very, very deeply. My Fabrice is never far away and I too want you to find Alicia. She is a dear girl. Now, my name is Gabrielle, ... Gabrielle Roux. I shall call you Monsieur Duferier, as this is easier for me and safer for you. I insist that you at least enjoy coffee and cake. You do look very tired. Did you not sleep on the train?”

“I slept well, Madame, , but I feel as if I had not. I will be delighted to enjoy your hospitality. You are most kind and generous, considering what my nation has taken from you.”

There was a knock at the door, heralding the arrival of the elegantly served coffee and cake. “I am sorry, Madame. Your mother is calling for you, most insistently. She will not let me give her her medicine.”

“Thank you, Celestine. I will go to her directly. Excuse me Monsieur Duferier. Celestine, set the tray by the chaise longue. Let Monsieur Duferier have a little rest.”

Karl rose, thanked them both and sat stiffly on the couch, enjoying the creamy coffee. He couldn't help wondering why he took such delight in all things French. The lemon cake was delicious and he guiltily helped himself to two slices. There was still no sign of Gabrielle, so he took off his jacket and laid it on the end of the couch and swung his legs round to rest his eyes for a few moments.

When he awoke the room was bathed in the leaping glow of the fire and the curtains were closed. As he came to, he recognised the presence of Madame Roux, who was seated in her chair, knitting by the light of the fire. As he moved, she laid down her work.

"You have been asleep a long time, Monsieur. Train journeys can be tiring."

"Yes, Yes. But surely I must be going. It must be late. I must find Alicia."

"It will soon be seven. I have asked cook to prepare a small repast of quiche Lorraine and mixed salad. It will be good if you eat something before you go. You may have a long night."

"Thank you. Yes, that will be good. Then I will not disturb you again tonight unless it is to bring Alicia back here."

"Do not worry about disturbing me. I'll give you a key, so you may come and go as you please."

The meal arrived, Karl devoured it speedily and rose to leave.

"Do you wish to change, Monsieur? Your things have been taken to your room."

"I don't think that will be necessary, but I must just check something."

"I'll show you to your room."

Karl found his suitcase next to the heavy mahogany wardrobe where his clothes had been neatly arranged. He glanced down the shelves; shirts, collars, studs, cuff-links, ties on the inside of the door. Where were his identity papers? He began to sweat; the bedside cabinet? No. It was empty. He remembered looking at them during his journey. Surely I haven't left them on the train. I couldn't have been so careless... Calm down! They must be here somewhere. There was a desk in the corner of the room. He sprang to it and the top rolled back to reveal two manila envelopes sitting neatly in the middle of the desk. He breathed a sigh of relief - his real passport and his other German identity; Gustav Farber of Dresden. He slipped them both under the mattress and left the room.

Gabrielle had given him instructions how to find the *Infermerie de St. Jean* on the Rue Dorsel in the shadow of Mont Martre. He took the Metro to the Place Des

Abbeesses and found himself opposite the church. The light was fading, but he could just make out the street signs and located the nearby hospital without difficulty.

The heavy wooden doors were already firmly closed and he had to knock hard for some time before a face appeared at a small hinged portal. After initial hostility, he gained entrance and was marched to the matron's austere office, where he sat for some time, while she was found. Finally, a door in the opposite wall opened and lady in a starched wimple and black habit emerged to greet him warmly. She took her place behind the mean desk, seeming to envelop it with her wide sleeves and capacious gown. Karl felt like a primary school pupil before the head mistress.

"Now, Monsieur ..."

"Duferier."

"Monsieur Duferier, we understand you are looking for Mademoiselle Languere. I have to tell you that neither she nor her father is here. Oh what madness war breeds in men's hearts! We did not segregate the Jews for anything, but their own religious sensibilities, but the mob came and forced their way in and dragged them all away. Two of our sisters protested, but were themselves kicked and bludgeoned by those savages. We don't know where the Jews were taken, except that one poor girl was found floating in the river yesterday. Mademoiselle Languere left to see if she could find her father elsewhere. We are most desperately sorry. These are terrible times in which we live ... terrible."

"Did she give you any idea where she would go in her search?"

"I gave her a list of hospitals and religious infirmaries like our own and suggested she look there. I will give you the same. But it is too late for you to be out tonight. The streets are not safe, especially for one such as you."

"I think you may well be right. I didn't like the look of the few groups of young men I saw hanging around on my way here, but what do you mean, 'one such as me'?"

"Haven't you heard? There is a curfew on Jews. You are not allowed onto the streets after ten o'clock at night."

"But I'm not a Jew."

"Are you sure? I thought with you looking for Monsieur and Mademoiselle Languere, you must be and with your looks, you would surely be taken for a Jew and not just any Jew. Where have you been living? Have you not seen the newspapers? We are an enclosed order, dedicated to the care of the sick, but I need to know what is happening, for the protection of the sisters. Father Thomas from our mother church

brings me a newspaper once a week. Haven't you seen a picture of the traitor, the Benningstein boy?"

She opened a drawer and handed him a newspaper, opened at a head and shoulders drawing of a man in military uniform. Karl sat staring at the picture. The nose, jaw, mouth, eyes, even the hair line were his. He felt like he was looking at himself in a mirror. The only major difference was a large birth mark on the soldier's right cheek. Karl passed the picture back to the matron.

"I see what you mean. I better be careful."

"Yes. I suggest you stay here tonight. We do not want any more blood on our hands. I will make arrangements for you to stay with Father Thomas. He has a soft heart for Jews. He was in Palestine for some years."

"But,...

"Oh dear, I'm sorry, I didn't mean. It's just that you look ... I'll send a message to Father Thomas and he will meet us in the chapel and then he can take you by an inside way to his own quarters. You will be safe there."

She rose and disappeared via the wood panelled door through which she had come. Karl was left to contemplate his future as a marked man. Maybe he should have kept the beard.

A diminutive sister soon appeared bearing a steaming glass of milk, which she placed on the desk without a word and disappeared. Karl sipped it gently, enjoying the warm comforting liquid. His heart ached to find Alicia. If only he hadn't fallen asleep, he would have had time to visit some of the hospitals. They might have been together by now. What a fool he was. Eventually the matron reappeared and led him through the private doorway down several narrow passages and into a small chapel, bare of ornamentation, except for a gold encrusted altarpiece depicting the story of the Good Samaritan. In one of the pews knelt a near emaciated figure in a black soutane and clerical collar. The matron touched him lightly on his shoulder.

"Father Thomas is somewhat deaf. You will have to speak up," she whispered.

He turned his head and rose awkwardly, as if shocked out of a reverie.

"Oh, Reverend Mother, I didn't hear you. So this is the gentleman. You are right, he does look tired. I will care for him as I would for our Lord. Come, Monsieur. It isn't far. I'm afraid I live a spartan life, but you will be safe and comfortable enough. The rabble will not dare break into a Catholic presbytery."

“Sleep well, Monsieur Duferier. See me before you leave. I am at my desk by six-thirty and I can give you directions to the other nearby hospitals. Father Thomas will conduct you ... Oh, and Mademoiselle Languere is in our prayers.” Karl watched as the black figure glided from sight.

“The Reverend Mother is an inspiration to us all. No-one seems to know her age, but the sisters joke that she was built with this place and they say she has daily communion with St. Genevieve herself. Come follow me, my good sir.”

Karl was led round behind the altar into a narrow passage, which sloped downwards for about fifty metres, levelled off and ended at a flight of steps rising to a solid door similar to all the others, which led into another corridor.

“Would you care to see my church? It is a fine example of the Romanesque; plain and simple, without all that deflecting confusion of the gothic.”

Karl agreed. The man had an enchanting simplicity about him. For the next half hour, they toured every niche, statue and image as Father Thomas genuflected and rapturously described his holy world. As they completed their tour, Karl breathed an inward sigh of relief.

“I’m sorry. I hope I haven’t bored you.”

“No, no, it has been most interesting, but I really must get some sleep now. I have a busy day tomorrow.”

“Of course, of course. This way.”

The spindly figure pushed open a door to his left and bending low, led him into a small stone cell furnished with a bed, chair and cupboard. Karl shivered.

“I’m sorry. We don’t have some of the comforts of the sisters, but you will find night clothes in the cupboard and there are feather quilts on the bed. I hope it’ll be warm enough. I’ll bring you another quilt and there is a Bible and missal for your devotions. You will find the usual facilities at the end of the passage.”

“Thank you, Father,” was all Karl could think to say.

“All will be well, my son. All will be well.” He squeezed Karl’s upper arms and kissed him on both cheeks. “My assistant and I rise to celebrate Lauds at five, if you care to join us in the church for prayer, otherwise, I will wake you after we have finished and we can enjoy a simple breakfast. Sleep well.”

He ducked through the low arch and was gone. Karl made a visit to the bathroom, closed the door to his room and within minutes had undressed, found the

nightshirt and was asleep on the hard kapok mattress. He didn't even notice Father Thomas's gift of another quilt.

Tuesday 28th August

It was mid-morning. Karl had just crossed the Canal St. Martin where had stopped to consult his map and watched a barge on its slow determined way. At least the simple soul who led his horse along the tow path knew his destination. Earlier he had knelt in front of the Reverend Mother and let her bless him before leaving, his *Guide Michelin* and a list of hospitals clasped in gloved hands. Three hospitals had so far yielded no result.

Holding onto his hat, he bent once more into the icy blast and felt the harsh rain on his face. The imposing façade of L'Hopital St. Louis loomed before him. He dodged a horse-drawn ambulance and scanned the wide cobbled courtyard from the safety of an arched colonnade. He made his way towards some figures emerging from a doorway some twenty metres away. A brass plaque was affixed to the grey sandstone, '*L'Entrée Principale*'. Just then the double doors opened and two black coated men burst forth.

"C'est impossible. Ce n'est pas juste. L'hopital est pour tous les gens," proclaimed one of them loudly, as they strode out into the wind, holding onto their top hats.

Karl stared after them for a moment before diving into the refuge of the hospital's marbled interior. To his left sat a mass of sickness and poverty huddled together on three wooden forms. Karl eyed them carefully, but there was no sign of Alicia or her father. Across the other side of the hall were a number of doors, each labelled with a doctor's name and beyond them was a high wooden counter presided over by a crisply dressed nurse, busily attending to some paperwork.

Karl pressed his fist into his back and approached the counter.

"Excusé moi, Madame."

"Oui, Monsieur?"

Karl waited, but she did not look up.

"Oui, Monsieur?"

He swallowed and explained his business.

“Les Juifs sont dans la dernière salle, numero quinze, a droite.” She motioned with her pen. Karl hesitated, thanked her and made off hurriedly in the direction she had pointed.

The corridor was long and busy, exuding an antiseptic brightness. Eventually Karl found ward fifteen. A Star of David was fixed above the swing doors, which he tentatively pushed open. An arched window at one end joined floor to ceiling, as Jacob's ladder had earth to heaven. Yet it gave little light. Neither did the electric orbs strung from the rafters, though, as his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, he saw it was a hospital ward like any other. A row of steel framed beds ran down each side of the room. Most were occupied by aged figures. In some, there were children, generally two to a bed. At most bedsides sat a darkly clothed figure either talking to, or feeding their occupants. The atmosphere was one of mournful solicitude.

A nurse in collar and cap approached Karl.

“Monsieur, are you looking for someone?”

“Yes, I am looking for an old man, by the name of Languere, who may be accompanied by his daughter. Are they here?”

“And you are?”

“Monsieur Xavier Duferier. A friend of the family.”

“Come this way. He was found at the hospital gates three days ago, hardly alive. Then his daughter arrived the next day. He has had surgery for internal injuries, but is still unconscious. How long he can stay, I don't know. I've heard rumours they want to move the Jews ... Here we are.”

She touched the shoulder of a woman slumped in a chair.

“Mademoiselle, a friend of yours, I believe.” Half smiling, she turned and left.

Alicia half turned, blinking through the gloom. Karl sat down on the bed and took her hand.

“Oh, Xavier, it's a miracle. He is alive and in the hands of such kind people and now you are here.” Her voice was stretched and thin. “I never thought to find him. He is a Frenchman like any other. He fought at Sedan. Why did they do this? Why Xavier? Why?”

“I am here now. I am so pleased you wrote to me. We can find a private sanatorium where they will care for him.” They both stared silently at the old man's bandaged face as Alicia gently stroked her father's hand.

“Oh, Xavier, I am so happy you have come, and after the way we treated you. I’ve missed you so much.”

“And I, you.” He wanted to say more, but knew it must wait. “You look cold, hungry and tired. I’ll speak to the doctor and arrange for your father to be moved to a place of safety. Then you can go back home for food and rest. Have you eaten at all?”

“They brought me some soup and bread. The staff are very kind. Doctor Hervey will be here later. He’s a good man.”

“I’m sure, but we an’t just sit here waiting. I’ll see what I can arrange.”

Alicia suddenly took Karl’s hand in hers, buried her face in his shoulder and began to weep softly. He freed his hands and held her awkwardly, but tenderly. It was the first time in his life that he had held the woman he loved. Half of him wanted to run away and sort out the practicalities of the situation, but the other half, the stronger half, was filled with awe, joy and compassion. He just wanted to hold her forever and let their bodies meld together into one. It was absurd.

Eventually she eased herself free of him, dried her eyes and stared into his, with a renewed determination. “You are right. You need to go and make preparations. Father cannot stay here. Go and find Doctor Hervey and see what he suggests.” She kissed him on both cheeks, straightened his tie and coat and handed him his hat.

Karl moved to the end of the bed, blew her a kiss and turned away to find the nurse, who directed him to an office on the third floor. When he arrived, Dr. Hervey was just leaving to begin his rounds. Karl explained who he was and the doctor agreed that while moving the old man was dangerous it was the best course of action given the circumstances and gave Karl the telephone number of L’Hopital St. Jacques in the 15th Arrondissement, plus the name of a doctor he might contact. Helpfully, he also put his own office at Karl’s disposal to make the arrangements.

Two hours later Karl was seated next to the driver of a motor ambulance, while Alicia and a nurse took care of Monsieur Languere as they trundled through the busy streets. Every so often Karl caught sight of newspaper hoardings exhibiting that dangerously familiar face, and advertising his imminent trial.

They met Dr. Roufflés at the new hospital and settled the old man into a private room. The Doctor assured them that he would be under constant surveillance and he would personally inform them if there was any change in his condition.

“I think my dear, food and rest are my prescription for you or you will not be able to care for your father.”

Alicia continued to stare into her father’s face. “He looks so peaceful. I wonder if he’s dreaming. Eventually she rose, kissed him on both cheeks and let Karl lead her away towards the door, where she paused and sat on the only other chair for several more minutes. Finally, she mouthed a kiss and allowed Karl to shepherd her through the door.

They took a cab to Madame Roux’s where she ate an omelette before retreating to her room and falling into a deep sleep.

Karl sat staring out of the window, while Celestine cleared the table. Madame Roux came in and flopped down in a chair.

“Oh, my mother is her own worst enemy! ... I’m sorry, you don’t want my troubles on top of everything else. It’s just so hard when parents get old and roles get reversed. You end up feeling so guilty.”

“It hasn’t happened to me yet, but I expect it will. My forebears all lived to a good age. But you do look tired. Maybe you should take a rest?”

“Me take a rest! Monsieur Duferier. Look who’s talking. You look half dead. In fact I’m not sure you shouldn’t see a doctor yourself. Your eyes are jaundiced and you hardly stop rubbing that back of yours. Are you sure you don’t have kidney problems?”

“Not to my knowledge. Why?”

“Oh, family history, but it’s probably nothing. You’ve been through a lot these last few days. You’ll benefit from an early night.”

Wednesday 29th August

Karl retired to his room, undressed and prepared for the night. He felt like he could sleep for a week. The next thing he knew was a knock on the door. He roused himself.

“Come.”

“Excusé moi, Monsieur, Madame suggested you might like some breakfast.”

“Yes, thank you. That’s very kind. Please just put it on the table. I’ll help myself.”

The girl departed and Karl flopped back onto his pillows, glancing at the ormolu clock on the mantelpiece; nine o'clock. Alicia would want to get to the hospital to see her father.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and flinched. Maybe he would have to see a doctor. The fire had died in the night, so he flung on his overcoat and tucked into the coffee and croissants. Celestine returned with a basin and a jug of hot water, placed them on the wash stand, curtsied and left. There was something so graceful about French girls – a romantic flourish that his own race somehow lacked. He shaved quickly and dressed in clean clothes. He would ask *Madame* Roux if she could arrange for his others to be laundered.

On reaching the reception rooms, he found them deserted. Another door opened on a small study, but it too was empty. Karl pondered what to do and sniffed the air. The smell of cooking led him along the corridor, past his bedroom and down a small flight of stairs into a kitchen, where Celestine and an older woman were engrossed in the mysteries of jam production.

Karl cleared his throat, which made a hitherto unseen cat leap from the top of the dresser onto the kitchen table, arching its back as it landed with a feline cry of protective anxiety. Celestine turned from the jam pan.

“Ooh, Ferousse, tu es trop ... Oh, pardon Monsieur. Our cat does not have the manners of a gentleman.”

Karl smiled as the cat continued to stare menacingly up at him. “But maybe he is a gallant chevalier, protecting maidens in distress.”

“Keep stirring, girl, or you’ll burn the fruit. That cat’ll be the death of us,” said the cook, turning to face Karl. Now, Monsieur, what can we do for you? You should have rung.”

“I was wondering about the whereabouts of your mistress and Mademoiselle Languere?”

“Oh, they went out early. There was a message from St. Jacques. I was going to wake you, but they told me to let you sleep.”

“Thank you. I’ll go directly.” Karl spun round, took the stairs two at a time, grabbed his coat and hat and slammed the door behind him, bounding down the stairs to look for a cab. He was still buttoning his coat when he reached Rue De Vouille and had lost his hat twice. He hailed a horse drawn cab and thankfully clambered aboard. The driver nodded wordlessly, cracked his whip and the horse bent his head into the wind

and rain. Karl stared out at the near deserted streets as the horse gallantly laboured its way towards their destination, where Karl paid the cabby and dashed inside, leaving them to take shelter from the storm.

The foyer was a mass of humanity. Karl pushed his way through and found the staircase he remembered from the previous day. He pulled himself up by the handrail and found the first floor contrastingly quiet. Somewhere a baby was crying. He surveyed the choice of identical corridors and hearing a cough turned to see the businesslike, questioning face of a sister, her head tilted to one side.

“Excusez-moi, I’m looking for Dr. Rouflés’ patients.”

The head nodded and its equally businesslike body carried it down the middle corridor with Karl in tow. They stopped outside a door.

“Monsieur.” She wheeled round and tip-tapped her way back up the corridor.

Karl remembered the door, pushed it open and soon found the private room where Monsieur Langue sat propped on pillows, sipping soup from a spoon proffered by his daughter. He sat down quietly on the other chair in the room watching the tableau of familial affection. After a few minutes the old man closed his eyes and uttered a satisfied grunt. Only as she turned to replace the soup on a tray resting on the bed, did she see Karl. Her expression switched from peace to anxiety as soon as she saw his face. Gathering her skirts, she rushed over to his side.

“Oh, Karl, Monsieur Duferier. You should not have come. You are unwell. You must rest.”

Karl gave her his seat and knelt on the floor at her side, taking her hands in his. “My dear Alicia, I could not stay in bed and leave you to look after your father. It is nothing. I must have pulled a muscle in my back, hunting with my father. He rides faster and harder than I. A touch more rest and I’ll be well. Oh, how I’ve longed for the moment when I could hold your hands in mine. And now your father is getting better. It’s so marvellous. I’m so happy for you. He looked as if he would never wake again.”

Alicia smiled, tearing her eyes away from Karl and looking at the bed once again. “Yes, he is a stubborn old man. The doctor says it is early days, but he is encouraged. The move may indeed have been welcome stimulation. But he says we must be careful. I am to enter the hospital by the rear entrance, used only by the clinicians. If I am challenged, he has given me a letter to show to them.”

“I am so pleased for you. Your father is a lovely man.”

“How can you think so, after the way he treated you.”

“How can one such as I expect to be treated any other way in France.”

She stared down into his eyes and smiled. “But this German is different. You don’t have any of that Teutonic bluster.”

“Shush, my dear. Remember, here I am Xavier Duferier and I am as French as you. We do not know who may be listening.”

Alicia’s hand shot to her mouth. “Oh, I’m so sorry, how unthinking of me ... Oh Xavier, I am so pleased we met.”

“Do you think your father will see things that way? Will he accept me?”

“He will, when he sees you again and after what he has been through. You say we are French. There are many who would disagree with you. Can a Jew ever be French, even if she’s a Catholic? Our blood is our curse I’m not sure I want to be French any longer, but if we can’t be French, what can we be, German? Are we loved any more there than here? Maybe we should follow Herzog’s disciples to Palestine? Yet even there it’s no longer our land. The myth of the wandering Jew. Do you think it’s come true in our time?”

“Alicia, we’ll find a place of safety, somewhere. My family will love you. There have been Jews in Prussia for generations. You know, when I went back to Germany, I felt I had left half of myself here in Paris. My heart had been torn in two and you know it’s only since I came back that I’ve found it again and,” he swallowed hard, “it’s only when I’m with you that I feel utterly complete. I’ve kept that little paper heart with me wherever I’ve been. It’s kept me going.”

He reached into his pocket and took out his wallet, opened it, carefully retrieved the thin paper icon and placed it in her hand. She looked quizzically at him.

“I’m not giving you back your heart, but I’m giving you this as a token of my gift of my heart and my very self to you. I want you and your father to come back to Germany and live with me there. I love you so much. You would make me so happy. And if you won’t live in Germany, I’ll go wherever you wish, if only we can be together.” Karl gazed up into her eyes, closed her hand around the little heart and waited.

He dared not say any more. Maybe he’d said too much already. Should he have waited? Yes, he should. It was all too much pressure for her; losing her house, her father injured and nearly dead, living with a near stranger. How could he have been such a

sentimental egotistic fool? Maybe he was just a Germanic cloth head, who knew nothing of the finer sensibilities of women.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have spoken so soon. You need time to think. You asked for my help and I'm demanding your love. Forgive me!"

"Xavier, I do love you. I have loved you since I first saw you in the *Bois de Boulogne*. I am so glad you spoke. I thought you might have come out of duty. You might be engaged or even married. I feared the worst. And yet you hardly know me. Let us spend some time together, to talk, to think, even to pray and to feel that love that we profess, before we commit ourselves to each other."

She slipped from her chair and knelt with him on the floor as they embraced and felt each other's lips. For Karl it was the realisation of an impossible dream. In his sleep he had seen those lips so often: the forbidden fruit. Now he had tasted, he wanted more.

There was a moan from the bed and they were shocked out of their private world. Alicia rose and ran to her father's side, but he was still asleep. Karl rose more slowly, clenched his teeth against the pain and joined her. She turned and looked steadily into his face.

"You are not well, my friend. You can pretend no-longer. You have let me into your soul. Speak to Docteur Rouflés. I'm sure he'll see you or recommend another physician. If you care for my father and me, you must care equally for yourself."

Karl frowned and nodded. "I'll speak to him before we leave today."

Monday 3rd September

The doctor had seen Karl immediately, nodding sagely at the description of the symptoms. He expressed his belief that it was probably a simple kidney infection, but had taken some blood for a test. Alicia was helping her father with his breakfast, when Docteur Rouflés arrived and took Karl to one side. It appeared that the blood test had shown the liver and kidneys to be healthy. Karl smiled and thanked him.

"Not so fast young man. I would just appreciate a second opinion."

He gave him a sealed envelope addressed to a colleague at *L'Hopital St. Vincent de Paul*. He had already telephoned and made an appointment for the afternoon.

The other hospital was not far away, so he left Alicia with her father and took a cab, entering by a side entrance, as Doctor Rouflés had suggested. He found the Doctor's office with little difficulty and was asked to wait by a nurse. He sat for some

time with his eyes closed and tried to settle his mind. The unknown seemed to be closing in on him. When he opened his eyes again, the nurse was staring at him. She hurried off and returned a few minutes later with the Doctor, a tall man with a rich mane of black hair. The nurse left them and he greeted Karl jovially, leading him into an examination room, where Karl stripped to his waist and lay down on a narrow bed. The doctor questioned and examined him carefully. He was far from rough, but Karl could not hide the pain as he explored his lower abdomen. There were then a lot of questions about his diet as Karl dressed himself again. The doctor seemed engrossed in the complexities of medical science and hardly to be aware of his patient's actual bodily presence in the room. Finally, he disappeared, leaving Karl buttoning his waistcoat. He put on his jacket and went out into the corridor. A couple of doctors in white coats passed by. He shivered and returned to the examination room to find his coat and wait. It was another twenty minutes before the doctor reappeared chuckling. Karl rose to greet him.

"Sit down, sit down. We don't stand on ceremony here. Oh dear, you've no idea how hard it is fitting everyone in, but I've done it. Yours will be on Wednesday next week. You'll come in Tuesday night. Then we can get down to business first thing in the morning."

Karl stared blankly at him. "I'm sorry Doctor Maurier, but I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, didn't Rouflés tell you anything? You need an operation. It's probably just an ulcer or two, but I'll have to get in there and sort it out. There's no other way. X-rays don't show them up very well and then we would still have to do surgery anyway. So what's the point? Sorry to give you a shock. I thought you realised why he sent you over here."

"No, I had no idea. Do you think it's serious?"

"Probably not, but we need to see."

"How's old Languere? Terrible business. Jew, Bretton, Italian, Walloon, what's it matter? We're all French at heart, even the English!!" The last seemed to cause him great amusement as he chuckled heartily, while he wrote something in a great curling script. "Here, take these powders. They'll relieve the pain. Now report here next Tuesday before five o'clock."

By the time Karl had returned to Alicia, he had decided to make light of his examination. Doctor Rouflés had made his usual daily visit and seemed concerned about some pain in the old man's side. Alicia was trying to give him some medicine and seemed to accept Karl's explanation that the doctor suspected the pain was caused by an ulcer and had given him some powders to take. As the old man began to snore peacefully, she rose and coiled her arms around Karl's neck, fixing her mouth to his lips. He responded and their tongues joined in a sweet embrace. Karl let himself relax into her love, yet it was not quite the unalloyed pleasure of previous days: something unsaid now lay between them.

After dinner that night Karl, Alicia and Madame Roux took turns reading poems and then Karl played the piano, while the ladies sang. It was the first time they had dressed for dinner and the struggles and ills of the world felt far away. At nine o'clock madam Roux went to settle her mother for the night and Karl and Alicia were left alone.

"Karl, you look so tired. I think you should rest. You've been so busy since you arrived from Germany. You need to look after yourself. Why don't you go down to Bordeaux or to Marseilles? It will still be warm."

"I can't leave you! How will you get to the hospital?"

"In the same way as we always do. We will take a taxi, the same one as usual. I'll be fine. You need a rest."

A plan began to form in Karl's mind as she spoke.

He sighed. "Maybe, but I don't like to leave you. It's not safe."

"As I say, we'll be fine. Now go to bed my Siegfried, and we'll talk more in the morning."

Tuesday 4th September

Before they had finished breakfast it was settled. Karl would continue to accompany Alicia to the hospital until the following Monday, when he was to make a necessary visit to the German embassy. After that he would take the train to Lyons to stay with some trusted friends, for a week of rest and recuperation.

Monsieur Languere continued to sleep for much of the time, but was able to maintain increasing periods of consciousness. Karl had begun to help with the feeding and the old man was beginning to speak, though they were unsure whether he even recognised his daughter. As he slept Karl and Alicia began to cement their relationship.

There was so much that they remembered about each other, but for Karl there was also so much that needed to be unsaid. Alicia kept having to remind herself that the scrupulously plausible life history of Xavier Duferier was just a fiction. They also shared much of their love of literature and music. Alicia was at first suspicious of his fascination with the ‘genius of Richard Wagner’, telling Karl the story of the famous riots of 1891, prompted by a performance of *Lohengrin*. Karl assured her that it was the music and certainly not any notions of genetic or cultural superiority that interested him.

“You don’t need to be defensive,” she assured him, laughing at his serious face, “it’s just that we French can’t hear Wagner without seeing Bismarck standing at the back of the stage.”

They were sitting at the back of a quiet café opposite the hospital. “So if it’s not in Wagnerian culture, where do you find your soul? The church?”

“Our church is very different from the one here. We are not Catholics in Prussia. We are Lutherans, but I’m not very orthodox. I like to think about something called ‘God consciousness.’ It’s the idea that we all have some spark of the divine in us and can reach out to a kind of world spirit, independent of our particular cultural experience, so your Hebrew Yahweh and my Christ become one and the same. We are united by our creator.”

“I don’t know much about our Yahweh, as you call him. Father celebrates the big festivals and knows the prayers, but has no time for organised religion. We never discussed it much. He says it just divides people into tribes who then learn to hate each other.”

“There’s a lot of truth in that, but you should read your Hebrew Bible. I studied Hebrew for a while at Tübingen and it’s so beautiful and full of some wonderful ideas and experiences. Those people wrote about God out of a rich knowledge of both joy and pain: ‘I lift my eyes up to the hills. From where does my help come? It comes from the Lord.’ I don’t know how many times I’ve held on to that. Your people have a great tradition.”

“Oh, Karl, you know so much. How can I ever compete?”

“Just don’t! You’ve got so much more wisdom than me. I feel such a boy. You’ve taught me so much already. We’re so different, but that’s where we’re strong. I just love being with you so much. Your spirit just lifts me out of myself and nothing else seems to matter.”

He stared into her eyes. "I can't believe I'm really here, with you. I told myself so many times it was impossible."

"And you make me feel secure. But there's something you haven't told me. We mustn't have secrets from each other. Why are you going to the German embassy tomorrow, if you're here as a Frenchman?"

Karl felt relieved. "Oh, that. It's my uncle in Berlin. He asked me to contact someone at the embassy for him. Also, I have my German passport with me in case of need. He will arrange for it to be stamped, so I can use it if I need it to cross the border. I'll also go to the Gare de Lyon and purchase my ticket Don't you think we'd better be getting back?"

Karl rose to leave, but Alicia held the sleeve of his coat.

"You're sure that's all? Father taught me always to be open and frank. We started with a lie, but we mustn't continue that way or we'll never trust each other."

Karl sat down again. He couldn't do it. He wondered how many years his uncle had been lying to Aunt Meta. The pain in his back had become the voice of his conscience. He placed his hands, palms downwards, on the table and looked at Alicia.

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to worry you. I'm not going to Lyons on Tuesday. I'm having surgery to find out what's wrong with me. I should have told you, but I thought you had enough to bear."

"Oh Karl, it is serious then."

"I don't know. It may be just an ulcer. The doctor will see on Wednesday. Oh, Alicia, I'm sorry to put more burdens on you. You don't want to have to worry about me as well as your father."

"Oh men! Are you men all so deaf and stupid? Haven't you heard how much I love you? There's nothing pleases me more than to look after the two great loves of my life ... Are you frightened?"

Karl looked down at his hands and nodded.

There was a long silence and Alicia took his hands in hers.

"You see, when I was a boy I had a friend. His name was Paul. We went everywhere together. One day he fell down clutching his side. They took him to hospital. I heard they operated, but I never saw him again. I never said goodbye." Tears slowly oozed from the corners of his eyes and ran down his face. He tried to stop them, took out his handkerchief and blew his nose, but the tears carried on coming and he buried his head on Alicia's shoulder as she stroked his hair.

The *patron* came over. "He has lost someone, Mademoiselle?"

Alicia nodded.

"C'est la guere, Mademoiselle. C'est terrible."

At last Karl raised his head. "I'm sorry. I must look such a fool. You see I've never told anyone about Paul. They wouldn't let me go to the funeral and I've never found the grave. I'd almost forgotten, until this came up."

They paid the *patron*, who watched them disappear out onto the street, as he wiped a tear from his eye.

Tuesday 11th September

On Tuesday evening Alicia accompanied Karl to hospital and helped him settle into his room. The day before he had spent an hour at the German embassy and then had visited a notary in order to compose a will in case everything did not go according to plan. It was this that he took from his breast pocket and gave to Alicia before she left. She smiled into his serious face.

"Never fear, *mon cher*, there will be no need to open this for many years to come."

"I hope so. I wish I had your confidence. I was not granted such a positive spirit."

"Oh, I nearly forgot," replied Alicia as she opened her bag and drew out a small roll of paper. "Open it! It might help you."

Karl frowned, took the scroll and unrolled it, revealing several lines of liling, cursive script. Karl smiled and read them aloud.

"I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.

My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.

He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not

slumber. Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.

The Lord is thy keeper: the Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand.

The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.

The lord shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul.

The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore. ”

Tears once more rolled down his unwilling cheeks. He took hold of Alicia’s hands and pulled her to him.

“However could I have been given such a woman as you? This is so beautiful. You know my heart so well already. Thank you ... Thank you.”

They just had time to embrace again before there were steps in the corridor and a knock at the door.

“*Ah! Monsieur Duferier, ... Mademoiselle, enchanté!*” The doctor bowed slightly and smiled. “Your sister, perhaps? You have the looks.”

“Doctor Maurier, this is Mademoiselle Languere.”

“Oh, of course, of course. Oh *Mademoiselle*. Let me say how sorry I am to hear what happened to your father. It is truly terrible. We Parisiennes have such a history to be ashamed of. I am sorry to interrupt you, but Monsieur, I must ask you to take this powder, and sleep now, so you are rested and prepared for tomorrow. Mademoiselle, if you would be so good ...”

He held the door open. Alicia rose. Kissed Karl on both cheeks and left. “I will come to see you tomorrow afternoon, as soon as I’ve seen father.”

Karl smiled. “Thank you.”

“I see you are a lucky man.” Doctor Maurier’s face was wreathed in smiles. I will mix your sleeping draught. It will help relax you for tomorrow. The doctor chatted happily as he worked, handing Karl a tall glass of milky liquid. Karl grimaced as he returned the empty glass.

“Well, Monsieur, we will meet again tomorrow. I can see you are little nervous. That is natural, but do not fear, you are in safe hands.” He glanced up at the cross on the wall and smiled again.

“Just one thing. I’m sure you are a very good doctor, but have you ever lost anyone on the operating table. I’m sorry to ask, but I once had a friend ...”

“Monsieur Duferier...” His voice was calm and soothing, but firm. “Operations always involve some risk, I would be lying to suggest otherwise, but I can honestly say

no-one has ever died on my table. There have been complications later, but my hands are the safest you will find.” His wide mouth broke into a smile again as he held out his hand, palm downwards.

“I’m sorry. I don’t doubt your skills.”

“Non, Monsieur, I am not offended. We all have our private fears. Now sleep well and we will meet tomorrow.” Tripping lightly out of the room, he extinguished the light, leaving Karl to surrender himself to the medicine.

Saturday 15th September

It was the first day that Karl had any real sense of consciousness. His dreams had been confused and ethereal. He remembered being moved from place to place, surrounded by strangers. At one point he saw his own body from some inordinate height and pain seemed to ebb and flow through and around him. Alicia and the Doctor flitted in and out, but never seemed to stay for long.

He opened his eyes and recognised the stark whiteness of the hospital room, relieved only marginally by a vase of flowers by the window. Everything else spoke of pain. His stomach felt as if a crushing weight was bearing down on it and pressing through his spine. A feeling of nausea suddenly welled up inside him and he felt his head being lifted, the hard edge of a dish against his chin; a bitter taste filled his mouth. He moaned and fell back against the pillows.

The next time he opened his eyes the light of day had been replaced by the shrouded glow of the lamp by his bed. He turned his head and saw Alicia. He tried to smile, but did not know if he managed it. She dabbed the sides of his mouth with some cotton wool and smiled.

“What happened?” he whispered hoarsely.

“The Doctor says it’s an infection. You’re doing fine, but you have to rest. It’ll be a couple of weeks before you’re strong enough to leave.”

“What did they find?”

Alicia’s smile faded. “He won’t tell me. Says you need to know first. It’s the policy. He never talks to friends or relatives without the patient’s permission unless it’s unavoidable. So don’t worry. He’s probably just cautious, and now you’re conscious we can find out.”

“I feel terrible. What day is it?”

“It’s Sunday evening. We can talk to the doctor in the morning.”

“I didn’t think it would be like ...”

Karl lost sight of Alicia and found himself in dark woodland where the trees were painfully close and he could not see the sky. He pushed and squeezed himself between the trees as if he was searching for something just beyond the next trunk, but was never able to reach it. He sensed the presence of familiar people, but they too were screened by the trees. At last he was in a wide country. It reminded him of home and he felt at peace.

Two days later he was sitting up in bed and Alicia was feeding him small spoonfuls of a thin soup.

“It’s a good thing I had plenty of practice with my father. I’ll be an expert at this. Maybe I should study to be a nurse.”

Karl managed a real smile this time. “Maybe,” he breathed.

Alicia raised the spoon to his mouth again, but he lifted his hand slightly. “Enough. My insides are not yet ready ... for so much exercise. It hurts again. I wish Doctor Maurier would be so good as ... to put me out of my misery.... I can’t help but think ... there is something seriously amiss.” He spoke in breathy tones.

“My dear, you mustn’t worry. I’m sure it’s just an infection, like he says. Soon you’ll be running around Paris and we can get married and move to Germany, away from all this.” Alicia stopped, her smile frozen on her face.

“So you’ve accepted.”

“I suppose I always had. I just wanted to be sure and seeing you like this has confirmed it. I’m so happy when I’m with you.”

“But, what of your father? Will he move to Germany? And you’ll have to learn German.”

“If you can learn French, I’m sure I can learn German! And as for Father ... I think he’s changing. Anyway, he’ll have to change and when he hears what you did to help us, I’m sure he’ll change. He can’t be so loyal to France when he sees how Paris has turned on us. France is not worth our love.”

There was a knock at the door.

“Careful what you say,” whispered Karl, “remember those walls.”

Alicia’s hand flew to her mouth once more as she went to open the door.

“*Bonjour, bonjour*, my dears. I heard your voice Mademoiselle and I did not wish to intrude, especially when love is being born.”

“I am sorry, Doctor Maurier, please don’t let our sentimental talk delay your busy work. You have been so kind to us already. If it were not for you and your staff, I fear that my ... I mean I fear that *Monsieur Duferier* would be no more.”

“Oh, do not apologise, *Mademoiselle*. It has been obvious from the moment I saw you two together, that you were in love and you are in Paris, the home of love. Never apologise for love. Such foolishness is to be celebrated, especially in times such as ours when madness is engulfing the world. Let me offer my congratulations on your engagement. If *Monsieur Duferier* were permitted to drink I would order a bottle of the best champagne, but I fear that will have to wait.”

“Thank you.” croaked Karl. “I am forever in your debt.”

Doctor Maurier’s face suddenly became solemn. “I’m afraid you are not in my debt at all Monsieur, for I do not have good news for you. Please, *Mademoiselle*, take your place next to your fiancé, for he will need all the love you can give him and I believe it is the best medicine he can have.”

Alicia sat down quickly and grasped Karl’s hand.

“*Monsieur Duferier*, when I first examined you I did not wish to alarm you unnecessarily, but I felt a mass in your lower abdomen and that is why I made arrangements to do some investigative surgery as soon as feasibly possible. Unfortunately in doing so I must have introduced some infection, for which I am heartily sorry, but that does not affect the diagnosis. Pardon me, I am beating about the bushes, as the English love to say. I will come straight to the point. You have cancer, *Monsieur*, cancer of the pancreas and I’m afraid there’s no cure and no treatment. I wish I could tell you otherwise, but I cannot.”

Doctor Maurier took out a white handkerchief wiping the sweat from his forehead. “Now, maybe I should leave you. I am so sorry.”

Karl raised a finger. “How long might I be expected to live?” he whispered hoarsely. The words hung heavily in the air.

“I am not God, young man, though sometimes I wish I could be. It may be months or even a year or even two. It is not too advanced. It all depends how quickly it grows. There are some who say you can retard the growth of cancer by lifestyle and diet. I am not sure, but you can try. Later, we should talk more. Now you need to be alone together, but call me at any time. Here is my address and telephone number.” He nodded solemnly to them both, handed Alicia an envelope and left.

Monday 24th September

“All rise!”

In filed three dress-uniformed generals bedecked with medals. They took their places on the dais and everyone except Philippe settled noisily back into their seats.

The prisoner stood smartly to attention in uniform and epaulettes.

“I hear-by charge you, Lieutenant Philippe Benningstein of the 15th Field Artillery Regiment on the following two counts. Firstly, that on the night of September 10th you deserted your post in order to serve the interests of the enemy. How do you plead?”

“Not guilty, Sir.”

Secondly I charge you with treason against the body politic of France in that during and subsequent to the war you did knowingly make secret military information available to the German authorities and regularly transferred funds belonging to French companies into German hands. How do you plead?”

“Not guilty, Sir.”

“The accused is reminded that should he not be able to prove himself innocent of the afore said charges, the court will have no option but to sentence him to death by a means of its own determining. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Sir.”

The clerk of the court bowed to the dais and took his seat.

The central figure leaned forward tilting his chin upwards, and addressed the public gallery. “In presiding today, I and my fellow judges come to execute a sad, but necessary duty. For any officer to dishonour his uniform and betray the people of France is most despicable, but the crimes with which this officer has been charged are the most heinous that I have ever heard brought before a court of France. It is for this reason that we have invited you, the people, and members of the press, to come and witness these events, that you may see that we continue to uphold the principles of justice upon which our nation is founded.” He looked down at the open file on his desk, stroked his moustache and turned abruptly to a young colonel seated at a desk to his right. Colonel Fauberg, I believe you are bringing the case for the prosecution.”

The man rose to his feet and bowed to the dais.

“General Pétain ... Your Honours.” He nodded respectfully to each of the judges in turn. “As the court has already heard, we come today to administer justice in a case of the most terrible crime. When all around him, his comrades were giving their lives for France, *this* lieutenant slipped away from the fighting in a cowardly act of betrayal and if this was not bad enough, we now know that he had been sending information to the enemy regarding our artillery and troop positions since the beginning of hostilities. Then, he took a new identity in Lille and continued to betray the financial interests of French businesses. I will take each of the phases of his treason in turn and place the facts before the court, so that you can judge for yourselves the guilt of this man. I therefore call upon *Lieutenant* Benningstein to face the people and army of France.”

Philippe rose, resting his manacled hands on the brass rail in front of him. A general murmur came from the gallery mixed with a few shouts of “traitor”. General Pétain glanced up and rapped the desk with his gavel. Philippe knew what was coming. Captain Armand had told him simply to deny everything, rather than trying to argue his way out of the charges. The two men had begun to get along quite well. Philippe did not know if the captain really believed him, but he seemed to be doing his best to represent him. It was clear that he had been assigned an unpopular duty, but seemed to be trying his best to do it justice. Also, since Philippe had begun to receive smuggled letters from his family, he had grown in confidence. He had still not been allowed to see them, but at least they knew he was safe and well, for the present.

“... and so we see the nature of this twisted feeble mind at work. Not only did he sell France to the German wolves, but he continued to bleed her dry in her defeat. Your honours, Generals of France, you have heard the undeniable evidence and you have seen the deceitful Semitic face before us, but what you do not know is from what verminous warren this traitor rose to feed on our flesh. *Lieutenant* where do you come from?”

Philippe frowned. This was completely unexpected.

“From Paris, of course. I have always lived in Paris. I love Paris.”

“That is not quite what I meant. And I think you know my meaning perfectly well, *Juif!*

You are of the Hebrew race, are you not?”

“Yes, sir, but I was born a Frenchman and I love my country. I am a patriot of France.”

“So, you say, ... but let me tell the court, from where your family comes, so that your dissembling Hebrew mind does not mislead us. Let us go back to the year 1869

when a certain ten year old boy by the name of Joseph Berenstein travelled from the town of Ortelsburg in East Prussia. He settled with his uncle in Paris and eventually was apprenticed to this small time photographer, changing his name on achieving adulthood in order to obscure his real identity. Is this not true, Lieutenant?”

“No! I mean I don’t know, Sir. I don’t know where my father was born.”

“Ah! The court should find this highly interesting. But, not only does our *patriotic lieutenant* come from German stock, but a certain Captain Berenstein also fought in Bismarck’s army at the Sedan. Then, when our wily Joseph Berenstein required a wife, he did not seek someone from his new home; a patriotic woman of France, but found his life partner in his Germanic homeland! Was he fearful that a French woman would not school her children according to his inclinations of patriotism?”

“This is not true, my mother is French.”

“So you wish us to believe Lieutenant, but you see the court is now aware that Lieutenant Benningstein was raised in a German Jewish home, in a family whose inclinations are against *La Patrie de La France* and who was schooled from birth to lie and dissemble, pretending a false patriotism, so he could worm his way into a position where he could serve his true master, Germany!”

“No! None of it is true. You’ve got to believe me,” yelled Philippe.

A chorus of “Juif, Juif! Traitor! Traitor!” came from the gallery as General Pétain hammered the innocent desk before him.

“The accused will remain silent until given leave to speak ... The court shall come to order.”

Colonel Fauberg stood calmly waiting for the commotion to subside, in full confidence that he had won the court to his declared opinion. He picked up a manila folder, handing it to the clerk of the court. “I think your honours will find all these documents are in order.” He stared around the court, daring anyone to challenge the logic of his position, and took his seat.

Captain Armand was immediately on his feet. “Your honour, the defence has not been given access to these documents. We have had no chance to confirm their veracity. I would humbly ask for an adjournment of the court, so I can consult with my client and study this new evidence.”

General Pétain turned to his colleagues for a brief discussion. “I think you will find all these documents in order, Captain. You may have two hours. This court is adjourned until two o’clock this afternoon.

“All rise!”

With that, the triumvirate left the dais and Philippe was marched down to the cells.

“Are you sure you didn’t know about this?” demanded Captain Armand. “Surely you know where your parents are from.”

“I know nothing about it and I don’t believe it’s true. We always spoke French or Yiddish at home.”

“Well the documents look to be in order: copies of German birth and marriage certificates, and original forms from their entry into France. It’s all there. We can’t contest it.”

“You can go and ask my parents.”

“The court won’t let them testify.”

“But at least you’ll know and you can tell the court and show it their real documents. I just don’t believe any of this. I’m French and my parents are French.”

“How can I contact them?”

Philippe hesitated. “Go to Levi’s *Boulangerie* on L’Avenue Du Temple and leave a message. My Father will contact you.”

The Captain sighed. “I’ll try, but if that’s all you’ve got, I don’t think we have a hope in hell before this court. I’ll send a message this afternoon and maybe we can meet tonight. It’ll have to be fast. We have very little time. There are certain people who want your head as fast as they can get it.”

“So you think there’s no hope. I’m as good as a dead man. They’ll have me against the wall by dawn tomorrow!” He jumped up and kicked his chair across the room. “Why? All I wanted to do was live for France and this is how she repays me – a lamb prepared for slaughter.” The door flew open and two hefty military policemen entered the room to restrain the dangerous prisoner and protect his counsel. Captain Armand raised the palm of his hand and they stopped in their tracks. “No need for that. We’re quite all right.” The two men retreated. Armand picked up the chair and motioned Philippe to sit down.

“We’ll need to prepare for this afternoon. Let me just help you to tell your story and you must keep as calm as you did for most of this morning. Lashing out or talking back won’t help you. Remember you have to prove your innocence. It’s not the same as a civilian court. Even if they don’t believe you, I’ll make sure they hear you’re side and you can hold your head up high.”

Captain Armand helped Philippe through his story. He came over as a loyal, trusting youth, committed to the cause of *La Patrie*. Each of the generals asked questions, to clarify points here and there and seemed to be genuinely weighing his evidence. The murmuring of the gallery ceased as the tale played out.

The captain resumed his seat and General Pétain’s gaze switched to the other side of the court, folding his hands under his chin as Colonel Fauberg rose to speak. “With your indulgence, I have a few questions for our gallant lieutenant.” He turned sharply on his heels, so the soles of his boots hit the floor with a sharp crack.

“Now Lieutenant, let us just re-visit the night of 10th September. The court must find it strange that you do not remember either the name or rank of the officer who supposedly spirited you out of the trenches on that night. Do you not agree?”

“No, Sir, it was dark and all I could see was that he was wearing an officer’s uniform.”

“Could he not have been a German officer, in the dark?”

“No, I don’t think so sir. He spoke French.”

“And no Germans speak French, even those from Alsace and Lorraine? But never mind, we will believe in your mysterious French officer for the present. But, what do you make of the bank book showing clearly that you withdrew funds from a bank in Guisse on 17th September, when you claim you were in a woodland Chateau near Cannes in Normandy. How do you explain that?

“I cannot. I left my bank behind. That must be a forgery.”

The gallery gasped.

“So, the French state deliberately created a bank book, purporting to come from you, in order to prosecute you for desertion and treason. Why should it do so? You must think you are inordinately important.

“Then after two and a half years you turn up in Lille, a junior employee of the Banque de France, according to your employer, living a strangely monastic existence

with him and his wife, rarely going out and having few or no friends. Was this your situation just before you came to Paris?

"Yes, I was working at the Banque de France and staying with Monsieur Barbeau, but I wouldn't say ..."

"Quite so, and you claim that you, a junior employee, were trusted with responsibility for major German company accounts and that you were told to divert sums of money from contracts associated with these accounts into unnamed French bank accounts."

"Yes sir, Captain Antoine Lefèvre contacted me and gave me instructions how to do this, without it being discovered."

"As you say, you met Antoine Lefèvre in Lille. The mysterious Antoine, so called *Captain* Lefèvre. Yet, as I am sure you know, he is no captain in the French army, but your accomplice in espionage. He has now revealed his contacts in the German banking system and we are now in possession of documents relating to the financial transactions carried out by *you!*" The word resounded across the court as the colonel's voice began to rise. "The court should know that a full audit of the accounts at the Lille branch of the Banque de France has been carried out and every one of the transactions authorised by Benningstein has been identified. Moreover, despite the criminal scheming of our two conspirators, we also discovered that these payments were not to French accounts, but to German cover accounts, which subsequent to the end of the occupation have been closed. Further, the money turns out not to be from German sources into French accounts, but quite the opposite. Money was carefully filched from French accounts and sent in an endless stream to support the German industrial and military machine." His voice rose to a crescendo. "Thus, as France was on her knees, her sons lying in the graves of the fallen, this ungrateful, deceiving Jew was leaching blood from her heart to feed the damnable designs of his Prussian masters."

A man draped in the Tricolour jumped to his feet. "*Tué le juif! Tué le juif!*"

Others in the gallery took up the cry and soon General Pétain was desperately, but ineffectively rapping his gavel on his desk, shouting "silence! silence! the court will come to order," but to no effect. The gallery had become a revolutionary chanting mob, stamping their feet in a united chorus of rage. The generals conferred and Pétain rose to his feet. "Clear the court. Take the prisoner below."

Suddenly, a man vaulted from the gallery into the well of the court. "*Tué le juif. Justice to the people. Vive La Revolution!*" Two others followed.

The generals crossed themselves, in stupefied rage. Philippe's guards began to march him out of the court, but were stopped by a further two representatives of the people, bursting through a side door. The two counsel exchanged glances and retreated towards the dais accompanied by the clerk of the court.

Shots rang out and all was plunged into silence as two young citizens crumpled and hit the floor. "*Vive La Peuple!*" shouted another man as he leaped into the court, his body hitting the floor lifeless as blood spattered the wall behind him.

"This is an army court martial and French justice will be allowed to take its course without the intervention of the rabble. Now clear the court and have all those who have disturbed our proceedings indicted for contempt under article 23 section 5c of the military code. The court will reconvene tomorrow at nine, in private."

Philippe knew, as he heard the receding clump of the generals' boots, that their forestalling of the mob's retributive justice, was but a delay of the inevitable. He was in a daze as he was poked and prodded back to his cell. *La France*, his erstwhile idol; *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, had dissolved in a moment into a mob, braying for the blood of one of its citizens, led by men who paid no heed to the value of a man's life. Three shots - for sake of the court, for the trial, for politics. He unbuttoned his tunic and wrenched the epaulettes from the shoulders. He knew they would do it to him in a few days; a public humiliation. Why not save them the trouble? He drew his feet up onto the bed, pressing his back against the wall and hid his face in his knees. If he could have found a sharp instrument or a rope, he would have ended it then and there and saved them the final triumph of execution, but there was nothing, nothing but bare, unfeeling walls, closing in on him more each day; nothing but anger, and stern faces; nothing but darkness; everything which might speak of beauty and humanity was gone. Even the light was naked and harsh, no smiles, no love, no welcome, no vistas to lead the heart on and out beyond itself, nothing but rude death.

Wednesday 26th September

Karl slid the golden circlet onto Alicia's waiting finger and the couple embraced before the official had chance to give his civic blessing. Events had pushed all social proprieties to one side. Every moment mattered. Madame Roux and her cook signed as witnesses and the small party adjourned to *L'Hopital St. Jacques*, where two doctors and

an old man sat waiting. Only the old man and his daughter knew the true identity of the groom.

The wedding party came in laughing and giggling. Even the cook had relaxed after her elevation to a most unexpected status. The doctors helped Monsieur Languere to rise and meet them at the door.

“Oh, Father, you mustn’t tire yourself. You must be careful.”

“Oh, nonsense, my dear, a little twinge here and there. That is all I have. How can I not greet my happy daughter and her dashing prince on their wedding day and give you my blessing? My son, I welcome you into our family. What was mine is yours. Look after her and treasure her. May you have many children and grow old gracefully together.”

“Thank you Father. Your blessing means so much to us, doesn’t it Xavier.”

“*Oui, Monsieur.* I am eternally grateful that I could be thought sufficient to marry your princess.” Karl’s smile slipped from his lips as he replied to the old man.

“What is the matter? Are you not happy?”

“Oh, I am deliciously happy. Oh, that I was born with the Parisian smile and bonhomie. Come let us eat.”

The party continued in an atmosphere of happy reverie. Paris might have been in uproar and revolution for all they knew, but nothing would touch their celebration of mutual love. All else was forgotten in that fourth floor private apartment of Dr. Rouflés. After dinner he produced his gramophone and played the Blue Danube as Karl and Alicia waltzed cheek to cheek around his compact sitting room. The doctor slipped more records from their brown paper sleeves, deftly lifting one from the turntable and replacing it with another, giving the handle a few rapid turns as the music continued. In an excessive exhibition of formality Dr Maurier offered his hand to Mme Roux and she joined him stiffly on the dance floor. The two couples navigated their way triumphantly around the furniture. Paris was performing its magic. Gabrielle Roux had not danced since her husband had gone off to war and Ernest Maurier had always been too busy for the inefficient subtleties of courtship. Eventually, the music stopped and the couples took their rest. Monsieur Languere was busy swapping recipes with the cook. Dr. Rouflés proposed a final Champagne toast and Karl and Alicia left by motor taxi for a hotel on the western edge of the Bois de Boulogne.

Karl woke the next morning a different person. He let his hand glide softly over the silky smooth satin sheets of their *Belle Epoch* bed and found himself caressing the rich flesh of his wife, who grunted appreciatively. She turned towards him and they embraced, sharing a long, satisfying kiss. She opened her legs and he pressed his naked body against hers as they began to envelop each other in love once more. Somehow he hadn't expected it to be so delicious. The discussion of sexual fulfilment had been neither part of his upbringing nor his experience as a young man; his natural shy reserve led him to avoid male sexual humour and discussion. He preferred to hide in a book. He could not believe that after the first surge of pain, Alicia not only allowed him, but welcomed him into her body, revelling in the experience. How could two human beings be so close, so much at one? For the first time he understood the words of all those wedding services "...to have and to hold from this day forth..." There was nothing like it. He felt to be a complete man for the first time.

They lay nose to nose in the young world of breathless love. "How do you feel? Is there any pain?" whispered Alicia.

"It's fantastic. There's nothing at all. I feel so marvellous. It's like your love has healed me. You're so perfect. I could do anything now."

She giggled. "And you're a silly love-sick boy and I'm your shameless romantic heroin. It feels like everything's happened just to bring us together. Isn't there something in that Christian Bible about 'all things work together for good?'"

"Oh, how many times have I heard that read? '...for those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.' Do you love God?"

Alicia kissed her husband's serious lips and smiled. "I suppose I do. We always celebrated *Shabbat* and Father led us in our prayers. What about you?"

"I don't know. The divine always seems so far away. The word love didn't seem to fit. Nothing like our love anyway."

She giggled again. "What I do know is that we've got a purpose and that our purpose for today is to be happy, to forget the pain of the world for a moment and enjoy each other."

She sprang up from the bed and held out her hand to Karl. "Let us dance my husband. Let us dance."

Karl's face broke into a broad grin as he clambered off the bed and took her in his arms. "You must be the craziest woman in the world." He spun her round and embraced her lips once again, letting his tongue stroke and caress hers as his passion

welled up inside him. Then in silent agreement they released each other and began to glide around the room. Finally he bowed to her flamboyantly; she curtsied and made for the bathroom.

Karl sat on the bed smiling to himself. He shivered and realised for the first time that the room was cold. There was a knock at the door and he hurried into his dressing gown.

“A telegram, Monsieur.” The bell boy bowed and was gone.

It was addressed to Madame Alicia Duferier. He laid it on the table and went to attend to making a fire with the paper, kindling and coal provided. He could have rung for the staff, but preferred the privacy. He was kneeling, warming his hands, when Alicia emerged from the bathroom, her long black wet hair standing out starkly against her white bath robe. Karl had also rung for coffee and croissants, which sat on the table by the telegram. Her face lit up at the sight of the coffee.

“Oh, you good man. I hoped you’d ordered.”

“This came for you. I hope it’s nothing serious.”

Her mouth dropped. “You should have told me. It might be Father. I wouldn’t have taken so long.”

She ripped open the seal and gasped. Karl read silently over her shoulder. ‘Your father sick – stop – Possibly heart failure – Stop – Come at once – Dr. Rouflés.’

“I’m sorry. I was in another world. I should have told you at once. I’m sorry.” There were tears in his eyes.

Alicia rose and faced him, taking his hands. “It’s all right. I too wanted that other world to last forever, but the real one just won’t go away, will it?. Come on. Help me dress and we’ll take one of the hotel taxis.” Half an hour later they were on their way to *L’Hopital St. Jacques*, still holding hands.

When they entered Monsieur Languere’s room, a rabbi stood at the bedside rocking gently backwards and forwards as he intoned a prayer. Alicia sprang to the other side of the bed and took her father’s hand. He turned his head and a smile quivered on his lips. “Sorry,” he breathed almost inaudibly. “It’s all right Father. We love you.” Tears began to roll down her face and drip onto the pillow as she kissed his forehead. “You’ve done so well.”

“I’ve just been hanging on for you. Now you’re settled, I can go.”

“No, Father, don’t think like that. Karl loves you. We both do.”

"I love you too, but my body ... says ... it's time ... to go." He closed his eyes again and his breathing settled into a shallow, rhythmic pattern as the rabbi continued to intone quietly, swaying gently in communion with the divine.

Karl put his arm round Alicia and she held his hand. Eventually the rabbi took his leave. As morning moved to afternoon and then evening. Nurses and Dr. Rouflés came and went and still the quiet breathing continued. Karl went out for a while to get something for them to eat and returned to find little had changed. Alicia smiled.

"I don't think it'll be long now."

"Maybe you should take a break. You've been here for hours."

"I will. I'll be back soon. Just hold his hand and clean the dribbles from his mouth. I won't be long." She let go reluctantly and left the room.

Karl took the old man's hand and the breathing faltered and stopped for a few seconds. Karl gasped and was about to get up when it resumed as rhythmical as before. Karl wanted to talk to the old man, but didn't know if he could hear. But did it really matter if he could hear or not? There was so much Karl needed to say.

"Father." He squeezed the old man's hand. "I'm sorry I lied to win your daughter's hand. I really hated myself for it, so I wouldn't have been surprised if you'd despised me till the end of your life. I am so grateful for your blessing. You know I never forgot your daughter all the time I was in Germany and I was so pleased when I heard from her. You and Alicia have made me so happy. She's perfect." The breathing quickened and the eyes struggled open. The old man's lips parted and slowly made to form words, but there was no sound. Karl squeezed his hand again and whispered in his ear. "Thank you."

Alicia had re-entered the room quietly and sat at the other side of the bed. The breathing continued as before, but together with a harsher, gurgling sound in the throat. The nurse arrived again, listened to his heart, nodded to them both, her lips pressed together and left. A few minutes later Dr. Rouflés returned, looking very serious. As he placed his hand on Karl's shoulder Alicia's father let out a long sigh, his breathing stopped and blood streamed from his mouth and nose. Alicia screamed and Karl dashed to the other side of the bed enveloping her in his arms.

Friday 28th September

When the verdict came Philippe was hardly surprised. He had felt doomed since his first interview with Madame Maillot. Captain Armand had managed to see the Benningsteins and been very favourably impressed by their hospitality, but the result of the interview was in fact a confirmation of Colonel Fauberg's basic outline of Philippe's origins. Philippe could not believe it. Why had they never told him?

Despite Captain Armand's impassioned plea for clemency, Philippe faced a humiliating ordeal. The national assembly had narrowly passed a bill reinstating public executions in cases of treason or political assassination. In the words of *Le Gaulois* it was 'a brave act of a nation determined to throw off the trappings of ignominy and publically rise from the ashes of defeat to show the world that *La France* will never again bow it's knee to any nation upon this earth.'

The words went round and round in his head; "Captain Philippe Benningstein shall be publically stripped of his rank before representatives of the Army of the French Republic, including officers and men of the 15th artillery regiment. He shall then immediately be conducted through the streets of Paris in an open vehicle to a place of public execution, where his head shall be severed from his body. May God have mercy on his soul."

He took his skull cap from under his mattress, placed it on his head and began to pray.

The words welled up inside him as never before. He had nothing more to fear. They were going to do their worst. Why fear their wrath?

What a strange thing is death? Once you were faced with its certainty, you don't fear it any longer. In fact there is a certain release, a freedom which comes when you are no-longer able to hold onto life. The decision is out of your hands; others have determined your future or lack of it. You'd rather go back, live it all again, make other choices, but you can't, thought Philippe. I've got to accept my fate. I wonder if this is how the Buddha felt when he reached Nirvana; the end of desire. At least that's how the author put it in a book I once read about Vietnam, that eastern outpost of French civilisation. It's like deciding not to fight any longer, except you don't decide, you just go along with the decision, make it your own, internalise it. In a strange way you don't

even have to make the effort; the work has been done for you. Life will end at a pre-determined date and you can't do anything about it.

Philippe rose from his chair, and went to stand at the foot of his bed, facing the wall. He had asked the guards which direction was east and after some discussion they determined it was the wall by side of his bed. He stood gently swaying backwards and forwards, a prayer shawl around his shoulders, reading from a book of Yiddish and Hebrew prayers. It was strange how, since the authorities had won, he was allowed almost anything he wanted, except his freedom. He had two thirty minute periods of exercise each day. The first time he saw more than a tiny patch of sky and smelt the fresh air, he wanted to jump and dance, except that he was shackled to a guard, so they just walked round the exercise yard in a circular motion as the other prisoners stared in silence and made way for them. He was a curiosity, the infamous oddity, deluded, and certainly dangerous. The newspapers had written at length about his deranged tales of working for a secret *revanchist* organisation. Le Gaulois and its like said this was just a cover for his espionage, while the more liberal press speculated that his deluded mind had allowed him to be recruited as a German spy.

Captain Armand had pleaded that his parents be allowed to visit and with the grudging support of Colonel Fauberg weekly visits had been granted. He had seen them three times, but Maria was deemed too young to be included. So far there was no date of execution, but the case was beyond appeal.

Saturday 29th September

Stephen Firth had been up for several hours conducting a photographic experiment in the garden. He limped enthusiastically into the breakfast room, rested his camera and tripod by the fireplace and threw his coat over a chair.

"Don't we have a hall cupboard any longer?" offered Helen, without raising her eyes from the letter she was reading.

"Oh Mother, just relax, it's Saturday morning." Stephen poured himself a cup of coffee, selected a lightly done piece of toast from the toast rack on the table and began to butter it. "Who's the letter from?"

"Your sister. I haven't read anything of hers for a while. She's developing some lovely turns of phrase."

“How’s she doing?” said Stephen, as he rammed half a piece of toast into his mouth.

“She seems to be settling into hall quite well and to be quite taken with her Political Philosophy classes; a young lecturer, called Höpfl. Evidently, he talks very fast and has a very dry sense of humour. She says no-body else seems to understand his jokes. She’s also started going to the Mount Street Chapel, where she met the Murrays and the Hinchcliffs. They send their regards.”

Stephen poured himself another coffee and spread his second piece of toast with a copious helping of marmalade.

“What’s the hurry? Are you going out? I hardly seem to see you some days.”

“I’m taking some of the men from the Photographic Society up to the moors above Meltham. It’s such a beautiful day. We should get some marvellous shots and we want to photograph the old cottages up there, before they fall down completely.”

“I did want to talk to you about something.”

Stephen buttered his third piece of toast as he munched hastily.

“Of course, go on Mother, I’m listening. I’ve got a few minutes. I said I’d pick Richard up at ten.”

“It’s about the mill. You said you were going to advertise for an under-manager. How are you getting on? I do like to be kept informed. I saw Mr Broomfield yesterday and he mentioned it. He seemed quite concerned.”

“Yes, I’m sure he is and I’ll bring him in at the interview stage and I’d like you to be involved then too.”

“Well, I’d assumed I would be. After all, I do still own the mill.” A knowing smile flickered across her face as she poured another cup of tea. “I’m not decrepit yet.”

Stephen realised he was beaten and rested his knife on his plate.

“Sorry, I should’ve thought more carefully. I just want to get things moving. We need new blood. I’ll get the letters of application on my way home this afternoon. Actually, I’d like your input; I’ve been worrying about it a bit. There’s one I think you’ll like, Frederick Evans. Family’s from south Wales, but was brought up in Bradford and goes to the Quaker Meeting in Little Horton Lane. Do you know them?”

“I don’t think I do, but I look forward to reading his particulars and the others of course. Aren’t you in for lunch?”

“No, we thought we’d get something in Meltham. I’ve told Mrs Benholmly. Oh and I forget to tell you, Albert’s coming tonight. He looked very serious about it. Seems

to have something on his mind.” Stephen picked up his toast, bit off a large chunk and looked up at the clock.

“Thank you, dear, we can talk this over once I’ve seen the letters – don’t forget them, will you? Now, you better be making tracks and have an enjoyable time. I’m so pleased you’ve got an interest.”

“Thank you, Mother. I’m really enjoying it. I’m seeing the world in a new way.”

“Will you bring Albert?”

“No! You know what he’s like; independent to the last. Must dash!”

Stephen rammed his last piece of toast into his mouth, licked his lips, grabbed his coat, camera and tripod and limped quickly to the door, where he turned, smiled and blew his mother a kiss.

It was three o’clock in the afternoon and Helen Firth was sitting in her usual chair by the fire, which was beginning to burn low. She heard the puttering of the Austin Seven as it mounted the drive, but did not move. The *Bradford Telegraph* was open at page five. Stephen came in through the back door and passed the stairs down to the kitchen, pulling off his driving gloves as he went.

“Mother! Mother!”

He shed his coat and hung it in the hall cupboard, placing his gloves on the top shelf above the coats and shut the door. He then made for the sitting room, opening the door with a flourish.

“Mother, you should have seen the light up on the moors! It was tremendous. I can’t wait to ... Mother! Are you all right?”

She sat stock still, only revealing that there was still life in her body as he reached her and turned to show her red, puffy eyes.

“Mother! What’s wrong? What’s happened? Have you had bad news?”

He knelt at her side, with his arm around her. “What is it?”

She opened her mouth to speak, but all that came out was a heart-felt sob, as her body shook. She motioned to the newspaper and managed to gasp, “read it.”

Stephen saw the face of a boyish young man. Richard had been full of it when he picked him up in the morning, but Stephen read the article carefully. He looked into his mother’s face. “I know. It’s dreadful isn’t it. I don’t know how people can sell the lives of their own people.”

Helen Firth shook her head slowly and pulled herself free of Stephen's arm. "You don't see, do you? ... None of you will ... Those...eyes,...they say it all. They bore into your soul, just like His do. He's innocent, just like He was and...they'll kill him just like they did Jesus." She began to sob again. Stephen had never seen his mother in such a state. Even when Father died she'd been so much in control. Now she was distraught over the death of a stranger who might well deserve to die.

Using the arm of his mother's chair, Stephen raised himself to his feet and seated himself on the sofa. "Mother, you need to explain this to me. I can't understand how this man can be like Jesus, except that he's a Jew."

Several minutes passed. Then Helen blew her nose several times, wiped her eyes and straightened her back in her usual manner. "I'm sorry dear. I must look very foolish to you. Now come and make up the fire and sit down with me. Stephen obeyed, sitting opposite his mother. In a few simple sentences she related her experience, long ago, when she had had her first mystical meeting with Jesus. Then she explained what had happened in the two hours or so since lunch.

"I had taken some time after dessert to drink my coffee in here as usual. I took my Bible and read the story from John's Gospel about the trial of Jesus before Pontius Pilate. I then picked up the *Telegraph*. There didn't seem to be much of interest in the first few pages, so I turned to the international news on page five. The picture of Philippe Benningstein just hit me between the eyes or rather his eyes met my eyes and I could hardly read the article. Suddenly, it was just like those many years ago, just like Jesus was in the room with me. There were no words, but just a powerful presence and the overwhelming feeling that this man," she shook the paper, "is innocent."

"But, Mother, how can you know?"

"I knew you wouldn't believe me. No-body will. You'll just think I'm a silly old woman, full of pious faith and foolish ideas."

"Mother, I could never see you like that and I want to understand. I've often tried to believe like you and Father, but it's never worked for me. Is there anything else that would help me believe in what you're saying?"

"Well, there is this. It's like a repeat of history. About twenty years ago there was a famous case in France, when a Jewish officer was falsely accused of espionage. Eventually he was cleared, but powerful men in the church and the army were furious and vowed to get back at the Jews one day. I believe that day has come and the Jewish

population of France may be in for a hard time. I feel Jesus is crying for them and calling me to cry with him.”

Stephen sat nodding gently. “I’m starting to understand.”

“You know it’s not just religious hysteria. Some people would say I’m crazy.”

“No-one would ever accuse Mrs Helen Firth of being crazy, you’re a watch word throughout the town for down to earth common sense, honesty and practical charity.”

“Well, maybe, but some worthy ladies still won’t speak to me because of Albert.”

“And we all know that’s more about their hypocrisy than anything you’ve done.”

“Mmm, maybe, It’s not for me to judge. Anyway, thank you. I feel a lot better. Will you go and ask Mrs Benholmly to bring some tea and scones and you better get out of those wet trousers.”

He grinned and left his mother still looking at the newspaper.

Stephen spent Monday and Tuesday at the public library researching the Benningstein-Dreyfus business. By the time he and his mother were eating dinner on Tuesday evening he had made a decision.

“Mother! I’ve been reading up on this Benningstein business and I agree with you. I think there’s something very strange going on. The Dreyfus case was out and out anti-Semitism and this looks so similar. What makes it even more suspicious is the way this new political party, *La Revanche*, is making use of it. It’s almost as if *La Revanche* created the whole thing for its own benefit. I know it seems a bit far fetched, but I just don’t trust the whole business. It’s just too neat and tidy and that makes it smell of corruption.”

Helen finished chewing her meat, swallowed and took a sip of water. “So what does my wise young son suggest we do about it? I thought I would write to the French President and ask for clemency, but I’ll need your help. My French is very poor these days.”

“I’m not sure that mine is perfect, but I did use it sometimes in Russia ... I wondered if we might go further and organise a petition. You know a lot of people in the town. I’m sure you could convince some of the folk at the Meeting and then there are the other churches, the choral and even one or two councillors might be persuaded to sign. I could produce an information leaflet and ...”

“Yes! I was thinking of something like that, but it all seemed too much for me, but if you could organise it, it would be possible. Do you think you could? I’ve spoken to Mrs Simpson and the Davies sisters. They had very much the same feelings as me. And I’m sure Barbara could be prevailed upon to get involved.”

“Well that’s settled. You better get on the blower after dinner. I’ll get Father’s old typewriter out and start drafting something. From what I can tell, there’s no time to lose.... God! This is exciting. Whoops, sorry Mother. It’s just that I feel I’m back in touch with the world. I’ve felt so cut off.”

There was a knock at the door and Becky arrived with dessert.

“Chocolate pudding and custard, just what the doctor ordered. We need good food and lots of it for this sort of campaign!” Stephen’s eyes blazed with excitement.

Becky placed the dessert on the sideboard and left.

“Don’t you think you’re enjoying this a bit too much. We are trying to save a man’s life. You’re not trying to get elected to parliament.”

“I know, but it is thrilling to be doing something real and out there again.”

Helen touched her son’s hand and smiled. “It’s good to see you coming back to life after all you’ve been through. Just remember folk around here are a pretty serious bunch, when it comes to politics. They need to know you mean what you say. Then they’ll back us to the hilt.”

“I’ll try not to get too excited in public, but it’s so good to feel I’ve got some purpose in life again.”

He filled their bowls with pudding, topped it with custard and set one in front of his mother.

“I’ll be in the study, if you want me. Now make a list of people to speak to and let’s make a start tonight. I’ll draft the wording of the petition.”

Helen opened her mouth to speak, but he had gone. Maybe Stephen and Stuart weren’t that unlike after all.

Wednesday 10th October

On Wednesday afternoon, two weeks later, Stephen was up at the mill. He had just finished discussing the installation of the new electric engines with Mr Broomhead, who had been unexpectedly enthusiastic about the idea. He realised he had probably misjudged the old man. He was staring out of the window and began to ponder his future. Finding the right under-manager would be critical.

The sound of a deep male voice and heavy boots in the corridor outside his office called him back to immediate reality. There was a knock at his door.

“Come in.”

The door opened and there stood William Henry Jessop J.P., Mayor of Huddersfield, accompanied by a flustered secretary. Stephen struggled to his feet.

“Well, this is an unexpected pleasure, Your Worship, please ... please come in, ... take a seat. Mrs Williamson, please bring us some tea and biscuits.”

“Thank you, Sir, right away.”

“No need for formality, young man, plain Mr Jessop will do right well.” He strode over to the middle of the room and deposited his large frame in one of the generous leather armchairs.

Stephen gripped his walking stick and followed him to the opposite chair. “As I said, this is an unexpected pleasure. I don’t think we have had an opportunity to meet on any previous occasion. As I’m sure you know, I have only recently returned from the war.”

“Aye, and I understand you did sterling work for the nation and suffered grievously for your pains. May I also say ‘ow sorry we were for t’ death o’ your father. He were a good man an’ no mistake.”

“Thank you. I appreciate your sentiments.”

“An’ ‘ow’s t’ business?”

“Well, I’ve only taken up the reins, along with my mother, earlier this year, so I have to say I’m feeling my way, but we are certainly facing some challenges. The world is changing.”

“Thee never spoke a truer word, young man. T’ain’t t’business I’ve been in for t’last forty years. We’ve got some ‘ard fights on us ‘ands.” He then disgorged at length about the nature of the economic and social pressures facing modern industry and life in Yorkshire and the wider world, as Stephen sat nodding at appropriate places, wondering what this visit was all about. Within five minutes a considerably more composed Mrs Williamson brought the tea, which, as she poured, Mr Jessop declared to be a very good strong working man’s brew. As the door closed, he took a healthy swig and filled up his cup, without the addition of any more milk.

“Now, Mr Firth, no doubt you are somewhat perplexed as to the subject of my visit.” He held up a hand to obviate any need to reply. “It has come to the notice of myself and the corporation of this borough that this document has been circulating

around the town.” He drew from his pocket a copy of the Benningstein petition and laid it on the table between them.

Stephen opened his mouth to speak, but the hand was raised again. “Now, as you realise, I am sure. This is a very serious issue and a man’s life hangs in the balance, but also there are some as would say that this is none of our business and that the association of the name of our town with such a political document may undermine our industrial position and trading future. I would therefore like to hear from your own lips the rationale for this campaign and the degree to which you have been successful so far.”

The man took another big slurp of tea and opened his hands in a gesture of invitation.

Stephen’s collar felt painfully tight and the hairs on his neck seemed to bristle. “I do not think you should be coming here and challenging our right to organise this petition. We are merely availing ourselves of the right of free speech in an effort to avoid a terrible injustice.” He was about to rise and ask the mayor to leave, when a huge smile spread across Mr Jessop’s face.

“Well done young man. That is exactly what I wanted to here. You have every right, but I want you to convince me that I should sign this damn thing!”

Stephen pulled out a leaflet and handed it over, as he explained his view on the Benningstein case and its relation to current French politics.

“And I gather the redoubtable Mrs Helen Firth supports you in this.”

“She not only supports me, but it was she who initiated the idea of making our views known to the French government.”

“Well, if Mrs Firth is for it, who could be against it,” he boomed, with a hearty chuckle. “I will see what I can do for you. And how much success have you had?”

“Many of the churches have taken it up, as well as several manufacturing and retail concerns in the town. Also, my sister is interesting people at Manchester University and the local Quaker meeting, oh and the members of the Jewish synagogue have all signed.”

“Well, I’m sure we can get many more names for you, and when will you be taking it to France?”

“I intend to leave in a week’s time. They may announce the date of execution at any moment.”

“I will make it my first priority. I will be in touch by next Monday. As you say a

man's life depends upon it." As he spoke, the Mayor emptied the remains of the teapot into his cup along with a dribble of milk and swallowed the contents in one gulp.

"You're a good man in the mould of your father. I can see that. God's speed to you!"

Stephen walked him to the main entrance and watched as the mayoral car rumbled and jolted his way over the cobbles.

Stephen felt relieved and elated, so much so, that all efforts at mill related work proved futile and he left early.

Tuesday 16th October

Paris was awash with posters and political rhetoric. The first national assembly since the occupation was about to be elected. Deputies who were seen as being too acquiescent to the Germans went in fear of losing their seats and their lives. The socialists were expected to hang on to many seats in the capital, but provincial and small town rural France, *La Profond*, was increasingly turning to the newly emerged party: *La Revanche*. No-one seemed to know from where it had sprung, but suddenly it was winning the hearts and minds of ordinary French working people, as well as the middle classes, who craved the firm stable government that its decidedly Bonapartist and sectarian policies seemed to offer.

M. and Mme. Duferier left their new apartment on Rue Fontinau. It was a fresh and sunny autumn day and they had decided to make a visit to the old Languere villa on the edge of the Bois de Boulogne. Its boarded up windows gave it a mournful look, but the carved stonework still allowed the glory of former years to make its mark. Posters carrying the image of a certain Madame Maillot, a *Revanchist* luminary, stared out from where the windows had been. Karl determined to have them removed. He unlocked the padlocks securing the front door and felt damp cold within. They wouldn't stay long. Karl entered the first room to his left, threw off a dust sheet and sank into a chair, while Alicia went upstairs to her former suite to look for some of her papers and possessions. The short walk had tired Karl and his back hurt. Some light filtered in from a small, un-boarded window at the back of the house, illuminating a portrait of Alicia's father hanging over the desk in the corner. He rose and walked to the desk, the grain of which was etched in his memory. That moment when he had been exiled to oblivion rushed back into his consciousness with terrifying force and he rushed out into the hall. It was

deserted. He called Alicia. There was no answer. He knew he was being a fool. She was up there. She just could not hear him. Forgetting his pain, he mounted the grand staircase two stairs at a time, and found Alicia on her knees, in front of a wardrobe. He joined her on the floor, his trembling arm around her waist.

“What are you looking for?”

“This.” She pulled out a small cardboard box and opened it.

“Father gave me these long ago. He said they were his most treasured possessions and I was to keep them to give to my husband as a kind of family testament.” She opened a leather case containing eight medals. “These are from his service at Sedan and in North Africa. They’re not just ordinary campaign medals. These are for gallantry under fire and this is for bravery in rescuing an injured comrade and this is the *Légion d’honneur*, given him when he retired as a full major.”

“I didn’t realise. No wonder he hated me so much.”

“He didn’t hate you. He hated what you seemed to stand for. He was a proud man, but in the end he also loved you for who he realised you truly are.” She slipped a photograph of a young woman out of a thick brown envelope. “My mother. I never knew her. She died soon after my birth. Father always blamed himself because he was away on campaign when I was born.” She kissed the photograph, slipped it back into its cover, handing it and the pouch of medals to Karl. “They’re yours now. My patrimony.”

They left the house and took a taxi to *Mont Martre*. From the steps of the Basilica, the whole of Paris lay before them stretching mistily into the distance.

“What do you think your parents will say?”

“They’re pretty used to surprises where I’m concerned. Mother says I’m like a jack-in-a-box; quiet and unassuming and you think there’s nothing going on inside and then suddenly I pop out with something unexpected.”

“I suppose I’ll have to be prepared.” She smiled and gave him a peck on his cheek, stepping back dramatically as if something surprising might happen.

Karl stared into the distance. Alicia wasn’t sure if he’d even noticed her kiss. “Mother’ll like you. She’ll welcome anyone I’m in love with. I know she will. Father, well, you never know with him: the old taciturn Junker type. He’ll take a while to show he accepts you, but once he does, you can depend on it for life. People don’t understand them, you know. They only remember Bismarck and Moltke. My people are much deeper.”

She put her arm round his waist.

“You’re shivering. You should have worn a thicker coat. It’s cold up here. Let’s go round to the Place Du Tetra and find a coffee.”

It was more sheltered in the old cobbled square and they ambled slowly around, admiring the artists’ work. Karl bought a copy of *Le Matin* and they took a table in the sun outside *Le Café des Communades*. Its coloured umbrellas, a forgotten rebellion against obedience to the church’s harsh snow white domes. Karl scanned the front page of the newspaper, opened it and was met by the only too familiar features of Philippe Benningstein.

“I can’t get over it; he’s got my eyes. You can’t help but feel sorry for him. As if enough young men haven’t died of the sake of national hubris already. Now there has to be another lamb for the slaughter! Lloyd George has asked the French to show mercy, but it seems English words count for little these days.”

“Clemenceau still says they were cowards at the Marne. According to him, the French wanted to press forward, but the British refused and that’s what lost the battle. I’ve heard it a hundred times. Gabrielle says the Pope may weigh in for the boy, but I doubt it. I read *Le Gaulois* the other day. It’s making a big thing about the kindness of the military authorities in letting him see his parents: something about special concessions because of his age. More like guilt. Put it away. I can’t bear to think about it. I hate France.”

Karl half closed the paper and squeezed his wife’s hand as the coffee arrived. “Shush, we’ll be able to leave soon - once your father’s affairs are all tidied up.”

The patron stared at Karl curiously, as he sidled over to their table. “Monsieur et Madame, be careful what you say and where you go. You may not be safe looking and talking like that. I don’t know who you are, but be careful.” Alicia shivered and drank her coffee quickly.

They thanked the patron and left the square, taking the first horse-drawn cab they saw back to their apartment.

“I’m frightened,” said Alicia, as soon as they were inside. Karl took her in his arms as she began to sob. They stood for a while in the hall, while the maid finished making up the fire in the drawing room. He led her in and they knelt by the fire.

“I think we should go as soon as we can. I’ve got a terrible feeling and you’re not well. Don’t imagine I don’t know you’re in pain most of the time. You can’t make love to me without showing me your pain.”

Karl looked her in the face. "If you really want to go, I'll make arrangements tomorrow. We'll have to give the cook and maid a month's notice and let Madame Martin know we are cutting short the lease on this place. You better start packing. I'll call Monsieur Bonheur. He can come this evening and we can sign the necessary papers, so he can act for us."

"I'm sorry, I don't know why, but I know we just can't wait and your parents need to see you before it's too late. You don't know how much time you have. We can't just live in our own make believe world, pretending our love will make everything else go away."

Karl stared into the flames. "Can you help me up? My back's killing me." Alicia helped him onto the chaise longue and then went to talk to their maid and cook as Karl fell asleep.

Tuesday 23rd October

Stephen stood in the middle of the Champs Elysées enjoying the vistas to east and west. He wondered why he had never wanted to visit Paris before. What had he shunned? After all, so many of his comrades in arms had encouraged him to go. Had he feared he might like it or was it just that every so often he felt echoes of Petrograd? He pressed his body into the wind in an effort to gain the Arc de Triomphe before the sky deposited its threatened deluge. Large drops of rain began to spatter the pavement and he sought refuge under a café awning to take his photographs. He had already used three rolls of film. A waiter looked quizzically at him and tried to show him to a table. He looked at his watch. No, he had already wasted too much time.

"Merci Monsieur, Je suis Pressé."

The waiter just shrugged, as if he could not understand why a foreigner in Paris could be in a hurry.

Stephen stowed his camera, pulled his hat down over his eyes and made for the Rue de Wagram, where he hailed a taxi. His leg was hurting and there was no point arriving at the British Embassy any wetter than necessary. He had telegraphed in advance and hoped that ambassadorial assistance might help his quest, but his arrival proved less than propitious. A woman with a large amount of shopping was complaining volubly about the dangers foreigners faced on the Paris streets. Stephen was made to sit on a hard wooden chair in an unheated hallway. Finally, when the attendant asked him

his business, he was told he knew nothing of a telegram and this was the consular section anyway. It was unlikely that he would be able to meet the ambassador, but if he wished to try, he would have to go to The Residence, some hundred metres further up the Rue du Faubourg St. Honoré. Thunder rumbled threateningly as he faced the elements once again. The courtyard of The Residence was a welcome relief, but the doorman offered no more of an inviting reception than he had received at the Consular Section.

Stephen sat for some time, imagining word being sent into the inner sanctum of the embassy that a bedraggled English gentleman of somewhat tragic appearance was asking to see the ambassador. What was he doing there? The days leading up to his departure had been frenetic. Once the town became aware that Mr Henry Jessop J.P. was backing the petition, people from all quarters wanted to add their names. Finally the borough seal itself was appended to the document and it was consigned to a steel chest, which was ceremoniously carried into Stephen's carriage as a crowd of well wishers waved him farewell at the station. Stephen did feel for Philippe Benningstein and his terrible predicament, but he had to admit to himself that the excitement of the affair was an important driver for him. He did miss the small part he had played in shaping the future of empires and had spent time idly imagining himself facing *La President de la Republic Française*, presenting the petition and arguing for the life of Philippe. Maybe if necessary, he would let the president know that he had played a role in negotiating the early withdrawal of Germany from France.

Now he wondered if the whole thing was a foolish escapade. The city was awash with posters denouncing *Les Traîtres Juifs* and proclaiming that the time of *La Revanche* had come. Would the president be able to act even if he wished?

A man of about forty, with already greying hair, approached Stephen and cleared his throat.

"I'm afraid the ambassador is too busy to see anyone at present. As I'm sure you are aware, we are suffering a somewhat trying situation," said the man in a mournful, but solicitous voice, which reminded Stephen of his Father's undertaker.

Stephen rose and the man made to take his arm. "May I call a"

"No! You may not call a cab. I am here to ask for the Ambassador's help in the case of Philippe Benningstein. My name is Colonel Stephen Firth, formerly his Majesty's special military attaché to the British Embassy in St. Petersburg and to the office of the Prime Minister of Russia." The man took a step back and swallowed as

another man in military uniform emerged from a doorway. "Now if you would tell His Excellency my details and give him this letter, I am sure he will see me." Stephen retrieved a letter of introduction from Sir Digby Montague-Smythe, which he had intended to keep until later, and thrust it at the first man.

"Now Sir, we don't want to make a scene, do we?" said the uniformed officer.

"We are not 'making a scene', Lieutenant. I think you will find all is in order. Here is my passport, if you wish to assure yourself of my identity."

The grey haired man read the letter, glancing at the passport. "This does appear to be in order. Please resume your seat Sir, and I will make further enquiries of His Excellency. I think your assistance will not be required, Lieutenant."

The young man's jaw twitched. "I'm sorry Sir, we do have to be ..."

"I'm sure you do." Stephen was not feeling very gracious, and was enjoying the experience of pulling rank.

The lieutenant saluted and retired via the doorway from which he had emerged. Stephen's adrenalin had begun to revive him and had helped him decide that a return to something like his former military persona would not come amiss. A few minutes later, another version of Sir Digby Montague-Smythe strode from a hidden doorway, gushing bonhomie and apologies as his secretary returned Stephen's papers and disappeared. Stephen found himself being ushered into an adjacent salon and was seated in a gold embroidered chair, before a glowing fire.

The Ambassador took the other identical chair after tugging on a bell pull by the fireplace. A somewhat intricate wrought iron, glass topped table sat between them, on which a tray of tea and an assortment of biscuits was soon placed.

"You must understand, you do look a bit of a sight and I'm afraid your telegram failed to get past my minders. I do apologise."

"Yes. One tends to forget one's injuries after a while. It's easy to think one looks like everyone else. It's a shame when people make unkind assumptions." Stephen took his cup and saucer from the tray, resting it on his knee and waited for the ambassador to make the next move.

"Well now, what can we do for you? I can't really see how you can be concerned with this Benningstein business; the poor man. I shouldn't be surprised if he's innocent, but what can you do? Hardly our business."

"I thought Mr Lloyd George had made representations to the French government, asking for clemency."

“Yes, of course we have brought the Prime Minister’s concerns before the President, as instructed, but our hands are tied otherwise. We have to tread carefully, as I’m sure you realise.”

“Quite.” Stephen had decided to make the man feel as uncomfortable as possible. “Well the people of my town do not feel they have to tread carefully and nine thousand five hundred and twenty-six of them, including our Mayor have placed their names on a petition asking for clemency and a reconsideration of the evidence on which he was found guilty. Moreover, as we are merely acting in line with the policy of the British government, we would expect His Majesty’s ambassador to give us every assistance in making our representations to *Monsieur Le President*.”

“I can see why you gained a name for yourself in Warsaw. I’ll tell you what I’ll do: I’ll have my secretary draft a letter of introduction and that might get you past the door of the Elysée Palace, but I can’t see you getting any further. Let me be honest with you. The French government’s gone to ground. No French politician can be seen to be influenced in any way by foreigners. We are *persona non grata*, as far as the French are concerned. Never mind that we lost twenty thousand men trying to save them from the Hun and negotiated on their behalf at Warsaw. If I fly the Union Flag on the Embassy Rolls, I get pelted with eggs and worse.”

“I’ve got to try. Are you sure you can’t get me a meeting?” Stephen fixed him with a searching stare.

“I haven’t even seen Poincaré face to face in months! They say he’s exhausted and his hands are tied. If the right get in at the elections, heaven only knows what we’ll be in for. It’s a dangerous game, but it’s all he’s got. If the Socialists can hold Paris, then maybe we’ll be saved from the worst.”

Stephen felt the utter naiveté of his family and townsfolk. “I can’t take this petition back with me.” It was all he could think to say.

The ambassador pressed the tips of his fingers together, rhythmically rocking them backwards and forwards against his lips as his eyes narrowed. Suddenly, his eyes flashed open with an impish gleam.

“Why not? - I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ll stick my neck out. After all, you’ve paid a heavy price and who knows, he may just see you. I do have a contact; a real Anglophile. I’ll come to your hotel tomorrow morning, ten o’clock in an unmarked car. We’ll go to the Elysée ourselves and see if we can get in. Watkins can get him on the blower. I don’t see things could get any worse if we’re discreet. What do you say? I

never did anything in the war, maybe it's time I chanced my arm a bit. The service doesn't encourage brave gestures, but sometimes you have to take a risk." He pulled on the bell-pull again and Moments later Watkins made another mournful appearance. "Would you like me to show the colonel out, Sir?"

"No, no, our business is not yet concluded. Send in Mademoiselle Frennée? We need a letter of recommendation to the President, and will you instruct my chauffeur to be ready in half an hour with my car to take the Colonel back to his hotel."

"That's really not necessary," protested Stephen, "a taxi will suffice."

"Nonsense! We need to make up for our frosty welcome. You are on British territory after all. It's the least we can do." He smiled briefly, before turning to the young lady who now stood demurely some two metres from the coffee table, notebook in hand, and began to dictate a letter in rapid French.

Thirty minutes later Stephen was gliding through a Parisian downpour in the ambassadorial Rolls-Royce, minus its flags. He could not help but think back to his last such journey at the wheel of a similar vehicle.

Back at his hotel, he took a nap, dressed for dinner and sat in the bar enjoying a Cognac and reading *Le Monde*. He flicked past the continued discussion of the Benningstein case and the preparations for his execution and on to the international news: 'Lenin arrives in St. Petersburg to a rapturous welcome.' He read on: 'Workers from the Putilov Works and other factories around Petrograd downed tools yesterday morning and flocked to welcome Lenin, Trotsky and other Bolshevik leaders on their arrival at Finlandskya Station. As he stood on the rear platform of the train, their leader made his first speech on Russian soil since 1905, promising "to stand with the workers in their titanic struggle to overthrow Kerensky and the puppet imperialists who continue to hold the people of Russia in bondage."' Stephen folded the paper and slapped it down angrily on the adjacent chair. The fool! Doesn't Kerensky realise what he's doing? He's handing Lenin a golden chalice. He'll be the next Tsar, in fact, if not in name. Stephen picked up his drink and walked sulkily into dinner.

Wednesday 24th October

The next day began quite well. The rain had given way to a bright, if still cloudy sky. Sir Bernard Brampton, British Ambassador, arrived at the appointed time and they

were admitted to the presidential residence. The car was waved forward to a covered entrance way and the driver signalled to stop. The back door was opened by a military looking individual, replete with gold braid and tassels. Stephen shuffled out with his battered steel box containing the petition. No-one offered to help him. He realised it must have been presumed that he was the ambassador's attendant. Sir Bernard made no effort to rectify the situation.

They entered a columned entrance hall and waited.

Stephen rested his burden on the deep blue carpet and sat on a nearby chair, panting. The ambassador remained unaware. "You know, I never fail to enjoy the taste of the French. Such an eye for true craftsmanship and decorous living. Ah, here's our man. If Monsieur Papé can't get us in, no-body can."

"Bonjour Monsieur, Comment ça va?"

"I am brutally well Monsieur Brampton and how is Madam?"

"Oh, well enough for an aging enchantress."

"You are the enchanter, not she. I will never understand how you managed to capture the most beautiful woman in Paris. And this is your comrade, the brave Colonel Firth?" The dapper, aging Frenchman turned to Stephen and held out his hand.

"Enchanté, Monsieur."

"Moi, ausie," replied Stephen.

M. Papé inclined his head slightly in an attitude of respect. "Do not worry to try and speak the language of angels. Talking with your good ambassador is one of my only opportunities to refresh my English tongue."

Sir Bernard smiled. "Unfortunately today we must ..."

"Yes, yes, I am aware of the urgency of your situation. Give me your papers and I will see what can be done. *Monsieur Le President* had a meeting with the Spanish Ambassador, followed by one with the Papal Nuncio, Cardinal Fontutelli. After that we have a small opportunity and may be able to arrange something. Just bear with me and I'll see what can be done. Come! Here is an anti-chamber. It is best at present if not too many people know he is meeting the English."

Sir Bernard, Stephen and the box were led through some ornate, mirrored doors and left to admire a selection of French art. Stephen sat worrying about what he might say to the French President, if they ever met him. His compatriot seemed quite unaware of their mission as he made a leisurely tour of the paintings scattered around the walls. Eventually he returned to Stephen's side.

“Marvellous! A rare opportunity to inspect pieces one hardly ever sees on general view.”

Stephen felt rather cross. “Sir Bernard, may I ask what you intend to say to the President?”

“Yes, yes. My goodness, of course. Just got a bit carried away. It’s all worked out. I’ll introduce you and explain why we’re here and emphasise the British government’s concern that a miscarriage of justice may have occurred. Then I’ll let you take over and tell it from your angle. We’ll ask Papé if someone could carry that thing for you. We’ll have to be pretty brisk. Old Poincaré doesn’t like time wasters.”

The time dragged by. Stephen got up and inspected the paintings for himself, as he rehearsed his speech, in what he knew would be rather faltering French. Eventually another door flew open, revealing Monsieur Papé.

“*Viens, Viens!* Monsieur Poincaré has agreed to see you briefly in his private rooms before he takes luncheon. We will have to hurry. What do you say? There is not minutes to lose?”

Stephen followed the other two through the door and down a plain, whitewashed passage. He was only half way along, when the others reached the end and turned right. Setting his box down on the bare floor boards, he tried to catch his breath. Moments later Sir Bernard had launched himself back up the corridor towards Stephen.

“Why didn’t you say you couldn’t manage that thing? Give it here. I’m not too et. Reminds me of my trunk at school. Hellish place. Cold showers every morning. Gosh, I haven’t had such fun in years.”

Stephen marshalled himself, using his stick to keep up with the ambassador. They climbed a steep, uncarpeted staircase, pushed open a door and felt the lush carpet and warmth of privilege once more.

“Wait here! I will make a *reconnaissance*,” whispered M. Papé.

The two men rested their backs against the wall as they waited.

“Hurry, hurry! The little man appeared again and ushered them into a large bed chamber, where a balding, grey haired man sat in one of three armchairs, his head in his hands. He looked up.

“*Bonjour, mes amies. Asseyez vous.*”

Sir Bernard and Stephen took the other two seats. *Monsieur* Papé had disappeared.

“Sir Bernard, Colonel Firth, you wished to see me, I believe. I have a few minutes before I join my wife for luncheon.” His eyes narrowed and fixed upon the ambassador.

“*Monsieur Le President*, it is the view of the British Government that ...”

“I know the view of the British Government. Maybe we should hear from *Monsieur Firth*. I believe you do me the *honneur* of coming all the way from the Yorkshire town of *‘uddersfield*.”

Stephen began in faltering French and explained the purpose of his visit. He opened the steel box and took out the petition, now glued together in a great roll, with the borough seal of Huddersfield affixed to the end. As he spoke he grew in confidence, eschewing his former diffidence and seeking to communicate the enthusiasm and depth of feeling with which the towns people had endorsed the cause of Philippe Benningstein. *Monsieur Le President* sat in silence, his palms pressed together below his nose, as if in prayer.

“Colonel Firth, I believe our nation may owe you some degree of gratitude for your efforts over the Treaty of Warsaw. It is also clear that you and your compatriots are admirable men and women of compassion and mercy, but I am the President of a France caught up in a maelstrom of nationalist fanaticism. The Republic itself teeters on the brink. *La Revanche* and its military masters would have my head at the mercy of *Madam La Guillotine* and those of my cabinet. Nightmares of the terror flood my nights. The blood of the Benningstein boy may yet save us. The military have made it very clear: either he or the Republic dies. Which would you choose? My head or his? And then there is Madam Maillot, the self styled, *La Mère de La Patrie*, whipping up the mothers of France to avenge their dead sons and husbands. Do we want them knitting as heads roll in the Place de La Bastille?”

Silence hung between them, broken suddenly by the chime of a clock on the mantelpiece.

“I am sorry gentlemen. You have had a wasted trip.”

He shook hands and disappeared through another door.

Stephen began to load the petition back into its box.

“Leave it! You have delivered your goods and acquitted yourself admirably, if I may say so.” Sir Bernard seemed strangely changed as they followed Monsieur Papé down the stairs and out to their car.

It was a pleasant sunny afternoon. Stephen was offered lunch at the Embassy, but asked to be taken to the Tuileries Gardens, where he sat watching couples strolling arm in arm, while children played with their hoops and scooters. Old men were playing *boules* on the gravel, smoking their *Gaulois*. Paris felt like the enchanted paradise of which he'd heard others talk. He wished he had his camera. On returning to his hotel he would place a telephone call to Mother. His work was done.

"Maria sent this. I'm sorry, but I said I'd give it to you. She can't understand why she's not allowed to come and see you. She's inconsolable: I don't know what we're going to do." Philippe stared down at the painting: a little girl – crimson tears oozing from her heart, running down her dress into a puddle at her feet. Something like a crown of thorns sat on her head. "She must have seen a picture of Jesus somewhere. I don't know where." His mother stroked the side of his face. "I don't know why they're doing this to you. You're such a good boy."

"It's all right mother. I'm at peace. I never knew the meaning of *shalom*. We say it so often, but without realising the true extent of the *hesed* of our *Yahweh*. I don't think I would have ever understood the depths of his love without this."

"Oh, what it is to be in the palm of God's hand," she murmured and kissed his cheek. "Oh, it's too much. I said I'd be strong, but it's too much." Finally, she gave in and tears flowed down her cheeks into one of Joseph's clean white handkerchiefs.

"They have told you, haven't they?" said his father.

"Yes, Captain Armand came to see me this morning. It was quite a relief to know. I can now plan my time over the next three days to get myself ready. They want to humiliate me as much as possible before ... Armand says he's organised a rabbi to come and see me the day after tomorrow. I can't help thinking it's more about their unrepentant guilt than any concern for me. They can then look good in the eyes of the world. They let the Jew have his religion at the last."

"I know it's hard, but don't be bitter son. Don't give them their victory." The keys jangled in the door and it swung open.

"Time's up!"

"That's not half an hour. We need longer. We might never see our son again. Have a heart, Monsieur, please," cried Joseph as his wife flung her arms round Philippe, sobbing uncontrollably.

"Sorry, Monsieur, orders."

Philippe gently released himself from his mother's grip and kissed her tenderly on both cheeks. "Armand will arrange for you to come again. I'm sure. Thank you Father, and tell Maria I love her and we'll play horsies again one day."

Joseph heaved a deep sigh. "Thank you, Son. You're a brave boy. I'm proud of you." The two of them shuffled out and the door clanged shut. A few moments later the light went out. Philippe lay down and pulled the blankets around him, screwing himself up into a tight ball.

Thursday 25th October

Stephen watched familiar rolling plains from his train window. It ran into a tunnel, emerging moments later to a scene of desolation. Ravaged men, sinking thigh deep in mud wondered aimlessly across his vision as he trundled closer and closer to an edifice emerging out of a gloomy, misty landscape. The mist cleared and the sun caught the edge of a blade.

He was startled out of his sleep by a sharp knock at the door.

"Du petit déjeuner, Monsieur Firth."

As he struggled to sit up, a stocky maid ambled across the bedroom and placed his breakfast tray over his legs. "Est ce que vous voulez du café ou du chocolate, s'il vous plait, Monsieur?"

"Um, ... er, ...du café, s'il vous plait."

She returned to the door and retrieved a pot of steaming black coffee.

Stephen waved away her attempts to add cream.

"C'est décidé, Monsieur Firth."

"Excusez moi?"

"Le date de l'exécution. C'est décidé."

She produced a hitherto unseen newspaper and plonked it down on his tray between the plate of croissants and the pot of jam. Stephen was just too slow to catch it before it unfolded, sending the croissants skidding across onto the bed clothes.

"Au revoir, Monsieur."

The door dragged heavily across the thick carpet and clicked shut.

Stephen wondered if this was what a beached whale felt like when it found itself on an unexpected ebb tide. Locating his coffee, he took several sips, creating ripples on the deep black surface as he sought to cool the liquid. He turned on his bedside lamp and looked at the familiar face. The poor man; had he already been told? He read the article and wandered what it would be like to know you would die in three days' time. His own near death experience had been unannounced. He thought he preferred the idea of having some warning; it would give time to prepare. There were so many loose ends to tie up and that whole business of the after-life: was there or wasn't there? Army chaplains had certainly never given him any reason to believe there was, but warning of imminent death would give you an opportunity to prepare for the possibility. Mother's faith was quite another thing: so inward, so private, the divine spark igniting the flame. Somehow he'd never been able to get behind the rhetoric and then there was the pacifism, so impractical, so much against his own decisive, active spirit. He knew he had joined the army to requite his own need for adventure and to be part of a bigger plan, to build and preserve an empire, a civilisation.

The previous evening he had told his mother of the failure of the mission, of the rejection of the petition. He had feared she would break down in tears on the phone. "I'm sorry mother. There's nothing more I can do. I feel wretched. I really thought we could make a difference, but in the end we're powerless pawns in a big political game."

"You've done your best dear ... All we can do is pray."

The words had come with such assurance of hope. In anyone else's mouth they would have been a pious cliché. Yet, he hadn't known what to say. "I suppose you're right," was all he could think of. She had tenderly instructed him to get a good night's sleep and rung off, no doubt to go and pray. He had followed her advice and despite the dreams, he did feel better.

Oh Mother! You're impossible! I suppose we'll never escape your power, even when you're dead! He moved the tray, threw off the bed clothes and ran himself a bath. He read the article several times as he lay in the warm, soapy water. He could have lain there all day, but he had to make a decision.

Dressed, he stared out of the window for some time. He then retrieved his overcoat, scarf and gloves and camera from the bed and exited the room. At the last moment he slung his camera round his neck. Coming out of the lift, the concierge beckoned him over.

"You are staying tonight, Monsieur?"

“I am yet to decide. If not, I will check out before midday.”

“Very good, Monsieur.”

Stephen emerged from the hotel’s revolving door onto a blustery Paris street. He pressed himself up against the wall to avoid the foot traffic, took out a pocket map and strode off towards the river. The wind, for once, was in his favour. On reaching the river bank, he turned right and continued walking until he reached a ferry quay and waited about ten minutes until one of the recently introduced Bateaux Mouches arrived. He stepped aboard, bought a ticket and sat in the bow of the vessel, clutching his hat. The famous sights flowed past in a blur: L’Ile St. Louis, Notre Dam, La Louvre, Le Jardin des Tuileries, Les Invalides and La Tour Eiffel. The boat docked and everyone disembarked, pressing past him as he stared up at this symbol of French division: to the moderns, a fantastic statement of French ingenuity and progress, to the conservatives, to *La Profond*, a heretical blot on the soul of France.

Stephen walked across the Pont d’Ile, through the Palais de Chailot, up to the Arc de Triomphe and stood before the eternal flame: lit by President Poincaré and Field Marshall von Moltke as a symbol of hope and remembrance. Stephen had much to remember: the day of that terrible argument with his father, when he had stormed off to join the army - subsequent conversations had rarely gone beyond banal pleasantries - the glories of victory and the comrades and subordinates he had lost, the horrors of France 1914 and the relief of his illness and subsequent dispatch to Russia, the elation of the Peace of Warsaw, the glory of knowing and loving Anna, the inkwell in the air and the hospital. All flickered before him.

It was eleven-twenty. He removed his gloves, stuffed them into a pocket, undid the top button of his overcoat and took out his return tickets. A tear coursed down his left cheek and another. He let his train ticket to Calais drop into the flame. It caught fire and was gone. Next went the glossy, first class ferry ticket. The surface bubbled, the card curled in on itself and the flames took hold. The last two tickets: Dover to London and London to Huddersfield, were now useless. He dropped them quickly, turned away and limped over to the side of the immense stone arch to retrieve his stick, pulling on his gloves as he went. A taxi passed. He raised his stick and it drew in to the curb.

“*Hôtel Pavillon De La Reine. Dépêchez-vous!*”

At eleven-fifty-five Stephen extended his reservation for the next two nights. Philippe Benningstein had already used up one of his remaining days.

Karl was watching the first light of morning creep round the sides of the curtains. He had been awake for at least two hours, but was loath to disturb Alicia and content to listen to the steady rhythm of her breathing. When he had first woken, he had wondered where he was. The last thing he could remember clearly was lying down on the chaise longue. Alicia must have helped him upstairs, undressed him and put him to bed. He had a vague recollection of struggling with his nightshirt, but no more. What he did remember were the faces in the night: ugly, brutal, dangerous faces - staring, threatening - grim as death. They came to him as from the workers' league and yet he was equally sure they weren't. Eyes bore into him, searching, calling forth a material manifestation of their own darkness. Then they found it. Dark figures sprang from his body in an endless stream. They grew and filled him, as he protested and fought them back. He was shouting: a voiceless tirade, but to no effect and the more he fought, the weaker he became. Then another pair of eyes pierced the darkness. He greeted them as his own, but they were not his. The sense of struggle began to dissipate and the march of darkness slowed. A memory from his youth of a stream flowing through green fields took over the centre of his mind. Still, darkness pressed threateningly around him, but by the stream sat the face from the newspaper. There might have been a military uniform. He wasn't sure, but there was no doubt it was Philippe Benningstein. Karl found himself sitting on the other side of the stream, facing a smiling Philippe. Then he was gone and Karl was all alone. The darkness closed in around him, pressing on his organs, crushing, bruising him. And yet still he was aware of the shadow of those eyes: his own and yet Philippe's. He had sat up suddenly. He remembered Alicia asking him if he was all right. He had reassured her and she had taken his body in her arms and snuggled into it. For Karl all sleep was gone. Those eyes had become part of him.

He told Alicia about it over breakfast.

She took his hand in hers. "We really need to go, don't we? Paris is killing us. It's terrible, but it's not as if we can do anything for the poor man. Father used to talk about the Dreyfus case. He said everyone knew he was innocent especially after Emile Zola wrote his famous articles, but what could they do? Father used to fume like mad about it sometimes.... My dear, you can't save the world, sometimes you just have to walk away, for your own sake and for those you love."

Karl turned to her. "You're right. I'll just have to forget it. Your eyes are worth so much more."

He withdrew his hand and pushed his chair back from the table. "Now to work. Get the maid to help pack your trunk and whatever other cases and boxes you want to take. We can get the rail company to collect our baggage the day before we leave, except for our immediate effects. I'll go to see Madame Martin and Monsieur Bonheur. He can call this afternoon, in case I'm tired again and need an early sleep. I'll also book the train tickets."

"Don't do too much! You're not well."

"Well or not, it needs doing if we're going." It sounded more abrupt than he had intended. Alicia stared at him.

"I've never seen you like this. I just don't want you to make yourself worse."

"Sorry, I know. It's the manager in me. I suppose there is a lot we'll be finding out about each other and it's times like these that really show up the rough edges." He kissed her forehead. "I'll be back by three o'clock and then you can mother me as much as you like." He turned at the door, smiled and blew her a kiss.

Karl went into the room he was using as a study, rolled back the top of his desk and took out a thick brown envelope from the central drawer, checked its contents and left the house. His business regarding the lease and the lawyer were quickly concluded and he set off by taxi for the Gare de l'Est, which took considerably longer than usual as all the roads around the Place de La Bastille were blocked off. It was already half past eleven when he left the station, having booked the last available private compartment on the train to Berlin the following evening.

Next, he went to the German Embassy to meet his uncle's contact.

"Herr Dornier, my uncle, Herr Gotthardt, said you are sympathetic to his concerns."

"Indeed. Herr Gotthardt has been kind enough to draw me into his confidence and we both share something of the same sensibilities. How is your uncle?"

"He is well, but forgive me if I have no time for small talk; I need your help. My uncle gave me another German passport to use if necessary. As you see the photograph is clearly my likeness. I need to replace it with this one." He handed over a photograph of himself before he removed his beard. Can you have this inserted?"

Herr Dornier looked up at him curiously. "Yes, certainly. I presume you need to change your identity."

"Not quite the way you mean, but can you do it before tomorrow afternoon and have it stamped with a French Immigration visa."

“Certainly. I can push it through our intelligence department as an urgent job, but can you tell me a little more?”

Karl stared out of the window. A horse drawn cart filled with squealing pigs was waiting at an intersection. “I can’t tell you much, but it will help someone who’s in a lot of trouble and it could work out very well for Germany, and France.”

“I can see your uncle in you. He doesn’t give much away either, but you know you can trust him. Will three o’clock tomorrow be early enough?”

“That should be fine. I appreciate your help.”

Herr Dornier began to rise.

“There is just one other thing,” continued Karl, “I believe you have some contact with Monsieur Léon Blum. Could you arrange a meeting?”

Now it was Dornier’s turn to be lost in thought. “It’s all very clandestine. He can’t be seen to meet me, particularly at the moment, but it so turns out I am seeing him tonight at a bar, down by the Moulin Rouge. It’s an awful place, pimps and prostitutes galore, but no sign of the press and lots of dark corners. You can come if you wish.”

“That’s marvellous, what time and where?”

“I’ll see you at the metro at seven-thirty and, by the way, no evening dress.”

“Thank you. You don’t know how much this means to me. Oh and just one more thing, do you have a business directory?”

“I don’t, but my secretary should. See her on your way out.”

Karl felt quite elated as he left. He came to a small park, bought a stuffed baguette from a nearby *Boulangerie* and sat on a bench. He watched people come and go. It was obviously a favourite lunch stop. Several people just came and wandered around the central fountain, marvelling at the rainbow colours created by the fine spray. Some came to the entrance, stopped and then turned away looking disappointed, angry or both.

Karl finished eating his lunch, threw the paper wrapping into a bin and left. At the entrance, he turned again to admire the fountain and only then did he see the notice - *Juifs Interdit!*

He returned home just before three, having taken the Metro to give himself time to think. He called to Alicia, entered the drawing room and flopped down by the fire, still in his heavy coat. He heard her feet on the stairs.

“Oh, Karl, it’s so difficult to know what to take, but Gabrielle’s here and she’s like gold. I couldn’t have done it without her,” she sang out as she came into the room. Her smile fled as she saw Karl. “Are you all right? You look terrible. You’ve over done it, haven’t you?”

“Just a bit tired, my love. I took the metro and walked from the station.”

“Oh, you stupid man. You won’t make it out of France at this rate. Have you eaten?”

“Yes, I had a *baguette* in the Parc Monceau. It was lovely, but you’re right. I see it very clearly now. We need to do. There was a notice forbidding Jews to use the park.”

“No! They can’t! This is France. *Egalité, Fraternité*. Everything we learned at school. The Republic for all French people of whatever creed. What has happened? Why do men go to war?”

She sank down at his feet and buried her face in his knees. He kissed the back of her head, stroked her hair and waited. Eventually she looked up. Her eyes were dry. “To think, if it wasn’t for you, I’d be all alone in this terrible world. What would the English call you? ... I know, my Sir Galahad.” She rose, took a step back and shook her finger at him. “Now you learn to look after yourself or you won’t be able to save me!”

Karl smiled and joined her, letting his coat fall to the floor as they embraced in the sweetness of their private world. He wanted to whisk Alicia off her feet and upstairs, but he knew only too well how make believe that world was and how important was the real world of fresh, blood and hard unrelenting men. There was a knock at the door and they had to part.

“That’s enough for the time being, you two love-sick creatures. There’s work to do, if you’re going to catch that train tomorrow.”

Karl kissed Gabrielle on both cheeks, thanking her for her help.

“It’s just such a pleasure for lovely friends. I just hope you’ll invite me to Germany one day. Now, the maid is bringing some ... what do you say, Karl, *café und kuchen*? Then it’s back to work.”

“You’ll stay for dinner, won’t you?”

“No, I’m sorry. I must get back to Mother. She’s getting more and more difficult about her medicine.”

“Then we won’t see you again.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll come to the station tomorrow. I must see you off.”

“No! I won’t hear of it,” cried Alicia, “there are gangs roaming the streets.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be quite safe. It’s all arranged. Cook’s going to send me with her eldest, Fabian, no-one will dare take him on.”

After their break the women had returned upstairs, insisting that Karl rest on the chaise longue. He didn’t need much encouragement; his stomach was beginning to feel nauseas.

He woke with a start. The fire had died down. He struggled to make out the time on his watch and located the light switch. It was already six-forty-five. He’d have to tell Alicia about his meeting and then get going. He found her in the dining room, where she was picking at some meat and vegetables.

“Oh, there you are. I thought I’d let you sleep. Just sit down and I’ll ring for your dinner. I can’t say I’m very hungry.”

Karl sat down and taking her arm to stop her from rising. “I’ll eat later dear. I’ve got to go out.”

“What? Again? This is too much. You are very unwell. It’s dark and cold and the streets are unsafe. I won’t hear of it. You’re more stupid than I thought, Karl von Allenstein. It’s beyond belief, especially after what you told me today. I sometimes wonder if you really do love me!” Her eyes blazed at him.

“Don’t say that! Don’t! You know I love you.” His voice was breaking.

“Then, why risk your health. I need you!”

“It’s something I must do for my uncle. I have to meet someone from the French government and give him something. Please trust me. It’s very important. It nearly cost me my life already.”

“Oh, Karl, you know I don’t like secrets.”

He swallowed. “You’ve no idea how much I just want to care for you and whisk you off to Germany, but I must do this. It means a lot.”

Karl was just in time to meet Herr Dornier as arranged. They shook hands and walked in silence, muffled warmly against the cold. They found their destination without difficulty, its garish lights and posters leaving no room for doubt as to the nature of the establishment. Entering down a flight of stairs, they bought drinks at a bar set to one side. A floor show was in progress and the tables were comfortably filled with the exclusively male clientele. Around the edges of the room was a ring of curtained booths. Herr Dornier scanned them.

“The one with the half open curtains, over there.” He gestured with his glass. They circled the tables and entered the gloomy den. There sat a middle-aged man with round spectacles, wearing a trilby hat and overcoat as if he intended to leave at any moment. He rose as they arrived and allowed Herr Dornier to introduce his companion. He seemed satisfied with the German’s recommendation and smiled warmly at Karl.

“Monsieur Duferier, I am aware of your uncle’s work and salute him as a true internationalist. We need more of his ilk. Now, as I’m sure you’re aware, our discussions must be totally confidential and I will deny all knowledge of your existence if necessary. However Herr Dornier implies that you may have some interesting information for us.”

Karl produced the list of French men and women that his uncle had returned to him and outlined the events surrounding its acquisition.

The politician stroked his moustache and smiled mischievously as he read the list. “Monsieur Duferier, you have no idea how important this is to us. The people on this list are no-bodies, petty functionaries whose names, in normal times, would mean nothing. But these are not ‘normal times’, Monsieur. You have no-doubt heard of the activities of our newest political party; *La Revanche*. This party has suddenly arisen from no-where, with funding which defies description. They claim to represent that mysterious entity of French society, *La Profound*; a heartland of rural, conservative clericalism, the soul of France, so they say. To me it seems akin to something the Italians are calling Fascism: a power hungry populism. I have studied this movement, and I immediately recognise at least half of these names as its members. Some are even putting up for election and as things stand, will win seats in the National Assembly. And you say this came from the German right wing underground? Oh, my friend you shall have the *Legion d’honneur* if I am even president of France! Is there anything I can do for you, for you may have saved the soul of France from herself.” He beamed at Karl, slapping him on the shoulder.

“I am nothing more than an errand boy, but I would like to ask one thing. Can you save Philippe Benningstein?”

Léon Blum’s face fell. “If only! I am sure the man is innocent: a pawn in a terrible game. The President has signed the warrant, despite my protests, and now there is nothing to be done but watch, and that I am bound to do the day after tomorrow at noon. Why do you ask? Do you know him?”

“No, but I feel so much for him and I thought if my actions can save one man, then maybe you ...”

“I’m sorry. It is beyond my powers to intervene. Even if I was made Minister of Justice tomorrow, I could do nothing.”

“But maybe there is something else that you can do. Can you get me permission to see him. He is so much on my mind and in my heart; I must see him, if at all possible.”

Blum took a sip of red wine. “It won’t be easy, but I do have useful friends, even in the army. We’ll need to move fast. I’ll send word via Herr Dornier. Now, if you’ll excuse me, my family has hardly seen me for three weeks and our rabbi is coming to dinner.”

The two Germans left the bar a few minutes later, firmly refusing the advances of several ladies of the night and hailed a taxi. “Well, talk about dynamite in your pocket! If Blum wins the election, Germany will have money in the bank for years to come and you’ll be its national hero.”

“As to the latter, I’d rather remain in obscurity. It’s safer.” Karl stroked his abdomen gently as they rode in silence past familiar landmarks.”

“Are you feeling all right?” asked his companion.

“No, not really. Those places make me feel sick: the atmosphere and past memories you know.” They drew up outside Karl’s apartment. He got out, said goodbye and steadied himself by the railings before ringing the bell. Alicia opened the front door and helped him inside, removed his coat and took him to sit by the drawing room fire. She could see he was a mess, but had decided there would be no recriminations. By the time the maid had brought him a tray of hot food, he could hardly keep his eyes open. Alicia helped him up to bed and he was asleep in minutes.

Friday 26th October

Karl felt heavy. Things had been set in motion, which were now difficult to control and he didn’t know if he could manage it all. He would rather have stayed home with Alicia all day, gone to the Gare de L’Est at six o’clock and left France for good. Yet he couldn’t do it. The bigger picture would always win out and then there were those eyes. They’d been with him all night, boring into his mind, claiming him. At last M. Bonheur was able to visit and they signed the necessary documents.

“I’ve got to make a final trip to the embassy,” he announced after lunch.

Alicia pressed her lips together in resignation and sighed audibly. “When will you be home?”

“I’ll make it by four o’clock. Can you ask the maid to pack all my travelling things and I’ll finish off when I get in. It’s all right. I’m rested. I just have to conclude some business. I hate lose ends.”

She smiled. “If it makes you happy; I’ll be so glad when we get onto that train. Are your Aunt and Uncle meeting us in Berlin?”

“Yes, I telegraphed yesterday. Aunt Meta’s very excited.”

They embraced in the hallway in their usual tender manner and Karl made for the door, then turned again, took Alicia’s face in his hands, gave her another lingering kiss and smiled.”

“What was that for?”

“I just felt like it. We Germans aren’t always logical, you know.”

She smiled back. “I’ll see you soon, you silly man.”

Despite the sun, Karl was clad in heavy coat and scarf. He took a taxi into down town Paris and alighted outside a shop selling theatrical costumes and artefacts. He had had little breakfast and felt faintly nauseas. Despite this, his Teutonic determination was taking over. Carrying his small packet of requisites he sauntered down to the Seine. It really was a beautiful autumn day, not unlike another one some few years before, when he had felt ashamed to be marching into a capital city not his own. Yet, this time was different. There were more leaves on the trees and the wind caressed his face with gentle warmth. Paris, would he ever see it again? He bought a hot crêpe from a street vendor, tipping him handsomely and sat by the river watching the ships and boats plying their various trades. Le Pont Alexandre III spoke of another age. Occasionally, elegantly dressed men and women passed him, some looking away quickly, gulls swooped low over the water, snatching at some prey. Soaring high over it all, Eiffel’s glinting masterpiece defying time and fashion’s sneering nose. Reluctantly he looked at his watch; one-thirty already, not much time.

He re-mounted the steps to the main road and took a taxi to the German Embassy, where Herr Dornier greeted him warmly and gave him his passport, suitably amended and a telegram from Monsieur Blum. Arrangements had been made.

“You look disappointed.”

“Oh no, I’m pleased. It’s just going to be very difficult and we’re leaving Paris tonight. I love it here. I don’t think I have a drop of French blood in me, but Paris feels like home.”

“I think I know what you mean. It calls to the heart. There’s something special. They’ve tried to send me home twice. Good luck, my friend. You don’t know how much good you’ve done.”

Karl smiled and they shook hands. “I don’t know what one man can do. History’ll give its verdict.”

“It will indeed, but *carpe diem* still holds true.”

“You old romantic! I hope we meet again,” said Karl, half turning as he pushed open the door. He found himself returning the guard’s salute at the gate as in the old days. The sharp click of the man’s heels reminded him of the identity he owned, whether he liked it or not. ‘*Carpe diem*,’ he hadn’t heard that for a long time. *Horace* had a point; how can you trust the future? The reality of today, on the other hand ... He smiled, buttoned his coat and straightened his back. The sun seemed to have made an early exit and the wind had lost its warmth.

Karl found a stationer’s round the next corner, bought some good quality note paper and envelopes and made for the *Bibliothèque Historique de Paris*. It had been one of his sanctuaries during the occupation. He loved its 18th century solid sandstone courtyard and inviting old wooden tables and chairs. The librarian remembered him happily and they chatted for some time before he excused himself due to the urgency of his work. He settled down to write the first of three letters.

‘Dear Alicia ...’ He hated himself for it. Every word was a betrayal, but nothing else was possible. He read it over. At least it offered an expectation of imminent reunion, despite the terrible lie. He folded the paper, kissed it and having placed it in the envelope, sealed the latter and wrote the address in bold letters. The next was easier in a way. At least there was no lie, but seeing the harsh black words against the white paper was torturous. At last he signed his name, took out his wallet and placed the little paper heart inside the folded sheet, which he then sealed inside another envelope, inscribing his wife’s name on the front. He placed these two in his breast pocket and then began on the third. This was much easier, dealing with practicalities, not feelings. He inscribed the envelope in the same bold hand: M. Léon Blum, 256B Rue LaFayette, 9th Arrondissement, Paris. Then at the top and bottom of the envelope he scrawled ‘URGENT, must arrive today’. He prayed a brief prayer before pocketing it and going to

the service desk to enquire about urgent courier services and was directed to a reputable firm three blocks away. He thanked the librarian and left.

Having entrusted two of his letters to the courier, with a handsome tip for rapid delivery, he set off by taxi for the army prison at Les Invalides, just south of the river. The taxi left him outside the door, but he had noticed a small café a block away and preferred anyway to wait until dusk, but the train left at eight, so he would have to be careful. He ordered a hot chocolate and a croissant. Chocolate usually settled his nerves better than coffee and the idea of a meal revolted him. It was half past five when he paid the bill, buttoned his coat and walked back to the imposing entrance, composing himself as he went, imagining his former military persona. He entered the courtyard and presented his letter of introduction to the sentry on duty, who conducted him inside and handed the letter to the duty officer.

“This is highly irregular. A condemned man does not usually receive visitors the night before his execution. I will have to check.”

Karl was left amongst the plethora of marble columns under the watchful eye of an equally immobile sentry. He looked around, pretending that he had every right to be there. As the minutes crawled by, he began to pace the floor. At last the officer reappeared. “It seems someone on high has pulled strings. I’ll take you down myself.”

Karl followed him down some stone steps and along a corridor to an iron door. A rust coloured key which screeched in the lock. “Point of no return, eh?” he joked as it closed heavily behind them. They went down another short corridor, turned a corner and came to a small desk manned by a corporal in a crumpled uniform. “I’ll leave you with Leblanc. He’ll sort you out. Remember, no longer than half an hour, corporal, and if *she* comes don’t let on he’s got a visitor unless she insists on seeing him. As for you, I’ll see you upstairs before you leave.” The officer disappeared and Karl looked at the corporal.

“Suppose you must be a relative. Left it a bit late to come ... or wouldn’t they let you in? Come down here. As the captain says, you’ve got thirty minutes and no more. It could be less if a certain lady gets wind you’re here.”

“Thank you. I just had to see him.”

“Fair enough. He’s in here.” He produced another rust coloured key and opened the door. “Unexpected visitor, my friend. I’ll leave you to it.” Karl entered. The door closed, its key squeaking in the lock.

Philippe was sitting reading on the bed, his skull cap anchored to his short hair with a hair clip. He looked a bit annoyed at the disturbance, but rose and offered his hand, a quizzical expression on his face.

“Do I know you? They said I couldn’t have any more visitors.”

“You don’t know me, but I feel I know you. We’re almost certainly related. I’m from East Prussia, where your family comes from. I read about it in the papers. There’s a Berrenstein connection. Anyway, we don’t have time to talk family, we need to change clothes quickly and get you out of here.”

“What? You’re mad. They’re going to kill me tomorrow. They’ll just as well do it to you as me. I won’t have your death on my conscience. You’re a lunatic!”

Karl gulped. He’d expected this. Why should the man go along with his plan? He took a small bottle from his trouser pocket. If you don’t do as I say, I’ll drink this and I’ll have a horrible death and you’ll be responsible. Trust me. I’ve got a powerful friend. They won’t kill me.”

“What about this. I’ll never pass for you.” Philippe pointed to the birthmark on his cheek. “I’ve got the mark of the devil.”

“Here, rub this on your face. It’ll cover it up. Now come on. We’ve only got a few minutes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Look, I’ve got cancer anyway. I’m going to die in a few months, so why not risk my life to save an innocent man. Now come on or we’ll both be on the scaffold tomorrow!”

Karl had already removed his overcoat, jacket, waistcoat and tie and was struggling with his collar stud.

“All right, I’ll do it. Let me help you with that. But, what can I do once I’m out of here, if I ever make it?”

“I’ll give you a train ticket. You go to the Gare de L’Est and catch the train for Berlin. You’ve got a reservation; a private compartment. Now stop talking and let’s get those clothes changed.”

Philippe realised he was already committed and in a few minutes Karl was helping him on with his jacket and overcoat.

“Now, I’ll cover that birth mark and no-one will tell us apart.”

“But what about you? They’ll check on me before lights out and they’ll see you don’t have the mark.”

“That’s where this comes in.” He took out another make-up stick. “The press kept going on about the mark so much, I knew exactly what colour to get. You recreate it with this and I’m sure I’ll pass muster until tomorrow and then I’ll reveal myself.”

Philippe took the stick and carefully inscribed Karl’s face with the mark that had plagued his life. “But who am I?”

“For now you are Xavier Duferier. You live in Paris, but your family comes from Alsace and you are married to Alicia, who you will meet on the train and you must give her this letter.”

“No! You can’t do this to me.”

“Before you get to the station, you need to put on this beard and use this passport to leave the country. You will be Gustave Farber from Dresden, but you must give the letter to Alicia, so she will understand what is happening.”

“You mean she ...”

There was a jangling of keys outside.

“Now give me a hug and make out you really upset. Don’t forget your hat. Got it all?” Karl’s voice was now a whisper as he shepherded Philippe to the door.

“That’s far enough, my lad. You’re not going to break out at the last moment.” Karl stopped and let Philippe leave. The door nearly closed and then opened again. “Lights out in five minutes.” Karl nodded. He did not dare speak, but just collapsed onto the bed. The prison clothes and blankets smelt and his nausea returned.

Philippe somehow made it out of the prison. He found a handkerchief in a trouser pocket and kept dabbing his eyes and blowing his nose as he showed his papers to the captain, who wished him well as he stepped out into dusk of early evening. He didn’t know whether to cry or laugh. He hurried to the nearest metro station and made for the Gare de L’Est, where he found a toilet cubical and applied the beard. It was busy, and having stuck the beard in place he had to surreptitiously examine his face, while washing his hands. He then made a pretence of checking his passport and decided it wasn’t too bad. Beards changed over time anyway.

It was quarter to eight by the time he finished and he hurried to find the train. The platform clock read five to eight. An attendant examined his ticket and passport and waved him to the front of the train. He leapt in at the nearest door and began to work his way down the train and suddenly, he was there. Coach A, compartment seven. He took a deep breath, pulled the handle back and opened the door. It was empty. He ran to the

window. There were two women and a large framed man on the platform. He ran back out. She had to get on the train. He took out the letter and thrust it into her hand. She stared at it. Tears welled up in her eyes. Together, they all bundled her into her carriage. Philippe was shaking as he led her gently to the compartment and sat her down. The whistle blew and slowly the long train was hauled out of the station.

The two strangers sat opposite each other, shaking in trauma, joined by a common dependence and seared in tragedy. Alicia stared down at her now smeared name on the envelope. She stroked it gently, but made no effort to open it. Philippe thought he better say something.

“I am so sorry Madame, I am Philippe Benningstein ...”

“I know who you are!”

They sat in silence. Philippe felt disgusted at himself, at his life, that it should bring such sorrow and pain to this beautiful woman. How could her husband have inflicted this upon us both. He had not asked to be saved.

“He made me do this. I argued. I didn’t want it. Your husband is a very brave and determined man.”

She looked up. “I know and foolish.”

“Please read the letter. It may give you some hope.”

Obediently, she turned over the envelope, eased it open and unfolded the single sheet carefully. She read for a long time, smiled a couple of times, then folded it, drawing her nail tenderly along the folds. She smiled and looked across at her nervous companion.

“Philippe Benningstein. We have been saved and destroyed by the same man. I don’t know how I can live, but live I must and so must you. It is his wish. Can you say *Kaddish*?”

“Yes, I think so, but he is not dead yet, he may ...”

“Please say it.”

Philippe reached into his pocket and only then realised he had left his skull cap behind. He placed his hand on his head and began the familiar prayer for the dead.

Saturday 27th October

Karl felt he had hardly slept at all on his cold narrow bed. Twice he had groped for the pail in the corner and been nauseated by the smell. Yet, he must have slept

because he was suddenly startled awake by the light and the jangle of keys. He shielded his eyes and looked up at the tall slim figure in the doorway.

“Give me the key. I’ll lock when I’m finished.”

The guard retired and she closed the door.

“Well, stand up! Or have you forgotten your manners, boy?”

Karl grimaced as he twisted himself out of bed and retched involuntarily.

“Accommodation, not suiting you? Well, we won’t have to worry much longer, will we? Your special day. I’ve heard there’ll be a good audience. At last your chance to do your patriotic duty. Isn’t that what you always said you wanted to do? Live for France. Save France. Today you will make your contribution. ‘One man must die for the people’, isn’t that what your race said long ago? Now you can say it again, with your head.”

“Madame.” Karl cleared his throat. “I am not Philippe Benningstein.”

She threw back her head and laughed. “Is that the best you can do; play the fool, the crazed imbecile. You should have tried it at your trial, but it won’t work now.”

“No, Madame, Philippe has gone. My name is Xavier Duferier. I have taken his place.”

“Nonsense! You’ve got the mark.”

Karl rubbed the side of his face and showed Madame Maillot the make-up. Her eyes narrowed and she stood back from him in reflection and then nodded. “Whoever you are, you’ll do. We just need a Jewish traitor, that’s all.”

“But I’m neither.”

“You’ve taken the boy’s place. You’re incredibly like him to look at and you’re a fool! That means you qualify. We can easily deal with the mark.”

She lunged at him, throwing him off balance and they both fell onto the bed, but Karl was no match for her wiry strength. She pinned his neck to the mattress with her hand, drew out a small pair of scissors, scored the left hand side of his face, let go and backed away against the opposite wall, breathing heavily and calling for help. Karl half raised himself, but fell back, vomiting over the bed. He heard the sound of running and two soldiers stood in the cell, surveying the scene.

“Take him. He’s deranged. He went for me. I had to fight him off,” gasped Madame Maillot. “He’s dangerous. Cuff him and get him to a nurse. Make sure they put a dressing on those cuts. We can’t have them saying we didn’t look after him.”

Tight hand cuffs were quickly locked around Karl's wrists and he was led away. Madame Maillot picked up the scissors, scanned the room and left.

Two hours later Karl found himself sandwiched between two files of soldiers on a draughty parade ground. His tunic was tight, his face still stung from a copious application of iodine and the edges of his cap pressed painfully around his newly shaven scalp. His efforts to enlighten his captors had fallen on deaf ears. His humanity was hidden behind his perceived identity. None of them seemed to revel in what they were doing. They just knew it had to be done and he was expected to play along and make it easy for them.

The two files divided, each man taking three steps backwards. A general approached smartly, flanked by two other officers and read out the charges and sentence of the court. A dress sword was drawn from the sheath at Karl's side and broken over his knee by a burly sergeant. Then his epaulettes were each removed with a knife and the buttons of his tunic were cut free and fell, bouncing and rolling on the concrete. Finally the accursed cap was removed by the sergeant, folded in two, and thrown to the ground to be trampled under the heel of his boot. Karl wanted to laugh. It all seemed so childish. They were about to kill him, why go through this absurd routine? He was then forced to stand, his tunic flapping in the breeze as each line of soldiers was marched past him, so as to view the ridiculous spectacle.

Finally, he was marched to the outer courtyard and made to climb up into a cart pulled by two plumed horses. They might as well have been pulling a hearse. Leg irons were applied and four soldiers took up their positions, one at each corner of the cart. Slowly and laboriously the horses drew their charge out of the barracks, through Les Invalides and over the Pont Alexandre III and up to the Avenue Des Champs Elysées. The crowds swelled as they drew nearer and nearer to the Place de La Bastille. Karl had loved the happy sights of Paris, drawing the eye always to new vistas. Now, as cruel faces vilified and abused him, it was transformed into a jagged landscape, where his eye could find no quarter.

Stephen stood on the Rue St. Antoine, only a few minutes from his hotel. He had checked out early and sent his luggage to the railway station. He was glad of his scarf and gloves. Every metre, *gendarmes* lined the edge of the pavement, their backs to the road. Around him the crowd pressed more and more heavily. His legs ached, but any exit from the dense throng was now impossible. He wondered why he had come to

watch. Was it a penance for his failure to save the poor man. The roar of the crowd was coming closer. Cries of *Vive La Republique ... Tué le juif!* rang out in an echoing chorus, as if one was impossible without the other. He struggled to free his hands and raise his camera to his eye. He needed no stick to steady him. The crowd held him fast.

“Un Allemand! C’est un Allemand!”

A heavy punch hit the side of his face and his prized Leica camera flew over the heads of the crowd into the road. Stephen protested, but no-one wanted to hear him. The tumbrel was there; its bloodied occupant vainly fending off the crowd’s missiles. People surged forward, as the *gendarmes* linked arms to hold them back. Stephen felt another heavy blow to his face as his arms were forced into the air. “*Vive La France! Alelmand, Vive La France! Dites-Vous! Vive La France!*” Then the crowd surged to the left in an effort to join the thousands already waiting in the *Place de la Bastille* and Stephen’s persecutors left him for a bigger quarry.

All he could do was to move with the throng. Then he saw his chance. At the end of the street were three steps, leading up to a shop doorway. The door was closed, but as the crowd passed, he leapt onto the first step. A hand grabbed hold of him and pulled him up onto the second. There he stood, one foot on the the step, the other wedged against a drainpipe running down the edge of the building.

By the time Karl arrived at the Place de La Bastile he was dirty, bruised and bleeding. Repeatedly projectiles had knocked him to the floor, only to be lifted to his feet again. The ordered tiers of seats to each side of the scaffold were almost a welcome sight. He had half expected to see the fabled gaggle of old women knitting, as his head rolled, but this was not 1789. This was autumn 1917, the France of civilised order and progress, where the great were assembled, with due decorum, to witness the justice of the state. Karl’s tumbrel drew up to the steps. His leg irons were removed and he was helped to descend. He stood looking up at the revolution’s great artifice of humane killing, impassive, neither calling nor rejecting him. A soldier pushed him roughly forward and he began to climb the steps. He would go as slowly as possible, allow for the possibility of reprieve. What had happened? Had M. Blum not received his letter? Had he read it and decided it came from a mad man? Was he a wily politician who thought the death of an innocent man would help his career? Karl reached the top of the stairs. His arms were held as the hand cuffs were removed and his arms bound to his

sides. There sat Léon Blum, impassive, his eyes staring enigmatically; a sphinx. Karl shook himself free of the soldiers and turned to the dignitaries to his left.

“Please don’t kill me. I am not Philippe Benningstein. He has escaped. For the sake of your souls, don’t kill an innocent man.” Not a head moved. Karl stumbled forward and fell. He was lifted up by four soldiers, carried towards the engine of death and strapped to a narrow wooden plank and the drums began to roll.

A small man with a bushy moustache seated to the right rose and stepped forward, placing a hand on Karl’s back. He raised his hand to speak. The drums stopped and the crowd waited in silence.

“Men of France. It is my duty today to speak for justice. We all know how much the body of France has been wounded, no family, no village, no town, no city, no department has been shielded from the impunity of our tormentors. The soul of France has been brutalised. Her blood has been sucked from her fibres and evil men and women continue to trample on the graves of her sons and fathers; those men who freely and bravely gave themselves to protect our lives and liberties. An evil malady is at work amongst us, creeping cunningly, quietly unseen and undetected into the cells and sinews of our nation, waiting to devour our children and our children’s children to the third and fourth generation, until we have forgotten who we are and the soul of France is mired in a new dark age and *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* and the very Revolution itself are forgotten. This deforming corruption is now being exposed and it is our duty today to execute justice and begin to heal our nation.”

A single shrill cry rose from somewhere in the crowd. “*Tué le Juif!*”

Léon Blum swung round. “No Jew will die today and nor will this man!” The crowd fell silent again. “Two days ago the man who lies at our mercy brought to me damning evidence of this conspiracy, this malady. This man has brought us the means to fight the disease spreading amongst us. This man asked me to save Philippe Benningstein, because as this evidence shows, he is an innocent man, but I Léon Blum refused. Yet, this man took the place of an innocent man and risked his own life. He has a beautiful wife, a maid of France. They are in love, but he was willing to give her up to rescue the innocent Jew, Philippe Benningstein. No man will die on this scaffold today, for if he does, so will Léon Blum.” Taking a pistol from his coat pocket he pressed the muzzle to his temple and advanced towards the guillotine.

A man in uniform rose to his right. “The sentence of the court has been passed. Monsieur Le President has signed the warrant. The sentence must be carried out.” The

executioner looked from one to the other. The crowd, the guests, everyone waited. An older man stepped forward. "Last night I received Monsieur Blum and saw his evidence. I consider that there is enough material to believe that a miscarriage of justice has occurred, therefore as President of the Republic I release this man. There will be no execution today."

The soldiers untied the Karl, placing him in Blum's vacant seat. He was barely conscious. The President continued to address the populace as they began reluctantly to disperse, cheated of their sport. General Pétain ground his teeth and wagged his finger viciously at Poincaré. "One day you may find the army is less willing to serve your weak French Republic and as for you, Blum, I hope your evidence is better than your woolly rhetoric."

Gradually the word filtered towards the periphery of the crowd and along the lines of humanity spreading down the glorious Parisian boulevards. Stephen clung to his precarious refuge until the crowds had thinned enough for him to make his way to the station. Consulting his pocket map, he took the narrower minor streets. Yet still came across groups of young men armed with sticks and bottles in preparation for the night. Having lost his stick in the crush, he needed frequently to stop and rest. His head throbbed.

He still arrived with three hours to spare and sought out a café for a welcome omelette and a white wine. Refreshed, he struck out across the road, found the main ticket office and bought a second class ticket for the sleeper to Berlin. He then retrieved his luggage and with the help of a porter made for the appropriate platform, where he found the train guarded by *gendarmes*. Only his luggage was allowed to proceed. His papers, including a newly acquired German visa, were taken from him. There was nowhere to sit and his leg ached. Others arrived and surrendered their travel documents, which were lined up in a box he could see on a desk further down the platform. Eventually a uniformed man, sporting gold braid and tassels on his epaulettes seated himself and began to examine his treasures at a leisurely pace. Stephen was called forward. Dark eyes scanned his face and his passport was hammered with a punishing black stamp, before being by a less resplendent assistant.

"*Monsieur Le President* sends his regards, Colonel Firth," said the man in gold tassels.

"*Merci, mais ...*" but there was no opportunity for explanation; another passenger was already being scrutinised.

Stephen checked on his luggage, found a lower berth and lay down. Three other men joined him and stowed their luggage. A whistle blew and the train steamed off into the gathering darkness. He felt a bruise rising on the back of his head and another around his nonexistent left eye, but they would get better. He had survived the war, Russian revolutionary politics and the Paris mob and he knew he had unfinished business.

At midnight a train with only one carriage pulled out of the *Gare de L'Est*, bound for Berlin. A man lay in one of the private compartments. His head was shaved, his face was white with a large plaster affixed to his cheek. At his side there sat a nurse and in the next compartment another nurse was preparing to sleep, so she could take over from her companion in the morning. It was a bright starry night, but Karl's heavily sedated mind was enveloped in sleep.

Post Script

1918

Thursday 21st March

Kerensky stood on the balcony of his private quarters in the Tauride Palace in Petrograd, his dressing gown pulled tightly around him, against the cold. Olga came up silently behind him and began to massage his shoulders.

"Come back to bed my dear. It's cold and still too early. You need your sleep if you are to convince the Congress of People's Soviets to support the government."

He let her lead him inside and close the balcony doors. They sat together on the side of the bed. "Do my politics bore you? Is it too much for you and the boys? We don't seem to have any other life, these days."

"Politics and the good of society have always been our life. I have been with you in it since the beginning. It is our work, not just yours."

"But sometimes I worry for you and when we travel we don't see the boys for weeks at a time. Where is our family life? Are we giving up too much?"

"A time will come when we will be together, when Russia is at peace with herself."

“But will she ever be at peace? We have done so much and yet the workers and peasants demand so much more.”

“The pain of a thousand years cannot be lifted in one season and you cannot heal the nation alone.” She kissed him and pushed him back onto the bed, loosening her nightgown.” He chuckled, “I mustn’t be too tired for the Congress of Soviets.”

There was a heavy knock at the door and the thump of military boots on polished wood as General Volontsyn strode into the room without waiting for an answer. The pair jumped to their feet, pulling their clothes around them.

“Volontsyn! We deserve some privacy.”

“Alexander Feodorovich,... not today! Lenin has declared the Congress of Soviets to be the supreme legislature of Russia. I have just learned that the Bolsheviks have been positioning troops in and around the city throughout the night. They have already taken control of the railway stations and my informants tell me that assaults on the Fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul and the Winter Palace will begin at dawn. Attacks on other government offices will follow. We must mobilise the Imperial Guard, the Vyborg Regiment and our two regiments of Don Cossacks at once.”

Kerensky stared at the Petrograd Commander. “I expect you have already issued the necessary orders.”

“I only await the Prime Minister’s confirmation.”

“You know I always wanted to avoid this, but they have forced our hand. Use all the forces at our disposal to crush the insurrection. Provide me with a military escort and I will go to the Winter Palace.”

Volontsev stamped his way from the room and Kerensky turned to his wife. “It seems that family life will have to wait for yet another day. Prepare the boys and pack a few things in case we need to leave. I shall send word.”

They embraced and held hands, looking solemnly into each other’s eyes for several moments.

“Go with God, my dear.”

Kerensky nodded, turned and was gone.

Stuart Firth had also been unable to sleep. He pulled on a pair of trousers and a coat over his nightshirt, worked his bare feet into a pair of shoes, crushing the backs and sides and picked up a slim volume from his bedside table. He closed the door to his

rooms and descended the ancient stone spiral staircase into St. John's quad. He used his key to open the outer door and stepped into the still quiet street.

Light! We need to understand it. He must be right. Mass can no longer be considered a constant when acceleration approaches the speed of light. The dynamic of the universe eclipses Newton's laws. It must be so. It must be. Otherwise we are locked in a static paradigm and it doesn't make sense. His mind whirled. Ideas jostled for acceptance, as one after another they were cast aside. Head down, he plunged across the road in front of a horse-drawn milk cart. The horse reared, the driver cursed him and Stuart ploughed on oblivious of all but the inward momentum of his mind.

At last he reached a meadow on the edge of the city. Sitting down on a fallen tree trunk, he stared into the pre-dawn gloom. What had he missed? There must be something: something or some way to prove to the world that that they were at the beginning of a new age, a new, prescient reality. He shivered as the first rays of the sun began to show over the horizon. He stared at the emerging light gazing up and around at cloudless infinity ... The stars, the sun, the planets. The big steps forward had always come by looking at the big picture: the worlds beyond our world - Copernicus, Galileo. The transits of Venus and Mercury gave us longitude.

The edge of the sun began to light the flat Cambridge landscape. He opened his book and read. A family of ducks quacked their greeting to the new day, gliding effortlessly down a nearby river. A farmer passed in an ancient rowing boat, taking his produce to market as his father and grandfather had done before him. A couple of cuckoos called to each other somewhere in the trees above. The hunched figure on the tree trunk neither heard nor saw any of them.

He suddenly snapped the book shut and laid it beside him. Rocking gently backwards and forwards on his seat, he raised his head to look at the now brightly lit blue sky. A smile spread across his face as he rose. Claspings his hands behind him he strode at a leisurely pace back across the meadow. His book lay on the tree trunk – *'Relativity'* by Albert Einstein.