



***Come
the Hour***

PEGGY SAVAGE

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Peggy Savage



ROBERT HALE · LONDON

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Chapter One

August, 1938

Amy sipped her tea, looking out of the kitchen window on to the garden. The sun was shining – a beautiful summer’s morning. The borders were bright, sparkling with flowers, roses and geraniums and marigolds, all tumbled together. All flowers were welcome, apart, perhaps, from red poppies – she did not want those memories. Mr Hodge was already out there on his knees, attacking the weeds. A long branch of the old cherry tree was propped up on a crutch like some sprightly old man, full of life, but shaky in the limb. It reminded her, fondly, of her father. The garden and the sunshine and the rainbow of colours should have calmed her, soothed her, but she couldn’t blot out the prowling beasts of worry that roamed and threatened at the edges of her mind.

The children’s swing was still there, even though they were more or less grown up now. She hadn’t the heart to take it down. Sometimes she sat on it herself, lazily swinging, just being. It was part of the tranquil years that had gone by, a tranquillity that she had imagined would always last.

Mrs Parks, duster in hand, looked in around the door. ‘Do you want anything, Doctor, or shall I go on with the rooms?’

Amy straightened up and smiled. ‘No thanks, Edith. I’m fine. Just having a cup of tea.’

Mrs Parks disappeared and the comfortable sound of the Hoover came from the sitting room.

Amy turned back to the window. How long had they been here? It must be nearly twenty years now. Holland Park had been a good choice, a large, pleasant house with a garden where the children could play, and an easy journey to central London so that Dan could get to work. A haven. It had almost blotted out those years of horror and despair. She smiled, a wry, humourless smile. What idiot had thought of calling it the ‘Great War’? Wrong word. It wasn’t great – it was hideous, foul, inhuman. There were many words to describe it, but not ‘great’. She assumed that description had been coined by some politician who had never seen any part of it for himself.

They didn’t talk much about the war, she and Dan. Nothing that anyone could say could take those horrors away. But through the years Dan had always been there, always known when the memories were thrusting up like the rotting, twisted, blasted trees of wartime France, or when the dreams were bad. He would hold her close, soothing and calming. The quiet house, the soft streetlights, the occasional passing car, were all that the night held now. Those fears and dreams had retreated, almost gone, until now. Now her defences were crumbling, the dreams returning. Surely, surely to God, no one would be mad enough or bad enough to do it again. The twins’ birthday was next week. The boys would be eighteen.

Dan breezed into the kitchen, straightening his tie. ‘Every day,’ he said, ‘I have to practically force my daughter out of the bathroom. What does she do in there?’

‘I don’t know,’ Amy smiled. ‘Girlie things. Shampoos and face creams and goodness knows what.’

‘We’ll have to put another one in,’ he said, ‘sacrifice one of the bedrooms.’

‘It’s only for a few weeks now,’ she said, ‘and they’ll both be gone for a while. It’s going to be very odd without them, isn’t it?’

He kissed her lightly. 'It might be nice, just us two again.'

~~She poured him his tea and he sat down at the table and filled a bowl with cornflakes. She handed him the milk. 'What are we going to do about their birthday?'~~

'Can't think about that now, my love,' he said. 'I've got to go early. I've got a long list this morning, starting with a possible appendix.' He took a hurried spoonful. 'But I know the orthopods got a stream of accidents with boys on motorbikes, so if Charlie wants a motorbike, the answer's no.'

She laughed. 'I think he'd rather have money. I think they both would. A bit more to spend.'

'Well, they can't go mad,' he said. 'Paying for their education at the same time is going to stretch things a bit. One of the pleasures of having twins.'

She smiled. A warm smile this time. She knew how he felt about his children.

He crunched more cornflakes. 'What are you doing today?'

'Surgery in Notting Hill this morning, and then shopping with Tessa this afternoon. She needs some books – a *Gray's Anatomy* for a start – mine's too tattered to use. We'll go to Lewis's. She wants to read up as much as she can before she starts.'

'Fancy our little girl doing medicine,' he said. 'She's so like you, Amy.'

'And you. I suppose it's not surprising if both your parents are doctors.'

'That doesn't seem to have influenced our Charlie,' he said. 'He doesn't seem to have any idea what he wants to do.'

'I know,' she said. 'But he'll find out.' She suspected that Dan was a little disappointed that Charlie didn't want to follow him into the profession, though he denied it. 'He'll know by the time he's got his degree.'

He took a swallow of tea and got up. 'Got to go. I'll see you tonight.' He stood close to her and touched her chin in his hand. She could see the grey that was starting at his temples and the little lines around his eyes. 'You've got to stop worrying,' he said. 'Nothing has happened. They'll sort it out. Neville Chamberlain's a good man – well intentioned.'

'Charlie ...' she said, her voice wavering.

'I know. It'll be all right.' He kissed her mouth and left.

She sat down at the table, nursing her cup, though it was cold now. She put her elbows on the table and rubbed her brow. Would it be all right? Dan didn't voice any fears, but he couldn't hide anything from her. She knew that he was worried, and that worried her even more. The Prime Minister might be well intentioned, but the whole world seemed to be in a mess and there was Winston Churchill's warning and warning. They were already planning to give gas-masks out to the children and forming an air-raid precaution service. What was that for, if everything was all right?

The twins. Tessa, starting medicine. She had been so thrilled to get in. She is like me, Amy though always keen on science, always known what she wanted since she was a small child; Charlie, reading history, both of them going up to Cambridge. They were twins, but they were so different. Tessa seemed so tough, so confident, so sure of herself. Charlie was a bit of a dreamer, quiet and thoughtful. He didn't say much about his thoughts or his feelings. But there was something there in Charlie, a strength that she recognized and respected. You could only push Charlie so far.

Tessa came into the kitchen, yawning. She was wearing slacks and a blue blouse, her fair hair tied back with what looked to Amy like an elastic band. She saw her mother looking. 'I think I'll get it cut short,' she said. 'It might dangle into things in the labs.'

Amy smiled. 'Good idea.'

Tessa sat at the table. 'Is there any tea?'

'I'll put the kettle on,' Amy said, 'and make some fresh.' She filled the kettle and put it on the gas.

‘Where’s Charlie?’

Tessa yawned again. ‘Still asleep, I expect. We got back rather late.’

Amy was well aware of when they had got back, though she would never let them know. Even at their age she still couldn’t sleep properly until they were safely back at home. ‘Good party?’ she asked.

‘Not bad.’

Amy put some tea in the pot and waited for the water, leaning against the kitchen cabinet.

‘There were a lot of army types,’ Tessa said, ‘going on about a war. They carry on as if it were something good, as if they were looking forward to it.’

Amy began to feel as if she couldn’t breathe. ‘It isn’t something good,’ she said, ‘for the winner or the loser.’ She poured the water on the tea, gave it a stir and poured a cup for Tessa. She watched her as she sipped her tea. She was proud of her. It still wasn’t easy for a girl to get into medical school, not as difficult as it had been in her day, but still not easy. There was a lot of competition, and still a lot of prejudice. Amazing, that, considering what women doctors had done in the last war.

‘Can you come this afternoon for the books?’ Tessa asked.

Amy nodded. ‘I’ll meet you at Lewis’s bookshop at two.’ She paused. ‘What were they saying – the army types?’

‘Oh – you know, “We can’t let the Nazis get away with it; Germans at it again; we licked them once and we’ll do it again.” They sounded as if they couldn’t wait.’

Amy turned away so that Tessa couldn’t see her face. Does it never change, she thought? One generation after another. All those boys in the last war marching cheerily off to France, not realizing it was not knowing. ‘It won’t happen again,’ she said. ‘No one would be mad enough to do that again.’

‘You never talk about it,’ Tessa said. ‘I don’t know what it was like for you and Dad. Was it absolutely horrible?’

‘It’s best forgotten.’ Amy looked away, fiddling with the teapot lid. It could never be forgotten, but she had been able, for the most part, to bury it. Until now.

Charlie appeared, tousle-headed and sleepy, wearing flannels and a white shirt rolled up at the sleeves. He sat down at the table. Amy poured more tea.

‘You look a bit hung over,’ Amy said.

‘No I’m not,’ he said. ‘I didn’t drink that much.’

‘He got in an argument,’ Tessa said, ‘about the morality of war.’ She gave him a smiling, exasperated glance. ‘He just does it to argue. He doesn’t believe half the things he says.’

‘It’s the fun of the debate,’ he said. ‘It’s an intellectual exercise.’

‘Well, there’s no point in having that particular argument with the army,’ Tessa said, ‘is there?’ She looked at Amy. ‘It got quite heated. They seemed to think he was a conscientious objector or something. He was lucky not to get his block knocked off.’

Charlie grinned. ‘Remind me not to join the army. The drunker they get the more they’re looking for a fight.’

‘I suppose if you train for a war,’ Tessa said, ‘you naturally want one. Otherwise it’s all for nothing.’

‘It won’t happen,’ Amy said sharply. ‘Not again.’

Charlie said nothing – just looked at her over the rim of his cup, a look that she couldn’t interpret. Was it questioning, cynical, resigned? She didn’t know. For a moment she could only see the little boy, romping in the garden. Sometimes he looked so much like Dan that her heart turned over: tall dark hair curling a little, his father’s sensitive mouth. ‘I’ve got to go,’ she said. ‘Get your brother

something to eat, Tessa. He looks as if he needs it.'

'I'm not that hung-over,' he said.

Tessa got up and kissed her mother's cheek. 'I'll see you at Lewis's, then. Isn't it all thrilling?'

Amy laughed. 'I hope you'll still think so when you're doing dissection.'

'Of course I will,' Tessa said happily. 'I got used to it with all those frogs and rats at school. Bod parts don't frighten me.'

Body parts. The words set another beast roaming and threatening. For a few horrified seconds Amy was back in one of the operating theatres in France, among the shattered limbs and appalling injuries among the body parts thrown away for disposal into the bins. She thrust the thoughts away. She picked up her bag and opened the door. 'Oh, Tessa – ask Mrs Parks to get some strawberries, will you? We'll have them for pudding tonight.'

'And cream,' Charlie said.

Amy put her bag into her little Austin Ten. She sat in the car for a few moments, trying to forget her worries. There were worries enough where she was going, down to the poorer streets at the end of Ladbroke Grove and the Harrow Road, to a mixture of hard pressed but respectable working-class families and downright slums.

They had hoped and expected, she and Dan, at the end of the war, that those men in the trenches would come home to a better life, better housing and food, better jobs. The slump had put paid to that. 'A country fit for heroes', the government had promised. Now the men, even those with jobs, said that you'd have to be a hero to live in it. Times here in London were bad enough, but some industries were still going. What must it be like in other places? She had seen those men from Jarrow, with their shabby clothes and cracked, worn shoes, strained and exhausted as they walked into London, asking only for justice. What was going to happen now? Something worse?

She started the car and drove into Holland Park Avenue, then turned left into Ladbroke Grove. She drove past the large Victorian terraced houses, many of which were tenements now. She was in and out of these houses all the time, visiting her patients. Families lived here in two or three rooms, many with no bathrooms and shared toilets. And there were now so many ageing women, living out their lives alone in one dingy room, their husbands and sons lost and thrown away in unknown graves in the ravaged fields of France.

The surgery waiting room was filling up with women and small children and babies. She knew the heart-breaking battle that many of these women were fighting, to feed and clothe their children, to keep their pride and respectability. Cleanliness wasn't cheap, or easy, in some of these tenements. Many of the children were wearing worn out plimsolls or shoes that were too big for them, and obvious hand-me-downs. As she walked through the waiting room she noticed that several of the children had impetigo, nasty-looking sores on their faces around their mouths. There must be another outbreak going round.

Nurse Jones was already there, laying out the consulting room, patients' notes, prescription pads, turning on the sterilizer.

'Morning, Jean,' Amy said. 'We've got impetigo again, I see.'

Jean nodded. 'And nits. You can see some of them from the door.'

Amy sighed. 'We've got some nit combs, haven't we? And Derbac soap? And Gentian Violet?'

Nora nodded. 'Yes. I'll make up some small bottles.'

The purple paint was all that Amy could offer for the infected sores – that and advice about cross-infection. Not that that would help much – many of the children slept three or four to a single bed, two

at the top and two at the bottom.

She went into her consulting room and laid out her equipment, stethoscope and auriscope and ophthalmoscope. Then she put out the contraceptive jellies and creams and diaphragms. Many of the women were desperate for contraceptive advice, and that still wasn't easy to come by. Most of them couldn't afford what they called French letters, or their husbands wouldn't use them. They had one child after another, year after year, or they risked their lives and went to a back-street abortionist, risking death from haemorrhage or infection.

She plodded through the children with impetigo and summer colds and gastroenteritis. She weighed the children. If the babies and infants were undernourished enough she gave the mother a note to get 'doctor's milk' at school – free milk, but they only got it until the child gained a normal weight. Then it was stopped again.

Her last patient was trimly dressed in a neat cotton blouse and skirt. Mrs Nora Lewis. Her address, Amy saw, was in one of the rows of terraced houses off the Harrow Road.

'Mrs Lewis,' Amy said. 'Please sit down.'

Mrs Lewis sat down carefully on the upright chair. She looked nervous, Amy thought. Many of her patients looked nervous, especially if they were going to ask for contraceptive advice. They seemed to be expecting rejection or shocked opposition. Even after Marie Stopes opened her clinics many women still didn't quite believe that they could get help with planning their families, and there was still opposition in certain quarters.

'I would like some of those jellies,' Mrs Lewis said, in a soft, Northern accent. 'My husband uses something but I'm always afraid they might break.'

Amy smiled. 'How many children have you got now, Mrs Lewis?'

She blushed faintly. 'Only one. I'd have loved to have more but I can't. I had something called toxæmia last time and the doctor said I shouldn't have any more. He said it would be dangerous. I don't want to leave Sara, my little girl, with no mother.'

Amy nodded. 'I understand.' She reached for a packet. 'Here you are. The directions are inside.'

Mrs Lewis sighed with relief – relief, Amy expected, at not being treated as if she were immoral. 'Is there anything to pay?'

'Only if you can afford it,' Amy said. 'Is your husband in work?'

Mrs Lewis nodded. 'At the moment. He's a carpenter, a real good one. He's got a job in a furniture factory. There wasn't anything in Manchester. He had to take whatever he could get and there wasn't much. He had some terrible jobs. So we came here.'

'I'm glad he got something,' Amy said.

Mrs Lewis picked up her handbag, preparing to leave. 'Do you think there's going to be a war, Doctor? Do you think they'd bomb London? I could go back to Manchester, to Trafford Park, but there are factories there. They might bomb those too. I wouldn't know what to do for the best.'

'We'll just have to hope not.' Amy's worries surged again.

'But they're already giving out gas-masks for the children. They must think it's going to happen.'

'I'm sure it's just a precaution,' Amy said.

Mrs Lewis got up. 'Have you got children, Doctor?'

'Yes,' Amy said. 'Twins, a boy and a girl. They're nearly eighteen.'

'Oh.' Mrs Lewis's face mirrored her own worries. 'My little girl is nearly twelve. Sara, she's called. She's just got a scholarship to the grammar school.'

'That's wonderful,' Amy said. 'She must be very clever.'

Mrs Lewis smiled – a thin, humourless smile – and walked to the door. 'She is, for what that'

worth. She says she wants to be a doctor when she grows up but I can't see much chance of that. You have to be well off for that, wouldn't you?' She went out, closing the door behind her.

Amy sighed. Mrs Lewis was right, she supposed. There wasn't much chance of that, the way things were, for a child like Sara.

Amy had a home visit to do after the surgery, to one of the tenement houses off Ladbroke Grove. Room four, she was told, on the first floor.

The front door was open and she walked inside and up the dingy stairs. These houses were all much the same. This one had dark-brown shiny paint below the dado and a dull green above. She knew what she would find – a cramped room with a single bed, a chest of drawers, a battered easy chair, a wireless. In the winter these rooms were often freezing cold, scarcely heated by a guttering gas fire. Her patient, almost always a woman, would be swathed in layers of tattered cardigans, often with woollen mittens on their chapped hands. At least it was warm today.

She knocked at the door and went in. 'It's the doctor, Mrs Kelly,' she said.

Mrs Kelly was in bed, wearing a worn but clean nighty, her hair in a net. 'I've got a bad cough, doctor,' she said.

Amy helped her off with her nighty. She was thin and scrawny. Most of these old ladies were undernourished. She listened to her chest and looked at her throat.

'Your chest is quite clear, Mrs Kelly,' she said, 'and your throat's a bit sore. I think you just have a cold. I'll leave you a prescription for some cough medicine.'

Mrs Kelly put her nighty on again. 'Thank you Doctor,' she said. 'The landlady will get it. You know, two-and-six is on the chest of drawers.'

Amy took the sixpence, leaving behind the two shillings. Some of the ladies got annoyed if she took nothing. They had their pride. Sometimes they paid her off at sixpence a week. Sometimes she didn't charge them at all.

She gave a little shrug, feeling uncomfortable, a goose walking over her grave. Ever since she had come into this room she had the odd feeling that she was being watched. There was a large photograph of a young man in uniform on the chest of drawers, and beside it a single flower in a little vase. He was almost certainly a son, killed in the war, but it wasn't him watching her. She raised her eyes and gave a sharp intake of breath. All around the picture rail there were perched grey, sooty-looking pigeons. They were sitting quite still, looking down at her with beady, malevolent eyes. 'We are watching you,' they seemed to be saying. 'What are you doing with Mrs Kelly?'

Mrs Kelly saw her surprise. 'They're my friends,' she said. 'I feed them and they know me.'

'You really shouldn't ...' Amy began, but Mrs Kelly waved her words away.

'I know,' she said. 'I know all about the diseases they're supposed to have but they've never done me any harm. They're my friends. They keep me company.'

Amy left and got into her car to drive home. She sighed. How sad, how shameful, that in this huge city her only friends were a bunch of scrawny London pigeons. War, and the aftermath of war. How shameful.

She drove home for a quick lunch. Charlie wasn't home – out with his friends, probably.

Mrs Parks was busy in the kitchen. 'Do you want lunch, Doctor?' she asked.

'Just a sandwich please.' Amy ate her lunch at the dining-room table and drank a cup of coffee. Mrs Lewis had stayed in her mind, and her little girl – Sara, was it? She sounded so bright and ambitious. Why couldn't these children be helped? Why did so few working-class children ever make it?

it to university? Half the country's brains were going to waste.

She finished her brief lunch, ~~drove to Gower Street and waited for Tessa inside Lewis's bookshop.~~ She glanced through a selection of second-hand books for medical students, some of them thumb-worn and grubby, some of them almost new. She smiled. You could tell who had worked hard.

Tessa arrived. Amy watched her as she came through the door, bright, happy, confident. Tessa could do what she wanted; achieve what she wanted, not like little Sara Lewis. They were so lucky they had so much. Sara Lewis's chances of doing medicine, as her mother said, were just about nil. Even if the fees were somehow paid, the expenses were enormous – books, lab coats, instruments, and keeping alive for six years. And then, if you wanted to be a general practitioner, you'd have to buy into a practice. It all took money.

'Hello, Mum.' Tessa kissed her cheek. 'I need the *Gray's* and a book on embryology. Come and help.'

Amy followed her. 'I expect things have changed since I was a student.'

Tessa laughed. 'I don't think anatomy has changed much. We haven't evolved at all, have we? We're just the same.'

Yes, Amy thought, her mood dark, humanity was much the same – just as mad, apparently.

'Bacteriology,' Tessa said. 'I'd better have that. I shall need to know about the little blighters.'

Amy pictured her in the pathology lab, inspecting the colonies of bacteria growing in Petri dishes, learning which was which, looking down a microscope at the little dots and dashes on the slides – those tiny, tiny things that were so deadly.

'What's up, Mum?' Tessa said. 'You look rather serious.'

'Oh – nothing.' Amy smiled. 'I was thinking about bacteria. At least we have sulphonamides now. We had nothing before.'

Tessa looked at her for a moment. She knows what I'm thinking, Amy thought. Why do we even have to think about war?

'Let's go and have tea,' Tessa said. 'Can we go back to Derry and Toms? I want to see the roof garden again.'

Amy drove to Kensington High Street. They went into the store and up in the onyx and black marble lift to the Rainbow restaurant on the top floor.

'I love these lifts,' Tessa said. 'Very Art Deco.'

'Tea first,' Amy said, 'then we'll go up to the roof garden.'

The waiter brought tea and cakes.

'Mum,' Tessa said, 'why did you change to general practice after the war? You did surgery then, didn't you?'

Amy nodded. 'You and Charlie came along and I didn't want to be out all day and never see you. And I wanted to do more for the families. Some of them lead wretched lives, Tessa, even now.'

'Do you think there'll be another war?' Tessa said. She spoke quietly, without emotion, without fear or excitement.

'I don't know,' Amy said.

Tessa pressed her lips together. 'It's Charlie ...'

Amy forced herself not to react, not to show her terrors to her daughter. But she was a woman now about to embark upon a career that would bring her face to face with distress and disaster. She couldn't give her childish assurances. She looked down at her hands, clasped in her lap. 'I don't know,' she said again.

'Charlie says he won't just kill people. He says they can't make him.' She paused. 'They sh

people who wouldn't fight in the last war, didn't they?'

Amy turned her head away, looking out across the restaurant at the well-dressed women taking tea, the quiet hum of conversation, the waitresses in their neat uniforms. For a moment she couldn't speak. 'They shot some men who ran away,' she said. 'It was utterly disgraceful. What those men went through ... They didn't shoot conscientious objectors.'

'I don't think he's a conchie, exactly,' Tessa said, 'But he says he won't just kill people indiscriminately; certainly not civilians, women and children.'

Oh Charlie, Amy thought. She couldn't see him hurting a fly.

'It's all right for me,' Tessa said. 'I'd defend my country against anybody if I had to, but I'll never have to make the choice, will I? I'll be doing the other thing, patching people up.'

She doesn't know, Amy thought. She can't imagine what it was like, the mud and the blood and the rats and the disease and the screaming hell of it all. 'Let's go up to the roof garden,' she said.

They went up to the garden and strolled among the trees and flowers.

'Amazing, isn't it?' Tessa said. 'All this and the pool and the pink flamingos, on top of the world.'

Amy nodded, but didn't speak. In the last war, German bombers had been seen from Kensington High Street, dropping their bombs, destroying and killing.

'Cheer up, Mum,' Tessa said. 'It may never happen.'

When his mother left Charlie got out his bike and rode to Kensington Gardens. He sat in the sunshine by the Round Pond, watching the children sailing their little boats. It was as tranquil as ever, since he and Tessa sailed their boats here with their parents, or with the nanny they'd had then. On the surface nothing had changed. Now, he couldn't be sure. No one could be sure. All those men last night, none much older than he was, going on and on about what was going to happen. Was it? Those army types behaved as if they were glad about it: excited, anyway. Was there going to be a war, and what would he, Charlie, have to do about it? What would he be made to do? What would all of them be made to do?

He felt a kind of tension, his insides contracting. It wasn't fear, exactly; he knew that. He even understood their excitement, those army chaps. He felt a sort of excitement himself. It would be a chance to overcome, to prove himself as a man. He had read enough history to hear that call. But then the last war – it was not a battle, but from what he had read, or gathered from his parents' occasional remarks, it was a spirit-numbing weary war of attrition, a bare-knuckled mindless slogging until both opponents were on their knees, battered and barely conscious. He didn't even really know what it was about. Did anyone?

What he felt, he realized, was revulsion. He tried to imagine himself pointing a gun at some man, looking him in the eye, deliberately pulling the trigger and killing him. He tried to imagine himself hating someone he didn't even know. None of it seemed real or possible.

In front of him a young boy was trying to catch his little boat, that had floated out of his reach, and he looked to be in danger of falling in. Charlie got up and fished it out for him. The child's mother smiled and thanked him. He remembered, with a shock, that the Government was already arranging to give out gas-masks for children.

Chapter Two

1938

Dan scrubbed up at the sink in the small room beside the operating theatre. The first patient was probably an appendicectomy, then two inguinal hernias, then an exploratory laparotomy that might take some time. He scrubbed the soap up his arms, around his nails and between his fingers.

He did this several times almost every working day. The routine of it had calmed his memories, but now and again they would edge back in, subtle and undermining, knowing they were unwelcome. Sometimes a faint whiff of infection as he opened an abdomen, or sometimes the brutal wounds of a road accident would revive it all, and for a few seconds he would be back in the sickening horror of the war in 1914, in the overwhelmed and spirit-numbing hospitals in France.

It happened less frequently now, but Amy's distress this morning had brought it back. He remembered holding her in his arms at the war's end, the day she said she would marry him. He remembered what she said: 'At least we know that our children will never have to go through this hell.' Now that happy assurance was thinning and fading. He would not admit to her that he was worried too, that the prospect of another war filled him with dread: dread on Charlie's account, and for everyone, women and children included. It would not be confined to the military any more – the advances in aircraft design, the newest bombers, would see to that. German bombers had bombed the defenceless town of Guernica in Spain and killed a thousand helpless civilians. The Germans seemed to regard that as some kind of successful experiment. If killing and intimidation and submission were what you were after, he supposed that it was.

Bob Reed, his registrar, appeared beside him and began to scrub up. 'Morning, Dan,' he said.

Dan nodded in reply, 'Morning.'

'The appendix needs doing,' Bob said. 'He's pyrexial and has definite rebound tenderness this morning, so I put him first on the list.'

'Fine,' Dan said.

There was a silence as they scrubbed, then Bob said, 'what do you think's happening, Dan? The doctor brought round gas-masks for my kids yesterday. My wife's in a bit of a state. Gas-masks! For children! Good God!'

'They say it's just a precaution.' Dan glanced at Bob, who was concentrating on his hands, frowning. 'I don't believe they would use gas on civilians. The repercussions would be terrible for them too.'

'You could say that about everything, couldn't you? The prospect of them winning would be bad enough. God knows what they might do if they were losing.'

'I don't think even they would use gas,' Dan said. He almost believed it.

'You were in the last lot, weren't you?'

'Yes,' Dan said shortly. 'I was in a hospital at Etaples.'

There was another silence. 'Bad?' Bob said.

There was no use in playing it down, especially to Bob, who was young enough to be conscripted

'Yes,' Dan said. 'It was bad enough.'

'You know what the Ministry is saying?' Bob went on. 'If there's another war they're expecting at least a million civilians dead in air raids. They're stockpiling thousands of cardboard coffins, planning to dig lime-pits. I'm wondering whether to move my wife and kids out of London, but where could they go to be safe?'

Dan shook the water from his hands and reached for a sterile towel. 'No good anticipating the worst,' he said. 'We must hope for the best.'

They moved into the operating theatre, slid their arms into the sterile gowns held out by the nurses and snapped on rubber gloves. The patient was already on the table, the anaesthetist at his head. They spread the sterile towels. Dan incised into the abdomen and the peritoneum. There was no putrid smell of infection; they had got it in time. 'I think it's retrocaecal,' he said. He carefully moved aside the bowel. The appendix was lying behind the bowel, the red, infected tip almost glowing. 'I've got it,' he said. 'It's definitely inflamed.' He removed it, careful not to release any pus into the abdomen, and closed up. Infection was the killer. It had taken so many lives in the war. 'I wish we had something,' he said, 'something to kill the damn bugs. The sulphonamides don't stop everything.'

They worked through the morning, and then changed into their suits and white coats and drank a cup of coffee.

Dan sensed that Bob was going to ask him more about the war. He was reluctant to talk about it, to drag it out of the protective covering he had managed to spread over it. The thought of a million civilian casualties, woman and children, appalled him. They could never cope. The hospitals would be overwhelmed in Britain, let alone the care needed for the troops. He knew too much. He knew what a million casualties looked like.

'How old are your kids?' Bob said.

'They're twins. They're eighteen next week.'

'Oh.' Bob's silence was expressive. Then he said, 'You've got a boy, haven't you?'

'Yes,' Dan said shortly. 'He's going up to Cambridge this year.'

'Perhaps he'd get an exemption,' Bob said, 'until he's got his degree. They did that in the last war, didn't they?'

'I believe so,' Dan said. 'At first, anyway.' Bob was speaking as if war were inevitable. He didn't want to talk about it any more and changed the subject. 'Good thing we did the laparotomy and caught that peptic ulcer. It wasn't far from perforating.'

The family assembled for dinner in the dining room. The french doors were open on to the garden and the faint summer scents filled the room. Mrs Parks brought in the roast chicken and the dishes of vegetables, and Dan carved.

'Get your books all right?' he asked.

Tessa nodded. 'Yes, some of them, but there are rows and rows of enormous tomes. How on earth do you get it all into your head?'

Dan smiled. 'I don't know, but it seems to happen. Hard work probably has something to do with it.' He handed round the plates.

'I had a letter from Kurt today,' Charlie said. 'He's invited me to stay with his family in Berlin for a week or so.'

There was a silence. Amy and Dan glanced at each other, Amy startled and worried. 'I don't think so,' she said. 'I don't think that's a very good idea.'

'Why?' Charlie said. 'Nothing much is happening, just talk, and it's not as if you don't know Kurt'

'It isn't Kurt,' Amy said. 'He seemed to be a very nice boy, but you know as well as I do that things are very dangerous just now. We don't know what's going to happen.' She turned to Dan. 'Don't you think so?'

Dan nodded. 'It's not the best time to be travelling in Europe. What else does Kurt say?'

'Only that his parents would like to repay us for having him for those half-term holidays. You can read the letter if you like. People are still going to Germany on holiday, aren't they? Nobody seems to be that worried.'

'Can I come?' Tessa said.

Her father shook his head. 'Absolutely not.'

'Why?' she said, grinning. 'Is Kurt a Nazi, Charlie? Does he wear a swastika and stick his arm up and say *Heil Hitler*? Did he come here to spy on us?'

'He came to school for a year to improve his English,' Charlie said. 'We didn't talk about politics.'

Tessa put her finger under her nose and put her hand in the air.

'It isn't funny, Tessa,' Amy said. 'They've just taken over Austria without a by-your-leave.'

'Weren't they Germans really?' Charlie said. 'They wanted to be taken over, didn't they?' There was a silence. 'I'm only asking.'

'They are doing terrible things to the Jews,' Amy said. 'There is no excuse for that.'

'Why do you want to go, Charlie?' Dan said quietly.

Charlie met his father's eyes directly. 'Can you really believe everything that the papers say? I want to see for myself.'

Dan saw something in Charlie's face – a message that the boy, knowingly or unknowingly, was giving him. Perhaps, he thought, some kind of resolve. For the first time, fleetingly, he had the impression that the boy was no longer there, and he was looking at a man.

Charlie tucked into his chicken. 'I'd like to go' he said.

Amy frowned. 'We'll have to think about it.' She glanced at Dan. 'Dad and I will think about it.'

After dinner Charlie joined his father in the garden. Dan lit his pipe and they sat together in the warm, pearly evening, the light soft and the air still.

'Why must you go to Germany?' Dan said. 'If you want to travel a bit go somewhere else – France perhaps. You could get home more easily from France.'

'I just want to see Germany for myself,' Charlie said. 'And I've never been there. I want to see what's going on.'

'You can't ignore what your mother said,' Dan went on, 'about Austria and the Jews. Any country that gets rid of men like Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud must have something seriously wrong with it.'

'I don't ignore it,' Charlie said, 'but I want to make up my own mind.' After a few moments he said, 'The Duke of Windsor went there.'

Dan drew on his pipe. 'That's hardly a recommendation, and anyway, that was a year ago and things have changed. The sabres are rattling. You know your mother wouldn't get a wink of sleep until you were home again.'

'A week,' Charlie said. 'That's all. You don't think anything's going to happen in the next week or two?'

Dan shook his head. 'No. I don't think so. I very much hope not.'

They sat in silence for a few moments.

'You never talk about the war,' Charlie said suddenly. 'You and Mum. You never say what it was like.'

Dan looked out across the garden. 'We were doctors,' he said. 'We weren't in the trenches.'

~~'But you saw what it was like. I've only read the books and seen the pictures. I don't know how people felt.'~~

Dan took his pipe out of his mouth and looked at his son. Charlie drew in his breath. His father's look of dark, raw pain and distress was unexpected.

'Don't look like that, Dad,' he said. 'It won't happen to me.'

Dan looked away. 'You realize that if it ever did come to war with Germany you and Kurt would be on opposite sides – enemies?'

'I'm not stupid, Dad.'

'I just mean that it might be best not to get too friendly with him – under the circumstances.'

'And that's what I mean. Surely if more of us ordinary people talk to each other...? We're not that different, are we?'

Dan puffed on his pipe. The evening began to fade, the colours blurring and losing their brilliance. Strange, he thought, how colour is only light. He knocked out his pipe on the arm of the bench. 'I don't know any more. We'd best go in.'

Later Amy lay in bed, restless, unable to sleep or read. 'What shall we do?' she said. 'Shall we let him go? The whole thing might blow up at any moment.'

'I don't think it will,' Dan said. 'Not yet anyway. We're certainly not ready for another war.'

'Oh God,' she said. 'What's happening, Dan? The Germans have taken Austria, the Spanish are killing each other, the Japanese are bombing China. The world's gone mad again. And it's as if some hideous evil force has arranged it, timed it perfectly. It's just twenty years – just exactly time for the children to grow up. It's evil. It's unbearable.'

He put his arm around her. 'It probably won't happen,' he said. 'Maybe we should let him go, just for a week. He's only kicking his heels around here. He says he wants to see for himself.'

'What difference would that make?' she said. 'If the balloon goes up he'd have to do what he was told like everybody else.'

'It might make a difference to his personal conviction, and for Charlie I think that would be important.'

She sighed. 'You'd have to tell him how careful he must be. You know that an American tourist was badly jostled by a crowd because he wouldn't give Hitler the Nazi salute?'

'I'll tell him,' he said. 'He's very sensible.'

'He's just a boy,' she said, turning over.

Dan lay back against the pillows. Would it do any good, Charlie going there? Did he need that immediacy, that face-to-face experience, before he decided how to manage his life, the possibilities of the coming world? Things took place in other countries; reports came filtering through misunderstandings, pride, hate, nationalism and patriotism. Statesmen were just men, after all, as wise and as foolish as anyone else. But Charlie's life was his own. Perhaps he did need to see for himself.

Charlie got out of the train at the Anhalter Bahnhof and picked up his suitcase. He didn't need a porter, he decided; his case wasn't heavy. At his mother's insistence he was only staying for a week.

The platform was crowded. The station smelt of hot oil and burning coal. Clouds of steam rose from the roof and disappeared. There were pigeons up there, he saw, just like at home. He looked about him. He was struck by the number of uniforms. The officers were very smartly dressed, their caps rising from the front in aggressive peaks, badges gleaming. The swastika was everywhere.

He had been through customs – a very thorough search – when he entered Germany. His passport had been inspected again on the train by a silent, suspicious frontier guard, and handed back to him curtly. He followed the crowd to the exit.

Kurt was waiting, smiling and waving. ‘I’m glad you are here,’ he said. ‘We’ll get a taxi.’

They left the station and walked to the taxi rank ‘What is that building?’ Charlie asked. It was close to the station, huge, rectangular, solid, ugly.

‘Oh that – it is an air-raid shelter,’ Kurt said. ‘It would take many people.’

Charlie thought of the air-raid shelters apparently being designed at home – Anderson shelters, he thought they were called – what looked like a couple of pieces of corrugated iron for a roof over a hole dug into the garden – flimsy looking things compared with this. ‘Are you expecting air raids?’ he said.

‘I don’t think so,’ Kurt said, ‘but you never know, do you? But I do not know if anyone would attack Germany. It would be foolish, I think.’

Charlie glanced at him, but Kurt’s face was expressionless.

They drove through Berlin on the way to the Brauns’ apartment. Charlie stared out of the window. Berlin looked prosperous, he thought. Some of the buildings were obviously new, massive and impressive, with great sculptures at their façades – eagles, soldiers, Teutonic knights, and everywhere the swastika. The whole atmosphere was military, and military on a grand scale. The very buildings seemed aggressive. It was not a bit like London. He wondered how two great European cities could be so different. To him, London had an air of grace, of dignity, wrought by centuries of culture, and by stability, achieved and retained. Here the buildings were new, huge, gleaming blocks. We are stronger than you, they seemed to say, more modern, more powerful. Ignore us at your peril.

‘Great buildings,’ he said, and Kurt seemed proud.

‘I will show them to you properly,’ he said. ‘They are worth seeing.’

‘Do your parents speak English?’ Charlie asked.

‘My father does, quite well, my mother hardly at all.’

Charlie was greeted by Kurt’s parents with the utmost politeness. ‘Welcome to Berlin,’ his father said.

Kurt took him to his bedroom. ‘I expect you would like a cup of tea,’ Kurt said. Charlie nodded.

Kurt smiled. ‘Very English,’ he said. ‘I will send it. Dinner will be ready very soon.’

Charlie unpacked and put his clothes away. The furniture was dark and heavy, very German, he thought, and then smiled at himself. What did he know about Germany? Almost nothing. That was what he was here for. A maid brought him a pot of tea and sugar and milk on a tray and he drank it looking out of the window. Across the street was a park with trees and flower-beds and straight paths meeting at neat right angles. He washed his hands and face, put on a clean shirt and tie and a jacket and joined the family for dinner.

Kurt’s father was quite short and plump, a heavy gold watch chain across his waistcoat. His mother and his little sister were both blond and blue-eyed.

‘I hope you will like our German food,’ Herr Braun said. ‘It will make you strong.’

Charlie smiled at Frau Braun. ‘I’m sure I will.’

‘It was kind of you to entertain Kurt in the half-term holidays,’ Herr Braun said, ‘and show him around London. He will show you our Berlin.’

After dinner the boys went for a walk in the park.

‘I’m looking forward to seeing the city,’ Charlie said. ‘The buildings look magnificent.’

‘And many of them are new,’ Kurt said. ‘London is very interesting, but you do live in the past, don’t you?’

'We have a lot of past,' Charlie said. 'A lot of history.'

~~'That is where we are encouraged to be different then,' Kurt said. 'We are supposed to look to the future now, to the new Germany.'~~ He paused. 'Whatever that may be.'

They walked on. 'How are your parents?' Kurt asked.

'Very well.'

'And how is Tessa?'

Charlie glanced at him. Kurt's voice had changed. It had a warmth in it, and a wariness. It hadn't occurred to him before that Kurt might have been attracted to Tessa. He had never said anything. He wouldn't, of course. Charlie could see that now. The atmosphere in this country was unmistakably military and aggressive. Kurt would not, could not, approach an English girl under the circumstances of the hovering of an uncertain and possibly dangerous future.

'Is she still going to be a doctor?' Kurt said.

'Yes,' Charlie said. 'She's very keen. What are you going to do?'

'Go to university,' Kurt said. 'I shall read modern languages. That might be useful in the future.'

Charlie wondered what kind of future Kurt had in mind, whether he envisaged a situation where the knowledge of languages might go beyond the simple advantages of everyday use. He had certainly been keen to learn English. He didn't ask. 'I'm going up to Cambridge,' he said, 'to read history.'

Kurt gave a little laugh. 'You are a dreamer, Charlie.'

Charlie felt a sudden rush of feeling. What was it? Pride, patriotism, love of family, of home, some kind of belief? 'Someone has to be,' he said.

Charlie went to bed early, tired from the journey. There was an atmosphere here, he thought, a sense of urgency, a kind of aggression. They were on their way somewhere. Where?

The next day they did a tour of the city. Troops were marching at the Brandenburg Gate. Charlie watched them, impressed. Their faces, implacable under the heavy helmets, looked as if they were carved from stone. 'They look very fit,' he said.

'They are,' Kurt said. 'Our Chancellor says that he doesn't want the army to be intelligent. He wants them brutal.'

Charlie didn't reply. Kurt's voice held a faint touch of deeper meaning. He couldn't decide whether it was amusement or cynicism.

They moved on. They looked at one great new building after another, the burnt and damaged Reichstag, now, seemingly, under reconstruction; then the huge, modern complex of the Air Ministry building. Charlie didn't know where the British Air Ministry was, but he was sure it didn't look like this. The Germans obviously attached a good deal of importance to their air force. They found and admired the *Eagle and Swastika* sculpture by Walter Lemke.

'They are magnificent, these buildings,' Charlie said. 'They must have cost a fortune.'

'It was probably worth it,' Kurt said. 'They send a certain message to the citizens, about our great strength.' Charlie glanced at him, not sure what he meant, but Kurt's face again seemed to be carefully expressionless.

They passed a small group of men, many of them well dressed in suits and overcoats and carrying small suitcases. They were being moved on by uniformed guards.

Charlie watched them go by. 'Who are they?'

'Just some Jews,' Kurt said, his voice low. 'Perhaps they have volunteered to do some work for Germany.' He paused. 'Or perhaps they are leaving the country.' He turned away abruptly. 'Let's go to the Potsdamer Platz and have coffee. You will like it there.'

The platz was crammed with cafés and restaurants and plastered with posters advertising reviews

and cabarets.

‘It is like a Christmas tree at night,’ Kurt said. ‘We will come.’

They sat at a table outside in the sunshine, watching the crowds, pretty girls, good-looking young men, many uniforms.

‘It’s all very impressive,’ Charlie said. ‘Germany is very modern.’

Karl said nothing, sipping his coffee. ‘What’s all this trouble with the Jews?’ Charlie went on. ‘What are they supposed to have done?’

Kurt lowered his voice. ‘I don’t think we will talk about the Jews.’

He didn’t move, didn’t look round, but Charlie could see the tension in his body, the wariness in his face. Kurt got up. ‘I think we will go now.’

They dined at home again that evening.

‘So, what do you think of our Berlin?’ Herr Braun smiled a broad, complacent smile.

‘The new buildings are magnificent,’ Charlie said.

‘They are the Führer’s doing,’ Herr Braun said. ‘He has saved us from inflation, the communists, the Jews.’ He took a mouthful of wine. ‘We were cheated after the last war,’ he went on, ‘and look at us now – the most powerful country in Europe, if not the world.’

Charlie didn’t know what to say. He just smiled. Herr Braun did not smile back. He seemed to regard Charlie’s smile as some kind of challenge. ‘We did not cause the last war,’ he said angrily, ‘and we were humiliated afterwards. Our land was given away, to the Czechs and the Poles. Our colonies were given away. Millions of Germans are forced to live outside our borders. What do you think of that?’

Charlie was deeply embarrassed. He could feel himself flushing. Kurt spoke to his father in rapid German and Herr Braun said no more, stabbing at his food in silence.

The boys went to the little park again.

‘I am sorry about that,’ Kurt said. ‘My father gets very emotional about it. He was in the last war. He was wounded in the leg.’

Charlie kicked at a little stone. ‘What did you say to him?’

‘I said that you were not born then and it was nothing to do with you.’ They walked on. ‘It has left its mark, though.’

‘It would,’ Charlie said. ‘I’m afraid I don’t know much about it.’

‘Never mind,’ Kurt said. ‘We will go to a lake tomorrow, the Wannsee, and take a picnic.’

Next day they took the subway train to the Lanke station and walked to the lake. They walked past prosperous houses and through a pleasant wood. The shores of the lake were crowded with families, walkers, and children running everywhere. The people looked prosperous, Charlie thought, the women in flowery summer dresses and shady hats.

‘We’ll take a boat out on the lake,’ Kurt said. ‘I need some exercise.’

They hired a rowing boat and Kurt rowed out on to the lake.

‘You must forgive my father,’ Kurt said. ‘He is a great admirer of Herr Hitler.’

‘I don’t blame him,’ Charlie said. ‘The man has pulled the country together. I just don’t understand why he has this hatred of the Jews, and I don’t understand why he’s risking another war.’

Kurt looked around him. ‘We are on the lake,’ he said quietly, ‘so that no one will hear us. Please, Charlie, do not speak about the Jews or criticize the Führer while you are here. It could make a great deal of trouble for my family.’

Charlie looked at Kurt’s troubled face and the darkness in his eyes. He felt a sense of sudden and profound shock. I’m a fool, he thought, an idiot. I know nothing. It simply hadn’t occurred to him that

he might be in a country where just his words or his expressed opinion could lead to such danger. The moment was a watershed. He felt as if a door had closed behind him, as if he had stepped into another world where he was naked and unprepared. He wondered what Kurt really thought about what was happening in Germany. He, Charlie, lived in a country that he had never questioned, that had never presented him with any real political conflict. He had never had to make such decisions. In fact, he thought, he had never been presented with any kind of conflict. His life had been smooth and untroubled. Perhaps that time was coming. He watched his childhood skitter away across the water.

He looked at Kurt with new eyes, a new understanding, at a Kurt who seemed so much older, so much more experienced, than himself.

‘Remember, Charlie,’ Kurt said. ‘You are not in England now.’

‘I – I understand,’ Charlie said. ‘I’m sorry.’

Kurt smiled. ‘We’ll go back now and have our picnic. My mother has packed *käsebrotchen* and smoked ham and salami and cheese and fruit.’

‘A feast,’ Charlie said.

On Charlie’s last night they went to a nightclub. Most of the clientele were officers in their glamorous uniforms with their pretty, well-dressed girls. On each table was a telephone.

‘You can ring up the other tables,’ Kurt said, ‘and ask a girl to dance or have a drink with you.’

‘I wouldn’t have the nerve,’ Charlie said.

They drank a few beers before the phone rang.

Kurt answered it and smiled. ‘It is for you. That young lady would like to dance with you.’

Charlie stood up and smiled and the girl walked to him across the dance floor. He wished her German was better. She didn’t seem to understand him, except when he said he was English. At the end of the dance she left him and went back to her table. She said something to her companions, the officers and their girls, and they roared with laughter, holding up their glasses to him in some kind of sarcastic salute. Later, when he and Kurt left, they raised their glasses again. ‘Good luck Englishman,’ one of them called, and they roared with laughter again. He imagined that the words hung in the air: *You’ll need it.*

Kurt took him to the station the next day. ‘I hope you and I will meet again one day,’ Kurt said. ‘As friends.’

Charlie knew immediately what he meant. It was the first time that either of them had hinted at the thoughts they would not express.

‘It won’t happen,’ Charlie said. ‘It can’t.’

A group of soldiers marched on to the platform. They looked so confident, Charlie thought, as if the world belonged to them.

The guard blew his whistle. ‘Do you remember the story of Croesus and the Delphic Oracle?’ Kurt said.

Charlie shook his head. ‘Not really. Why?’

‘Look it up,’ Kurt said. ‘It is as true as ever.’

Charlie settled in the train. Kurt waved to him, and then was swallowed up in a crowd of uniformed men. It was a strange relief when the train started, as if he feared that they would never let him leave. The atmosphere seemed to him to be oppressive, strangling. The people, he thought, had no freedom. Even if they disagreed with the regime they were not able to say so. Even to express such a thought invited retribution, a visit from the police. He had no idea what Kurt really thought. He found that he couldn’t wait to get out of Germany. Crossing the border was a positive relief. There was no more beautiful sight than the English coastline, no better feeling than to find himself back in England.

~~His mother threw her arms around his neck as he came through the door, laughing with relief. 'Thank God you're home,' she said. 'I was worried all the time.'~~

Tessa kissed his cheek. 'Did you get up to no good? They say Berlin is a bit racy.'

'Good as gold.' Charlie grinned. 'I return unscathed.'

Later he sat with his father in the garden.

'Well,' Dan said. 'Did you see for yourself?'

'Yes,' Charlie said shortly.

'And...?'

Charlie looked around the garden, at the tranquil evening, at the old swing. 'I think we're for Dad. They're preparing for war, that's for sure. I'm not saying they want one, but they're getting ready. I've never seen so many uniforms, such an atmosphere. Their Ministry of Aviation building as big as a small town.'

'Don't say that to your mother,' Dan said.

'I won't, but it isn't just that.'

Dan sucked on his pipe. 'What then?'

'It's hard to describe,' Charlie frowned, 'but there's something dark there, Dad, something very unpleasant. It's not like it is here.'

Dan was quiet, drawing on his pipe. 'How was Kurt?'

'Very well, physically. He didn't say anything but I get the feeling he isn't happy about it. His father is very pro Hitler.'

'He won't have a choice if war comes,' Dan said. 'I don't suppose they would show much mercy to conscientious objectors.'

'Dad,' Charlie said, 'do you remember anything about Croesus and the oracle at Delphi?'

His father was obviously surprised at the change of subject. 'Why?'

'Kurt said something about it just as I was leaving.'

'I believe Croesus asked the Oracle if he should go to war against the Persians and the Oracle said that if he did a great nation would be destroyed. So Croesus went to war and was heavily defeated. The great nation destroyed was his own.'

'Oh,' Charlie said, 'I see.' He didn't see. He wondered which nation Kurt had in mind. Perhaps, he thought, it was both.

Chapter Three

1938

Sara sat at the table in her little bedroom. She could come back here after tea and stay up a bit later tonight – it was school holidays. Her mum made her go to bed at half past eight on school days even if the other children were still playing outside. She said sleep fed your brain. Outside in the street she could hear the other children playing, running and shouting. She preferred to stay here and read. She didn't want to join them. Sometimes she did go out, playing pig-in-the-middle or tag or skipping but she seemed to have grown out of that kind of play, running about to no purpose.

She had another purpose, one that she could never talk of to the children in the street. They would look at her with bafflement and poke fun at her and call her names. It was going to be bad enough going out in her new school uniform and carrying the leather satchel that was a kind of grammar school badge. That was if she got there. Her heart seemed to swell in her chest. The longing was desperate. She squeezed her eyes tight. Perhaps if she just wished hard enough it would all happen. She wanted to be a doctor more than anything in the whole world. Meanwhile, there were her books, years of study at her new school. But it wouldn't be hard – she loved it, loved the endless revelation of endless, thrilling science. There was so much to know and so much to learn. She couldn't wait. She couldn't remember when she had first wanted to be a doctor – years ago. Her mum's doctor was a lady, so it could happen – girls could do it.

Downstairs Nora was cooking what she called 'tea' – dinner really – that's what they called it down here. Fish and chips tonight, it being Friday. She wasn't Catholic but she had got into the habit back home in Manchester. Everybody seemed to have fish on Friday: fish, chips and peas. She peeled the potatoes carefully, so as not to waste anything. What is happening, she thought – all this talk of war. She couldn't bear it. She'd been a child last time. It had never occurred to anybody that it could happen again. The threat had become for her a solely personal thing. A war would be directed right here, to her home, to her Sara. She couldn't expand the fear, spread it out, include the rest of the world, even the rest of her own country. It seemed to her that the whole purpose of a war would be to threaten Sara.

She stared out of the window, where Sara's bicycle was propped up against the yard wall. She had never realized what motherhood would be like, never anticipated this degree of loving and caring. Sometimes she wondered whether, if she had known, she would have wanted motherhood at all. The kind of love brought with it a low but constant anxiety – would Sara be all right? Would she escape the dreadful diseases that could kill a child: diphtheria, scarlet fever, TB? Now it was growing into a new fear – fear of a war, and even if there was no war, fear that she might not be able to give Sara what she wanted. A doctor! Her daughter a doctor! It would make up for everything that she herself had missed. Somehow, somehow, they would make it happen. She slipped the chips into the hot fat in the chip pan and the fat bubbled up, crackling and spitting.

Jim came in and kissed her cheek. He took off his jacket and hung it up on a chair-back. 'Any news?' she said.

Jim sat down at the table and she gave him a cup of tea. He knew what she meant. She wasn't talking about a war. Some dangers were closer than a war. 'No,' he said. 'The bosses seem to think the factory'll be all right. People still need furniture.'

Nora said nothing. Every day she was frightened that Jim would come home and tell her that the factory was closing and he was out of work again. She didn't know how she would cope if they had to go back on the dole again, back on fifteen shillings a week. Keeping body and soul together would be bad enough, but there was Sara and grammar school – so much to pay for. Thanks to the scholarship there would be no fees, but there was uniform and books and gym clothes and goodness knows what else. The uniform alone would cost a fortune; the wool dresses for winter and the cotton ones for summer, the blue gabardine mac and the blazer for summer, and the hat with a yellow hatband, the gym tunic, navy-blue knickers, indoor shoes. And then the books. The list of books alone was bad enough.

She pressed her lips together, and turned the fish over in the frying pan. She'd saved enough, she thought, bit by bit, shilling by shilling. The pound notes were slowly growing in the shoebox in the wardrobe. Sara was getting out of this, out of privation and scrimping and saving and getting nowhere. Sara was going to the grammar school if she, Nora, had to starve to death to get her there.

'Where's Sara?' Jim said

'Upstairs. Reading, I expect.' She went to the foot of the stairs. 'Sara,' she called. 'Tea's ready. Your dad's here.'

'She's always reading,' Jim said. 'I don't know why you're so insistent on that school. She'd be perfectly all right at the ordinary school with the other kids.'

'No she wouldn't,' Nora snapped. 'We've been through all this. She's clever. She's going to get on. She isn't going to be stuck in some dead-end job.'

'We can't afford it,' he said.

Nora put his tea before him with a little thump. 'Yes we can. I could get a job.'

He opened his mouth to reply but Sara came into the kitchen. She kissed her father on the cheek. 'Hello Dad.'

Jim smiled at her with affection, and some puzzlement. Where had she come from, this brainy child, and what were they going to do with her? No one in either family had ever been to a university let alone want to be a doctor. What an idea! There seemed to be no way out of the mess the country was in. She'd be lucky to get a job at all. It was pie in the sky, especially for a girl.

Sara sat down at the table. 'Mum,' she said, 'why did you go to the doctor's? Is there something wrong?'

Nora glanced quickly at Jim, a faint colour rising in her cheeks. 'No love,' she said. 'Just a check-up. I'm fine.'

Sara took up her knife and fork and carefully dissected her fish away from the bone, admiring the little vertebrae in the spine, the way they so cleverly locked together. 'It's a lady doctor, isn't it?'

Nora nodded. 'Yes. Doctor Fielding.'

'Do you think,' Sara said, 'that she might have some old medical books that she doesn't want? I like to read some and they haven't got any in the library.'

'I don't really like to ask.' Nora frowned. She balked at anything that smacked of charity.

'Oh please, Mum. Only any old ones that she'd throw away.'

'I'll see,' Nora said. 'If I go to see her again I'll see.'

After tea Sara went up to her room again.

'You shouldn't encourage her,' Jim said. 'This being a doctor idea is crazy. You know we couldn't'

afford it.'

'She'd have to get another scholarship,' Nora said, 'she knows that. She works so hard. She might get a county or a state scholarship.'

Jim snorted. 'And when do they ever give them to people like us – a girl, a working man's daughter? I just don't want you to get her hopes up and then be disappointed. People like us don't go to university.'

'We never had a chance,' Nora said bitterly. 'We're both intelligent, you and me. I passed the exam to go to the grammar school but I couldn't go. My mother had seven kids to bring up. You'd have passed too if you'd taken it. We never had a chance.'

'Who gets a chance,' Jim said sourly, 'in this damn country? Not unless you're rich or one of the nobs.'

'Sara will.' Nora poured them both another cup of tea and sat down again. 'Things have got to change, Jim.' He made a dismissive noise. Her fears rose again. 'What if there's a war, Jim? What will we do?'

'I don't know,' he said.

'Do you think there will be one?'

'I don't know,' he said again. 'They don't tell us anything, do they? We're just the cannon fodder.'

'They'd attack London, wouldn't they? Like they did in Spain. Would we go back to Manchester?'

'There wouldn't be much point in that, would there? They'd bomb Manchester as well. All the factories there.'

She cleared up the table and started the washing-up, thinking, worrying.

Sara sat at the little table in her room, reading again the latest book she'd got from the library: *The Wonders of Science*. It sat before her, ready to be consumed, like a huge box of chocolates. Every word thrilled her. The first chapter was about the solar system and the planets. How wonderful that the earth rotated and went round the sun, and that explained night and day and the seasons. What was gravity, and wasn't it wonderful that Sir Isaac Newton had discovered it? Before tea she had moved on to the science of plants. They were just there, all over the place, growing everywhere, and look what they were doing – photosynthesis, changing the energy of the sun into food! And look at them inside the xylem and the phloem carrying stuff up and down their stems; making seeds, reproducing. Tonight she was starting on zoology, beginning with the frog. She felt an excitement and pleasure that seemed to expand and fill her little room. I want to know everything, she thought. I want to learn everything there is to learn, and then I want to learn some more. The universe opened out in front of her like a flower.

'Where are you two off to?' Amy was sitting in the garden, reading *The Lancet*. The twins were stuffing rolled-up towels into their backpacks.

'Swimming,' Tessa said, 'at the new outdoor lido at Hampstead. We're meeting the gang there.'

'Can you go in together?' Amy asked. 'Isn't it segregated?'

'Mixed bathing on Saturday.' Charlie grinned. 'So we've got to be respectable and take our swimming costumes.'

Amy laughed. 'Have you got money?'

'Enough,' Tessa said. 'It's only sixpence to get in, and Mrs Parks has made us some sandwiches.'

'Have a good time.' Amy watched them leave, both so well, so contented. I've got to do what Dad said, she thought, and stop worrying. Otherwise she might set them off too. This was no time to be worrying them about anything. They were both facing perhaps the most important change in their lives.

– leaving school, joining the adult world. Please God, she thought, let that be all it is.

The twins took the tube to Kentish Town and walked down Highgate Road and Gordon House Road.

‘Good job it’s a warm day,’ Charlie said. ‘I bet the water’s icy.’

‘And I bet it’s crowded,’ Tessa said. ‘Lots of girls in swimming costumes for you to ogle.’

‘I don’t ogle,’ he said blandly. ‘I never learnt. There wasn’t much chance at school. The youngest female there was Miss Blake the French mistress, and she was at least thirty.’

Tessa laughed. ‘Goodness, what an age. How ever did she survive that long?’

They paid their sixpences and went in.

‘Wow,’ Tessa said. ‘It’s lovely. It’s huge.’ The blue glazed bricks lining the pool sparkled in the water and the ornamental fountain glittered in the sunshine. It was crowded, young people in swimming costumes everywhere, sitting on the beige tiles around the pool or on the grass.

‘Go and change,’ Charlie said, ‘and I’ll meet you out here and we’ll go and find the others.’

Tessa changed into her blue costume and put her clothes in a locker. She went out again into the sunshine, carrying her towel and a white rubber bathing-cap. Charlie was waiting in his black costume with his towel around his neck. Their friends, two boys and two girls, waved to them from across the pool and they walked round to meet them.

‘Is it cold?’ Tessa tucked her hair into her bathing-cap.

‘Freezing,’ one of the boys said, ‘but it soon wears off.’

Tessa dived into the pool, enjoying the shock of the cold water. It seemed to draw her body together, concentrate her form and energy into a contained package of being young, being fit, being happy. She turned over on to her back, floating, squinting up her eyes against the bright sunshine. I’m starting soon, she thought. I’m nearly there. She had wanted to be a doctor for as long as she could remember. It was going to happen. A small cloud drifted slowly across the bright sky. It had a definite shape; it looked like a bird, like an eagle. Surely they couldn’t stop her now, she thought, even if there was a war? They would need more doctors, more women in medicine. Her mother had once told her how the British army had refused to use women doctors at the beginning of the last war. Surely things had moved on? Surely women had proved themselves? She turned over and swam back to her friends.

‘What have you been doing, Charlie?’ Rob, one of the boys, was thin, with dark-brown eyes that didn’t seem to focus without his thick horn-rimmed glasses. ‘We haven’t seen you for a week or two.’

‘He’s been in Germany.’ Tessa took off her cap and shook out her hair. ‘In Berlin.’

Both the boys sat up quickly and stared at him. ‘Berlin?’ Rob said. ‘What were you doing there? What was it like? What was happening?’

Charlie tried to arrange his thoughts, to describe it as it was, without adding his own impressions and judgements. But there wasn’t any way to avoid the reality. ‘It’s stiff with military,’ he said. ‘everywhere you go, and Hitler has got a complete stranglehold. Nobody dares to disagree with him or you get into trouble with the police. There are swastikas everywhere and that salute. There are huge air-raid shelters and an air ministry like a fortress. They mean business.’

The boys still stared at him, saying nothing, but one of the girls gasped. ‘You can’t mean it,’ she said. ‘You’re just scaremongering.’

‘I didn’t say they want war,’ Charlie said. ‘I’m just saying they’re well prepared, I suppose in case anyone attacks them. They seem to be much better prepared than we would be.’ He paused. ‘But they look to me as if they’re spoiling for a fight.’

There was a silence, a question hanging in the air. ‘What would we do?’ Rob said. They all knew what he meant.

Charlie shrugged. ‘What we’re told, I imagine.’

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