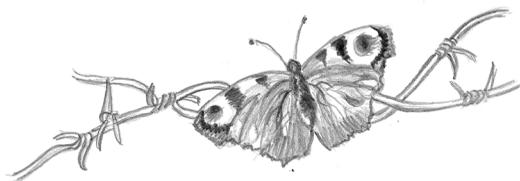


PART ONE

Ticket



Property of Puffin Books

Property of Puffin Books

I

*The Somme, forward medical station,
near Albert, 1 July 1916, 2 a.m.*

‘Nurse, I’m ready for the next patient. What do we have?’

Helen checked her hastily scribbled notes for the surgeon. Dr Cameron was one of her favourites among the medical staff, a cheery Scot, short of stature, whose balding crown glowed in the operating theatre lights with a steady and reassuring beam. Absurd, but she’d learnt to look at it whenever she felt adrift or scared, drawn to flutter at his side like a moth to the collector’s lantern.

‘We’ve a lung, a knee and a head wound, doctor.’

‘Head wound – will he pull through?’

Helen swallowed, remembering the deep injury she had seen on the scalp, blood against dark hair like the red stripe on the dark wing of the cinnabar moth. ‘Unlikely, doctor.’

‘Best leave him then. Bring me the lung.’

Helen signalled to the orderlies, two elderly labourers with whom she communicated in her schoolgirl French. ‘*Celui-là. Vite, vite!*’ The ‘lung’ in question was a poor private no older than her; he had taken shrapnel in the chest on a ration run, according to the tag on his toe.

The old men heaved the stretcher up and bounced the boy into the operating theatre. Helen had already cut off his bloody uniform, but it was nigh on impossible to keep the place as clean as she had been taught. The surgeons had stopped demanding it of the nurses, seeing they were fighting an impossible battle when the casualties came in so fast.

And tonight had been a 'quiet' night.

Dr Cameron probed the injury. 'Two holes. Thank God he's insensible. Chloroform.' Helen, who had received the extra training required to administer the anaesthetic, gave the boy a light dose to keep him under as Miss Kelly, an experienced nurse in her fifties, moved closer to assist the surgeon.

The doctor tutted, annoyed by the insult of the injury to the young victim. 'We'll have this sorted at the double.' With the deft touch of someone with too much experience of grave injuries, the surgeon repaired the damage and sewed the boy up, humming as he did so. 'That'll have to do. Lord, I'm hungry. Can't wait for breakfast. Bring the knee and tell me how the head is doing.'

Two operations later, the surgery was over. The head had died on the table – a merciful release, Dr Cameron had told the nurses as the man was taken away. You could not save everyone. The knee had become an amputation, but the patient was expected to pull through.

The Scot stripped off his bloodied gown.

'Good work, Nurse Kelly, Nurse Sandford. Go and

get some rest, my dears. We've orders to clear the beds. Pass the word on.'

Helen nodded. 'Yes, sir.' She exchanged a grim look with the other nurse. He didn't need to say any more. That order meant another assault was planned, casualties expected. The day shift would have their hands full. She would have to snatch what sleep she could before going back on duty. 'I'll tell Sister, shall I, Miss Kelly?'

The older woman gave her a grateful smile. 'Thank you. If you wouldn't mind. I'm dead on my feet.'

Pausing at the head nurse's station in Ward One, Helen passed on the message to her section leader.

Sister Richards received the news with her usual stoic acceptance, her face strangely waxen, reminding Helen of a weather-worn marble angel in Highgate Cemetery, each drop of bad news sliding over her face, taking a little more of her identity with it every time. 'Thank you, Sandford. I'll see you back on duty at six unless you are required.'

Helen left Sister Richards looking despairingly at her list of patients, calculating who would survive the removal from the forward medical station to one of the units further behind the lines. Helen was thankful she didn't have to make these life-and-death choices, her junior position sparing her some burdens. There were too many decisions to make as it was. Should she have said the head wound might pull through? What if they had operated on him first?

She hurried out of the hut, running away from the

night's work. You couldn't think like that. Helen's teachers in nursing school had warned her that she had to stick with her decisions, not unpick them afterwards. Do what you think is right. Prioritize. Read the medical evidence and draw conclusions based on fact not fancy.

She paused in the doorway to allow her eyes to adjust to the dark. In a few hours, dawn would flush the horizon, bringing a false rosy glow to the dead world. Night was kinder, veiling the ugliness, but she could still see it in her mind's eye. At heart a nature lover, Helen had spent much of her life as a child out of doors on tramps through the countryside, seeking out the hidden world of hedge and copse, avoiding her home and her father for long, happy hours. This place had once also been a landscape of lush meadows and slow rivers; now the fields around the River Somme had undergone a thorough and complete beating. Though it was high summer, this area had been so pounded by artillery that nature had been whipped into a retreat. The churned mud was a dirty bone-white due to the chalky soil. The odd stray drift of flowers among the network of wooden duckboards was the only proof that things could still grow. It was haunting how the stubborn blood-red poppies and bright dandelions clung on where other flowers had given up. During the day, chalkhill blue butterflies still hung from stems, flexing their wings, bravely pretending life as normal could proceed. Helen had no such hope. Most of the trees were amputees, the last remaining sprays of leaves waving their surrender.

British lines, the Somme, 1 July 1916, 2 a.m.

The ticket lay flat on Sebastian's palm, slightly damp like everything else in the trenches. Creased down the middle, folded and refolded so many times, it was threatening to make a permanent division into two parts.

He knew every single curl on that elaborate font, the sloping S, the roundness of the Os.

The Palace Theatre of Varieties invites you
to an evening of Patriotic Songs
'Your King and Country want You'

We don't want to lose you, but we think you ought to go!
23rd October 1914, Row F, Seat 14

He ran his finger over the middle, knowing he risked further degrading the thinning pale pink paper, delicate as butterfly wings. The ticket gestured to a life beyond mud-and-plank walls, his talisman, something solid in contrast to the holder who felt so insubstantial. Since orders came down for the attack on the German lines in the morning, Sebastian had been going about his duties as if he were dreaming but not able to wake. Full consciousness was too dangerous – that way lurked insanity. The 1st Somerset Light Infantry, or what was left of it, had been asked to steel themselves to do the unthinkable so often, he was no longer sure he had any courage left, having expended it all on other days, other raids. Tired – so tired. If he could manage in this semi-aware

state, he might get by. It was the men who dwelt too much on things that got the shrieks. A bit of emotional lobotomy was the only way to survive.

He could not, would not, lose it in front of the men.

Find an anchor and hold steady. Sebastian fixed his gaze on the music-hall memento, a paper skin overlying his lifeline, forcing his mind away from the danger zone. The ticket was his link to the first time he met Helen. Now, near the likely end of things, perhaps he need not fret too much about tearing it. Life was dissolving around him, a tablet in a glass of water, fizzing away to nothing but bubbles and a bitter taste. Would something as fragile as romance survive or would that too crumble to meaningless pieces? He no longer knew.

‘Have you ever been to Germany, Doodle?’

Sebastian looked up from his notebook, slipping the worn ticket back between the covers. He had earned his nickname – in its full form Yankee-Doodle – thanks to the happy coincidence of his habit of sketching in his book or on any scrap of spare paper, and his American blood. Private Cook, the unit’s clown and fixer, had christened him a few months back and the name had stuck – now everyone used the friendly moniker.

‘What was that, sir?’

‘Germany – have you visited?’ Sebastian had thought his commanding officer had been snatching a few moments of sleep before tomorrow’s assault. Instead, Captain Williams lay staring up at the stain of sleepy, fat blue-bottles that covered the plank ceiling of the dugout, hands

laced across his chest like a medieval tomb effigy. The captain had had little enough rest since the orders had come through to prepare the company, but, like Sebastian, he was probably unable to close his eyes even though they were supposed to be off duty, the other officers in the company standing the watch. The constant artillery fire from their own lines to clear the wire from no man's land made them all strangers to sleep. The returning barks from German guns were unnerving. Sebastian pushed away the thought that an unlucky hit could bury them alive; at least in the dugout they were safe from shrapnel.

'Germany? No, sir. I never had the chance.'

'I forgot – you're so bally young. You were what? Sixteen when this madness blew up in our faces?'

'Seventeen, sir. Nineteen now. I did travel but not to Germany.'

'I had friends in Berlin before all this.' Williams waved his hand in the direction of the Germans hunkered down in the ruined village of Serre. 'Spent the summer of eleven there. A fine country. Damned fine.' His words were punchy, but his tone lacked energy as if he too felt half rubbed out of existence.

'So I've heard, sir.' Sebastian wondered at this strange mood that had come upon his captain. He needed his leader to show no cracks if he was going to maintain his own determination not to fail in his duty.

Williams scratched the bites on the back of his hands. 'I can't help asking myself if any of my friends are over there.'

Sebastian couldn't think of a suitable answer. Despite the best attempts of the propaganda back in London, it was a rare Tommy at the front that held any personal grudge against Fritz, but neither did they think too much about him as a person. If you did that, it became next to impossible to take the shot or go over the top. 'Best not to wonder, sir.'

'You're right, as always, Doodle. You've an amazingly level head on your young shoulders.'

Sebastian took the compliment, undeserved though he knew it to be. He was only calm because all the alternatives were worse. He faced the dawn with dread, haunted by the thought that there was little or no point to their courage as this stalemate in the trenches had gone on for too long. For all the pep talks from top brass, their knowledge gained from poring over maps at headquarters, it was hard to believe that yet one more push would break through the German lines. He could see what they were trying to do – it wasn't as if there were no strategy behind the orders. The whole hellish situation was like one of those interminable rugby games at school where the scrum had been too evenly matched. For all the shouting of the sports masters, neither side could do more than splatter each other with mud until some lucky heel scuffed the ball free. He sometimes wondered if the generals thought that their troops were actually teams to be pitted against each other, not considering how their bodies were being blown up, sliced apart, gassed to death.

Christ.

Best not to think at all.

Helen retreated to the cocoon of nurses' huts, a small collection of iron-roofed buildings hastily assembled on the site of what once must have been a prosperous farm. Some of their equipment was housed in the shell of the barn; the house itself was roofless. Even so, several of the male orderlies had taken to bedding down there, preferring it to the huts that could become either freezing or like ovens, depending on the whim of the weather.

She envied the men their freedom to choose. For decency's sake, the nurses did not have such latitude. Many people back home found it shocking to have women so near the front, not because of the danger, but the risk of fraternization between the sexes. The nurses countered possible accusations of loose morals by chaperoning each other in this masculine world of doctors and soldier patients. Helen shared her cubicle with Mary Henderson, another sister in her section, but they were rarely there together, working opposite shifts. As anticipated, the little enclosure was empty, her bed ready for her. Eating could wait until after she had slept. She took off her headscarf and apron and hung them on a peg. Starched cuffs, collar and blouse followed, then she filled the enamel basin on the box washstand. She couldn't bear the idea of taking anything from the theatre into her bed. Checking the door was firmly closed and the curtains pulled, she finally took off her underclothes and soaped

her face, arms and chest briskly. She fell into a kind of standing doze, exhausted by the night's work.

The suds smelt medicinal, not like the rose perfume that her sister, Flora, had favoured back in the days when they could afford a few luxuries. The water trickled cool down to her elbows, then to the tips of her little fingers, before dripping to the linoleum. The shivery sensation brought back the memory of someone running a stalk along her inner arm. She closed her eyes to savour the brief escape.

A picnic. Young people stretched out on a riverbank, young gods come to the mortal world to play. Sebastian leaning over her and tickling her awake with the feathery bluegrass. Yes, that was what he had called it, the faint trace of America in his accent, as light as the touch of the seed head against her skin. She would have called it plain meadow grass until she met him, but now preferred the name he used as it captured the faint blue wash of the ripening stem. He had insisted on sketching her as she lay on her back, her sleepy smile the definition of spring, he had claimed, full of promise.

But he didn't want her near him now.

Helen shivered and grabbed a linen towel, quickly drying herself, a burst of frustration at his last letter fueling her movements. She had thought he understood her, but instead he had tried to send her home.

'Stupid, stupid war.' She glared at her reflection. She was still pondering her reply, knowing better than to post the first impassioned response. How could she make him

see that her sacrifice was as worthy as his? That women were not butterflies to be kept in a glass house?

She pulled a nightgown over her head. Perhaps she thought she had no common sense – a sweet face but no brains? Strange really. It had always been the other way round before, her intelligence praised to make up for what she lacked in looks. Sebastian was the first man to say she was pretty, but she had decided long ago it was the artist in him who saw interest in forms that others thought quite ordinary. He had made her feel desirable, her with her unfashionably full figure and long, straight brown hair. He'd claimed it shone with golden highlights, but, as she punished it now with a brush, she could see nothing special about it.

'Far too heavy and dull, Helen,' she told herself, unembarrassed to be talking aloud as there was no one to overhear. Her tone turned mocking. 'Not like *Flora's blonde curls*.' Lord, how many times had she heard that comparison when she was growing up? She was used to playing the ugly sister to Flora's Cinderella.

Looks had promised to determine the sisters' destiny. Their father had been blunt: he declared Helen a wasted effort of a girl when she left school at fourteen, fit only for service or teaching; Flora, the family jewel, was destined for great things. Helen had stumbled over the threshold of adulthood where others glided.

Bending closer to the little mirror, Helen brushed her fingertips over her skin. She had suffered from a bad complexion in her last year at home, but it had cleared

up with age. Still, her father had never forgiven her for daring to be so plain.

Helen dropped the brush and twisted her hair into a loose plait. Not her father. She did not want to think of him.

But the recollection had already forced its way in – refusing to leave. Dad would have mocked her to see her pretending to be a competent nurse. Every time she dropped something – and her natural clumsiness always increased tenfold around him – he had clouted her, shouting into her face that she was a disgrace to the Sandfords. It was so unfair. He blamed her faults on her mother’s German blood, an Abendroth from Dresden before marriage, because, of course, nothing bad could come from the Sandfords, good Suffolk folk with ne’er a smudge on their family reputation. She had come to hate the sound of those stodgy farming folk, grinding their women down into the mud.

Helen picked up the ribbon curled like a centipede on her nature diary and secured her plait in preparation for bed. Amazing that her parents had ever met considering her father’s stay-at-home nature; he didn’t trust the people in the next village, let alone from another country. Yet in his younger days he must have been different for Geerta had been introduced to Harvey Sandford by mutual friends while on holiday at Brighton and they had married only weeks later. Helen had seen the wedding photograph – her parents looking happy and painfully young. She had imagined how it must have been: the

country solicitor's clerk pretending to be a man of the world in the gay holiday atmosphere of Brighton, with its fluttering flags and Punch and Judy shows; the pretty, shy German girl, unable to read the nuances of the English tongue she was learning, translating his fumbling words into the romance of the lover she had created in her imagination. It had not started out so badly, but, as the war clouds gathered, her father had become embarrassed by his wife's origins and found an outlet for this in his inadequate daughter.

'You're useless!' her dad had yelled in Helen's face once when she'd fumbled the coal scuttle.

'Please, Harvey, let the girl alone,' her mother pleaded. 'She does not mean it. Here, please, drink your tea.'

'That makes it no better, Mother.' He snapped the paper straight, his movements having crumpled the pages. 'I don't know what we're going to do with her. Spinster material, she is. She'll be the bane of our lives, you mark my words.'

And Helen supposed he had been right because she was the reason why Flora had upped and left for London, taking her little sister with her, a flurry of righteous white-blonde hair and red coat, the drab little sister in brown hurrying to catch up. Harvey Sandford had lost his golden girl the same day he had got rid of his curse.

Served him right, nasty, selfish man. Leaving had the effect of wrenching the telescope from his grip and allowing Helen to look at him through the other end.

He shrank to a petty dictator, his inadequacies even clearer.

Footsteps approached the nurses' dormitory at a run. Helen tensed, half expecting a summons to the operating theatre, but the messenger passed by. A reprieve. She still had time for sleep. Helen gathered up her hairpins and tucked them in the Chinese box by her bedside. She ran her finger round the rim. It was a beautiful object that an admirer had given Flora and then been passed on to her. Cardboard covered with a silk embroidery of creeping tigers in an ink-black forest, it folded up like a fan, so was easy to transport. Yet, when you pulled it out and pushed the base flat, it formed three hexagonal compartments, like a little bit of honeycomb. It was the only thing she had with her that belonged to her sister, but she doubted Flora even remembered it: she had been given so many gifts over the years and discarded them easily.

That thought wasn't so satisfying. Flora's attitude to life was like that – throw out anything or anyone she did not want with her.

My nature is more like the box, thought Helen whimsically, tipping out the pins and playing at folding and unfolding the honeycomb a few times. *Memories springing out at a touch*.

Sebastian had once told her that he thought memory worked like a Russian doll, one leading to another, but that was too tidy. Hers brought the recollections side by side, jostling for attention, the *now* having to compete with the *then*. Flipping the boxes open a final time, she

replaced her pins and slipped between the bedcovers, leaving the tigers to guard her little treasures.

The reply to Sebastian's letter would have to wait.

Sebastian flicked through his notebook, reviewing his sketches. There was a portrait of his servant in the trenches, Ted Atkins, killed last week and not yet replaced. He missed the old campaigner's steadiness and fussy ways. One page had a perfect thumbprint on the corner – in mud rather than ink.

'What would you have been doing, if it hadn't been for this blasted war?' Captain Williams propped his head up on one arm.

'Me, sir?' They had been serving together for three months and this was the first time the captain had broached the subject of his private life.

Williams rolled his eyes. 'You had a future, didn't you, even though you were barely in long trousers?' He sighed and flopped back. 'Nineteen fourteen. I was on a rubber estate in Malaya, saving up a nice little nest egg, planning to marry and settle down out there. Never imagined I'd end up in charge of a rabble of cockneys and public school boys.'

Sebastian found it hard to picture the captain in such an exotic place; the redhead's pale complexion must have made the equatorial sun a torture. It would have been a life of sunburn and peeling skin.

Two years back. What had his own future held?

'I'd just won a place at the Slade.'

Williams raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

‘It’s one of the art colleges in London. Even did a few terms. I was going to be an artist.’ Sebastian grimaced at the memory of his old self striding so confidently through the West End, drunk on being young, feeling he had the world at his feet and believing love conquered all.

Williams laughed. ‘Bloody good thing the war intervened then. Can’t let a good man like you go to waste.’

Sebastian had heard this dismissal of his chosen career too often to bother to argue. It no longer hurt.

A shell whistled overhead, exploding some distance away. Williams warmed to his subject, thankful for the distraction. ‘Modern artists haven’t a clue how to draw. Look at that Cézanne fellow. Saw one of his pictures once – couldn’t tell the sky from the sea.’

A second shell landed short, rocking the trench with a percussive *whump* as the mud absorbed the impact. The candle on the ledge next to Sebastian puffed out. He fumbled for the matches, swearing under his breath. Neither of them commented on the near miss as the occurrence was too frequent to surprise. Outside there was a shout from the men, telling the bleeding artillery to point the effing guns in the right effing place. Sebastian wrenched his thoughts back to the ordinary world of artistic endeavour, which now seemed as fanciful as Shangri-La.

‘I was planning to return to New York last summer for an extended holiday – if the war hadn’t intervened. I grew up there until I was eleven.’

‘*An extended holiday*, eh?’ The captain’s tone was amused rather than mocking. ‘Ah, how the other half lives!’

‘My father’s family are from the States. I had ideas of going on a sketching tour of New England.’

‘Good Lord, a sketching tour!’ The idea tickled Williams. ‘But what have you done with your accent, Yankee boy?’

‘I’m only half American. The English side – my mother – insisted her boys went to Eton – it was where all her brothers went. Ironed out most of the accent, don’t you know.’ Sebastian put on an impossibly posh voice.

Williams snorted. ‘Cut it out, Doodle, you sound like the bloody colonel. I’ll be wanting to salute you next. So where’s your old mum from?’

His mother would faint to hear herself referred to with such disrespect. ‘My “old mum” is from Somerset. Daughter of an earl.’

‘Blimey.’

‘Not an important one.’ Sebastian wondered why he was confessing so much to Captain Williams. The prospect of imminent death did that to a man. ‘Bit of a ramshackle lot, truth be told. Disgrace to the House of Lords and all that.’

‘Still, grandson of an earl,’ chuckled Williams. ‘And I’m the son of a coalminer. If you want any more proof that the world is barking, there you have it.’ He yawned. ‘I’m so bally tired, I can’t sleep.’

Sebastian passed Williams his flask. He still had half his ration of rum left: he’d tipped it into his flask to make

the chlorinated water palatable. 'Maybe that will help take the edge off.'

'You're an A1 chap, Doodle, even though you are an offence to common sense. Yankee blue blood, just fancy that.' Williams gulped down the contents of the flask and lay back on his camp bed.

Sebastian slipped the notebook inside his right puttee, rewinding the wrapping round his leg, relieved Williams hadn't mentioned the forbidden sketches even though he must have noticed Sebastian doing them. Soldiers weren't supposed to go into battle with anything on them which could reveal details of the allied operations to the enemy, including casual drawings like the ones Sebastian did in his spare moments. Williams must have decided on his own authority that they posed no danger. Life in the trenches was a strange mixture of intimacy and restraint. It was hard to have a heart-to-heart with a chap who you were likely to see buy it the next time you advanced towards the enemy guns. Sebastian had learnt to think of the men around him as comrades, as distinct from friends. Comrades fell, you mourned and moved on. The loss of a friend would be too gutting to contemplate. He knew: he'd already lost too many.

As Williams' gentle snores rumbled, a distant steam train going through a tunnel, Sebastian closed his eyes and leaned back against the plank-lined wall, collar turned up against the incursion of rats that liked to lick the Brylcreem from a chap's hair. He tucked his hands inside opposite sleeves to stop them nibbling his fingers. He felt

like ninety, not nineteen. So weary, his bones ached. He wondered if he would ever feel young again.

Helen. She always made him feel happy. He'd think about her; he would refuse to let this bonfire of all that was good and decent incinerate his stubborn hope that love did count and could survive. What point would there be in fighting if there were nothing better than this, if life were just a battle of tooth and claw, animals seeking to be the fittest? That wasn't enough for him.

So where was she now? Sebastian knew she was posted to a forward medical station somewhere behind the front line, but he wasn't sure where, thanks to the censors. They had last met up a few weeks ago when he was on leave, before her move to the front. She hadn't written since his last letter two days ago. He couldn't blame the postal service as it was the one thing that was miraculously efficient in the whole fumbling war operation. The soldiers may not have boots that fitted, or uniforms in the right size, but they nearly always got their personal mail, thanks to the bravery of the messengers. He could hardly fault her for refusing to answer as he had just received word she had taken a position so close to the front and he had let rip his opinion of her risking her life. No one liked a scolding, least of all Helen, who despite her sweet appearance had the obstinacy of the proverbial mule. She had taken no notice of his protests when she had decided to come to France, so why had he been surprised when she took the next logical step closer to danger? Still, he hoped she had come to her senses and

asked for another assignment, preferably back in Le Havre or better still one of the hospitals in England. He did not want her caught up in this mess.

Williams shuddered and turned over, the planks squeaking beneath him. A rat scampered over the bed, but kept running when Sebastian threw a stone. The dugout returned to its counterfeit peace. Sebastian replaced the blanket that had slid off the captain's legs. He had not done that for another man since he went camping with his brothers. Neil, the eldest, had been a terribly restless sleeper in a tent, arms flung out like a starfish, freckled face squashed against the canvas. He had gone down in the Mediterranean with Des.

No, not that memory, not now. Tears stung Sebastian's eyes, but he knuckled them away, his nose and throat burning with the effort of choking off the emotion before it could get hold. He swore under his breath, bringing himself back under control. War was a dirty business – but it was a business that had to be done by someone and their generation was the one selected. The bigger principles no longer seemed important; what mattered to him now was his loyalty to the other men and a desire not to fail in his duty. He could not let his brothers down.

But that didn't change the fact that the battlefield was no place for a girl, no matter how determined to do her part.

London, 23 October 1914

Picking a shaft of evening sunlight streaming through the window as his spot, Sebastian settled down to read the papers in the library of the Junior Athenaeum Club. The leather armchairs squatted on the dark parquet floor like thrones for fat potentates; the air smelt of beeswax polish and fresh newsprint. The only noise was the hum of low voices, the softened tread of the well-trained staff and the rumble of traffic outside. What bliss. A quiet pause before the storm when his brother, Neil, arrived on leave for the weekend.

‘Seb, just the man I was looking for!’ Desmond Packenham strode across the room, his hand outstretched.

‘Des! Don’t tell me that the navy’s had enough of you already?’ Sebastian threw *The Times* aside with its talk of a German invasion to shake his old friend’s hand vigorously. ‘Or does it mean we’ve beaten the Boche already?’

‘Not likely. Got Jerry on the run though. I came down with Neil on the train. He told me where to find you.’ Des collapsed into the armchair opposite him. With his florid complexion and unruly fair hair, Des always looked

permanently exercised about something. Naval uniform suited Des, thought Sebastian. He had always been a scruffy dresser, even when he had been at Dartmouth, the training school where he had teamed up with Neil, a like-minded, devil-may-care cadet. Now they both had commissions on the HMS *Irresistible*. Their captain must have taken them in hand and finally instilled some discipline because Midshipman Des now looked very dapper. 'Can you do me a favour?'

'I was supposed to be meeting Neil here,' said Sebastian, experiencing a familiar inner groan. His older brother was forever landing him in scrapes and this one was approaching like a navy warship steaming into port.

Des signalled for the waiter to bring him a drink. 'He said he'll see you later. He ran into Jack Glanville and his sister at King's Cross.'

Sebastian coughed. 'Say no more. Neil's desperately in love with Jilly. Has been for years. I imagine he went off like a hound on the trail of a fox.'

'And left me high and dry.' Des's pale green eyes twinkled as he pulled two pink tickets out of his breast pocket. 'And here I am with the two best seats for the Palace of Varieties tonight.'

Sebastian raised an eyebrow. The shows at the Palace verged on the saucy as the management specialized in *tableaux vivants* of chorus girls clad in flesh-coloured body stockings, skirting just under the line of indecent. Not that he was embarrassed by seeing bare skin: the Slade concentrated on drawing skills and he spent many hours

observing the unclad forms of life models, male and female, pencil in hand. But still, it was all a bit vulgar. 'You require company for your excursion? I would've thought you'd only have eyes for the stage.'

Des took out a slim gold case and lit a cigarette. 'There's this girl.'

'Ah.'

Des leaned back, a dreamy smile on his face. 'She's a Venus, Seb.'

'Of course she is. All the fairies and fluff girls at the Palace are goddesses or they wouldn't have a job.'

'But she's different. New. Fresh. Amusing.'

'Then go ask this paragon to dinner.' Seb looked at his watch. 'Your leave will be over before you know it. No time to waste.'

Des puffed on his cigarette. 'I know.' He leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees, ready to share a confidence. 'But she has a sister.'

Seb feared he knew where this was heading. 'Really?'

'A sweet little thing – not so little actually. On the plumper side. Not a traditional looker – I have to be frank with you.'

'And why should I be interested?'

'Flora won't leave her on her own. Some family trouble; the girl is very timid so won't travel back after the show alone.'

'This ugly sister is part of the chorus then?' That made no sense.

'Lord, no!' Des chuckled. 'No, she's some kind of

dresser to the chorus in the evening. Training as something or other during the day. Forget what.’ His cigarette sketched a vague circle like a priest’s blessing. ‘Teacher, nurse or something. It’s a few months since I last saw them. The pair live in some ghastly digs in Canning Town. Or was it Forest Gate? Can’t remember. The point is they stick with each other for protection. One won’t go out without the other after dark.’ Des subsided, not quite making port with his remarks. Did he realize, Sebastian wondered, that he had developed the habit of chopping up his conversation into short sentences like a telegraph operator? Too much time working signals perhaps?

‘What’s this to do with me?’ Sebastian cast about for a plausible reason to wriggle out of the request that was about to be made.

‘Would you be a brick and keep the sister company while I escort the Venus to supper after the show?’

‘Des –’

‘I’ll be eternally in your debt.’ He grinned, showing a tiny chip in his front tooth, given him on the cricket pitch years ago. ‘I think she might be the one, you know.’

Every girl Des fell for was ‘the one’ according to him. Sebastian doubted very much that a chorus girl would make the finish line, not if Des’s stockbroking father had anything to say about it. He’d be after a young lady with a private fortune from the Home Counties for his son. ‘Do I have to, Des?’

The expression in Des’s eyes took on a steely glint. ‘I’ll

let you borrow my motorbike while I'm at sea. I know you've always lusted after it.'

'By George, you must be serious if you're willing to let me near your pride and joy.' Sebastian made a quick calculation: an evening of small talk in exchange for weekends of freedom roaring round the countryside. Surely he need not be shy of charming a girl unused to attention; his own social ineptitude with the opposite sex might not be noticed by such an undemanding audience. 'All right, I'll be your second.'

Des stubbed out his cigarette. 'Good man. We'd better hurry. I wouldn't want to miss Flora's first entrance.'

Helen fastened the last hook and eye on Flora's costume and patted her sister on the back. 'You're ready.'

Flora turned, surveying her appearance in the mirror, pursing her lips critically. She looked like a calla lily, shapely and slim in her pale, skin-tight costume, long blonde wig covering her golden curls. Tonight's theme was the recruitment drive: Britannia surrounded by Valkyrie maidens encouraging the boys to go off to war – in other words, scantily clad Viking girls wearing strategically draped furs and carrying toy weapons. Helen considered the whole parade to be in very bad taste, but knew better than to offer her opinion to Flora. Her sister was still in love with the idea of performing before an adoring public and had few demands when it came to artistic standards. It wasn't Shakespeare, that much was certain.

‘Do you think he’ll be here tonight?’ Flora leaned towards the mirror to apply a fresh coat of red lipstick.

‘He’, of course, was Desmond Pakenham, the young naval officer who had been showering her sister with lovelorn letters. Flora had fallen for the idea of being the girlfriend of a noble suitor in one of the services and even quite fancied the chap himself, as far as Helen could judge. ‘I’m sure he’ll be here if he can.’

‘Sandy dear, could you do something with this dratted feather for me?’ Toots Bailey called from the other side of the dressing room.

All the chorus called Helen ‘Sandy’, having picked up the nickname from her sister. Helen didn’t mind: it made them feel like family. She waved that she was coming, picked up her sewing kit and hurried over to deal with the last-minute costume emergency. A couple of stitches and the headdress was saved from disaster. Toots, a vibrant brunette, kissed her cheek. ‘Thank you, sweetie. Oops, now I’ve smudged you.’ She delved in her beaded clutch bag to find a handkerchief, but there wasn’t time. The stage manager was already calling for the chorus.

Helen ushered her out. ‘Don’t worry, Toots, I’ll sort it out while you’re onstage.’

The dressing room emptied as rapidly as suds from a bath, a swirl of peach-toned girls in sequins and feathers spinning away for their opening positions.

Helen took a deep breath and sat down on her sister’s chair. She liked the dressing room at these moments. A sense of life happening close by, but not sweeping her

away. She could find her feet, centre her spinning self like a child wobbling on shaky legs in the school playground after a vigorous attempt to get dizzy. For weeks now she had felt she was lurching from one shock to another.

Picking up after her untidy sister, Helen cleared a space on Flora's eighteen inches of shared dressing table, tucking the spare hairgrips into the Chinese box Lord Gordonstone had sent the older girl, tigers growling on the tail of the one in front. She then inspected the lipstick smear, rubbing it away with a smidge of cold cream. Her fingers lingered on her cheek for a moment. Her complexion had cleared up over the summer. She could date that happy fact from the moment Flora had finally packed their bags and marched them both to the station to find their fortune in London, like a latter-day Dick Whittington, as Flora had optimistically put it.

I suppose that made me the cat. Helen smiled and smoothed her hair back with a feline flick.

Their departure had happened the morning after their father had given Helen a black eye. Flora had refused to be witness to any more abuse and anyway, she had told Helen, snapping shut her suitcase, she had always planned to leave for the big city so now was as good a time as any to put that plan into action. Being away from the threats and fists of her father had worked wonders for Helen's well-being. Though they were as poor as church mice, at least she didn't have abuse raining down on her at unpredictable intervals. She owed her sister for so much.

The music began outside, the gust of audience applause

beating against the door, a storm heard from under the covers. Helen sniffed at the bottles of perfume on the table, finding she liked Toots's light lavender scent more than Flora's heavy French concoction (another gift – Helen forgot from whom). She dabbed the smallest amount behind her ear, knowing Toots wouldn't begrudge her the luxury. As Helen had only just turned sixteen, all the chorus girls treated her like a little sister that needed mothering. They'd plucked her brows into a more pleasing shape, advised her on her clothes and even dressed her hair – not that they could do anything about the fact that she just did not have their sparkle. It was a tough test for an ordinary-looking girl to be dresser to a gaggle of the most gorgeous women in London. The only thing she had to match theirs was her generous figure which made her seem older than she was – an asset that had enabled her to get herself a place on nurse training without a blink at her claim to be eighteen.

Seized by a sudden impulse, Helen ran her fingers down the row of costumes and grabbed a feather boa from the costume basket. She draped it over her shoulders, adjusting it to hang just so. Mincing before the mirror, she did a little shimmy as she'd seen the girls do. It didn't work in her practical high-necked gown. She just looked a fool.

A door banged behind her. Mortified to be caught prancing about, Helen dropped the prop and spun round, expecting a sniggering stagehand. What she saw was much worse. A large man with dark hair slicked ruthlessly

in place blocked the door. He was wearing his old evening suit, spats polished to a high gloss, the middle-class man's attempt at appearing well-to-do. He said nothing, just fixed her with his vicious hunting-dog glare.

Helen found her voice. 'Dad!'

'Surprised to see me, Helen?'

She could feel herself shaking in her shoes – until now, she hadn't known that this could be a literal description of the effects of fear. 'How . . . how did you find us?'

Harvey Sandford invaded the room and looked around with puzzlement at the gaudy trappings, the silks and satins of a lady's boudoir. Did he know that his golden girl was onstage at that moment wearing not very much at all? He'd be livid if he found that out. 'Flora wrote to your mother to tell her how you were managing. Didn't want to worry her, she said.'

'Oh, I see.' Helen had thought they had agreed to withhold their address from their mother, but it seemed Flora had forgotten that Geerta never kept anything from her spouse, or conveniently overlooked the fact, which would be more in character. Their mother was from the strict school where wives obeyed their husbands no matter what.

'Where's your sister?'

Helen could tell from the way he avoided meeting her gaze as he prowled that he was trying his utmost to keep his temper in check. He had to be furious with her for depriving him of his favourite daughter, but this was not the privacy of their home where there was no one to

remark on his violence. Just beyond the door were witnesses aplenty. 'She . . . she's singing. There's a recruitment drive tonight.' There, he should approve of that.

He smiled briefly, teeth showing. 'That's my girl. I knew she would fall on her feet. Talent like hers won't let her down. Even when she defied me by leaving home, I admired her spirit. She's a true Sandford.'

Helen dared to let go of a little of her fear. He seemed mollified by news of Flora's success; perhaps this visit could pass off peacefully. 'Yes, she's very . . . um . . . popular.' Helen did a quick calculation as to how long they had before the chorus would sweep back in wearing their scanty costumes. 'But this is a shared dressing room, Dad, they'll be along for a change any moment now, the girls, I mean. Men aren't allowed. You'll have to see her after the show.'

Harvey Sandford nodded, the female unmentionables scattered on every surface a better defence of their territory than any number of barricades. 'I've got a seat in the gallery. Just wanted to check you were both here.'

'Yes, yes, we're here.' He was going to watch? This was a disaster.

Then he lobbed his grenade on his way to the door. 'Flora may be old enough to leave home without my permission, but you forget, Helen, you are still under my authority. You'd better get used to the idea of coming back to Haverhill tomorrow.'

'But . . . but I've a place training as a nurse. I can't just leave.'

Harvey Sandford snorted. ‘You, a nurse? God save your patients. Anyway, your mother wants you. She’s had a fall and needs some help around the house. You can nurse her.’

A fall or had been knocked down? It wouldn’t be the first time. But Helen wouldn’t put herself back in that house just to give him another target for his fists, even to help her mother. She knew how that would end – her running away again, but with no Flora to aid her. ‘But Flora needs me too, Dad.’

He frowned. ‘We’ll talk about it later. Tell Flora I’ll meet her at the stage door after the show.’ He and half of Flora’s admirers, but he wasn’t to know that. Saints alive, this was a Titanic of an evening heading full speed towards the iceberg.

‘Yes, yes, I will.’ She’d have to warn Flora, stop her appearing in the second half. Perhaps they could leave early, say Flora had been taken ill?

Hand on the doorknob, he paused. ‘You’re looking well, Helen. I see that you’ve grown up a bit. Flora was right to let you spread your wings a little.’

Of course it would be Flora’s doing, not hers. ‘We’ll see you later then?’ Why was her voice always so weak around him? ‘Bye, Dad.’

Harvey Sandford closed the door behind him.

Still trembling, Helen backed up against the wall and wrapped her arms round her waist, imagining she was folding her wings like the hawkmoth dropping from the path of a predator. This was not fair, so not fair! She could

not go back with him – would not. Once upon a time, she had hoped her father had depths of compassion she would eventually access, some place where a meeting of minds might be possible, but the years had disappointed her. He had no hidden depths. He lived a life where only he could be king; he was cock of the walk, top dog. Flora would have to persuade him she needed Helen in London. Yes, he would listen to her.

But not if he was incensed at Flora's unsuitable occupation. He mustn't see her. Helen's head spun with the horrible dilemma.

The rapid fire of heels on the stairs warned her that the chorus was stampeding back for their costume change. Helen stood frozen to the spot. This was too awful.

Flora glided in, discarding her fur tunic with a practised hand. 'Helen, he's here!'

She closed her eyes. 'I know. He called by while you were onstage.'

'Don't be silly. I saw him sitting in the stalls. We exchanged one of those glances – the *significant* sort. He'll ask me out tonight, I'm sure of it.' Flora placed her wig on a peg by Helen's head, the strands brushing her in passing, then ran her fingers through her own hair to fluff it up. 'Where's my Grecian robe, Helen? Weren't you altering the hem for me?'

Yes, from short to barely there. Helen shook herself and took it off the hanger. 'Flora, Dad's here.'

Her sister paused in brushing her hair, face leached of colour. 'You saw Dad?'

‘He knows you’re performing. You told Mum where to find us.’ Helen clenched the white fabric in her fist, wishing she could scream her complaints at her sister, but she owed Flora too much and could not be so brattish.

Flora’s hand shook as she replaced the brush on the table. ‘I wrote in German and I told her not to tell him. You can’t blame me.’

This wasn’t an argument worth pursuing right now. ‘He has a ticket for the show. He’ll be watching the next song. Please, you can’t go on.’

Flora tugged the robe out of Helen’s grip. ‘Don’t be a fool. I have to work or we won’t make enough for the rent. I’m not ashamed of what I do. Dad will just have to lump it.’

Helen was aware they had only a minute to settle this and she had so much to say. ‘He’s come to fetch me. Says Mum is ill again and needs me.’

‘Damn the man: can’t he keep his fists under control?’ Flora shook open her powder compact and took the shine of perspiration off her nose. ‘Well, he’s not having you back, you needn’t worry about that.’

‘But legally he’s my guardian.’

Flora dropped the compact back in her cosmetic box. ‘Sod the law, Sandy. I’ll make such a fuss, he’ll creep back to Haverhill with his tail between his legs.’ She patted Helen’s cheek. ‘Don’t worry. That man has no power over us any longer.’

Flora flounced out, leaving her area in its usual mess. Helen forced herself to pick up and lay out the next

costume as if nothing unusual was happening onstage. Would their father hang on in the gallery until the last song or would he storm back in here as soon as he realized what kind of performer Flora had become? Well, there was something Helen could do about that. Slipping out of the dressing room, she passed word to the doorman that Flora Sandford wanted no more visitors, friends or family, backstage that night.

The Somme, 1 July 1916, 5.15 a.m.

Sebastian checked his kit for the last time before emerging from the dugout that he had shared with Captain Williams. He did not have much with him as they had been ordered to leave all spare belongings and private correspondence behind in anticipation of marching to the front yesterday morning. He had dumped everything but his notebook from which he refused to be parted and he certainly did not want it to survive if he went down in the attack. Better it perish with him than be sent to his family and cause them distress. There were too many personal thoughts inside. Pruned of the stuff of his private life, his pack was weighed down with rations and water, his belt heavy with ammunition and grenades.

A real little soldier, he thought wryly, picking up his Lee-Enfield rifle. He preferred this to his revolver as it did not mark him out as an officer to sharp-eyed German snipers, unlike the sidearm. Both sides targeted senior officers. A thread of remembered music drifted through his mind, passing across it like one of the swifts swooping above the Somme on the hunt for flies, the carnage below

none of its business. *Now your country calls you to play your part in war.* The tune returned, refusing to give up its hold, trilling as it snagged another line out of his memory. *We don't want to lose you, but we think you ought to go.*

Sebastian crackled with impatience. *Yes, thank you, brain, you can shut up now.* He had thought that, when facing extreme danger, his mind could have come up with something loftier than a foolish musical-hall song, but no, he would have to face death with a tuppenny ditty meandering through his head. Had other war heroes had this lowering experience? Had Nelson really been thinking of his breakfast, or a sea shanty, or the itch he couldn't reach on his back when he had died expecting every man to do his duty?

Not that I'm putting myself in the same bracket as Nelson, Sebastian quickly amended. *God, just listen to me – or don't, please. I need to get my head straight or that bullet will find me before I even get halfway to the German lines. Inadequate to the task doesn't even begin to describe it.*

Sebastian pushed the sacking aside and blinked in the half-light, dazed like a bear coming out of hibernation. In a moment the sun would rise, sending its beams streaming horizontally across the fields.

'Stand-to!' came the order from Captain Williams. All the men lined up at their positions, weapons ready. It was a ritual observed at dusk and dawn and could last for an hour or more. Sebastian was conscious that every soldier, from the Swiss border to the sea, stood to attention at this time, like some vast religious ceremony, their nerves

strained, eyes and ears bent on the enemy. It marked the beginning of the new day – one that would be murderous and hellish but unavoidable. He inspected his own little contingent, finding no fault in their preparations. Guns were clean even if the men were not.

At last the order to ‘stand down’ came – a brief pause before the hour allotted for their big push forward; time enough for a quick breakfast. The sun sat full on the horizon. One thing was bloody obvious: attacking eastwards, they would be blind in their assault while the Germans would have them spotlighted. Had the commanders thought of that? Daylight raids were always carnage.

No sooner had he framed the question than the first British smoke bomb exploded in no man’s land.

‘Ready the smoke candles!’ shouted Captain Williams, already up and patrolling the stretch of trench under his command.

Yes, they had. They were trying to hide their manoeuvres behind man-made clouds.

Private Cook, a cheeky bugger of a cockney, was manning the lookout on the fire step, a notch cut into the turf higher up the trench wall. He turned and grinned down at Sebastian. Filling in for Sebastian’s missing servant, they had become quite close over the last few days. Cook wore the dust and grime like a coalman in his element. ‘Morning, sir. ’Ad your beauty sleep then?’

‘Morning, Cook. Yes, I slept like a baby.’ Sebastian took his place with the men at his post, nodding to Bentley, Norton and Whitworth.

‘Like a newborn, I bet, what with that barrage poppin’ awake all night. Awake every two minutes like me.’

‘Effing guns,’ murmured Norton, a taciturn farmer’s boy from Sussex who rarely dropped more than two words at a time like a precision seed drill in the furrow of conversation.

‘My missus swears our latest keeps ’er up all night, squawlin’ and squeakin’. Says I’m lucky to be out of it.’

Thick billows of smoke mimicking a London fog rolled across the barren landscape.

‘Gawd, will you look at that: a lovely pea-souper. Now I feel right at ’ome.’

‘Glad someone’s happy.’ Sebastian adjusted his pack. ‘How’s Fritz this morning?’

‘Quiet. I reckon our guns have done for ’im.’

Private Bentley, a lanky recruit from Coventry, had formed a tight bond with Cook from their first deployment, behaving at times like a music-hall double act; he now snorted with derision. ‘Not a chance, Cookie. He’s just waiting for us to go for our stroll.’

In a lull between explosions, a burst of birdsong – more a screech really – took them by surprise.

‘Look at that bugger,’ marvelled Cook as the swift swooped low overhead. ‘Would’ve thought he’d pick somewhere else to fly this mornin’.’

‘I think he’s hightailing it out of here.’ Whitworth, a quiet seventeen-year-old from Shrewsbury, shaded his eyes, watching the bird’s progress. ‘What is it? A swallow?’

‘A swift,’ said Sebastian.

‘Nah, it’s a swallow.’ Private Cook rubbed his chin. ‘I ’eard they don’t ’ave legs, on account of ’em not ever landin’.’

Sebastian and Bentley exchanged a look. Both decided life was too short to take on the stubborn cockney’s misapprehension of the facts. They let it go.

‘What, never?’ asked Whitworth. ‘Not to sleep even . . . or mate?’ He blushed, causing the other men to hoot. They all rather enjoyed his bashful nature and took every opportunity to tease him for it.

‘No, son, they don’t even stop to –’

‘So how *do* they lay their eggs?’ Whitworth asked hastily, interrupting Cook’s gleeful and colourful response. He had quickly learnt not to flinch when a Tommy launched into the foulest language.

‘Well, now, there you’ve got me. ’Ow do you think they manage it, sir?’ Cook turned to Sebastian, doubtless hoping to scare up a blush from him too.

‘With great difficulty,’ offered Sebastian, prompting the chorus of laughter he had aimed for.

‘Blimey, if I get out of this alive, I want to see that.’ Cook wiped his eyes. ‘A swallow dropping an egg like a bleedin’ bomb, aiming for a soft landin’.’

‘Everything all right there, lieutenant?’ Williams asked, hearing the hilarity from the other end of the trench.

Sebastian stood up from his slouch. ‘Yes, sir.’

‘That’s right, lads, keep up your spirits. Let’s not let the Germans think we’re afraid.’

‘Yes, sir!’ the men barked in reply.

But they were all afraid, Sebastian knew. They would be fools not to be.

Helen woke up with a start. Something was wrong.

Light slanted through the chink in the curtain spotlighting the chair with her uniform draped on the back. It was far too early to get up – she must have snatched only an hour’s rest – yet her body was primed for action like an arrow fitted to a bowstring.

It was all right, she told herself. The courtyard was quiet. Casualties had not yet begun arriving.

So why was she so tense?

Sitting up, she reached for her tiger box and took out the worn photograph of Sebastian in his lieutenant’s uniform and caressed the edge. The chances were that he was on rotation behind the lines; she persuaded herself he would be safe. The events of the day would be someone else’s problem – at least that was what she prayed.

It was unfair but sometimes all she could do was hope the bullet went past Sebastian, the shell fell a hundred yards away, the gas cloud blew in the other direction.

Did that make her a horrible person?

She stared up at the ceiling for a long time.

The Palace Theatre, London, 23 October 1914

Sitting bathed in the half-light spilling from the stage, Sebastian was frankly a bit annoyed by the performance.

Pretty spectacles though they were, these patriotic pageants made no secret of their desire to manipulate young men into signing up for the great fight before it was all over.

*'We watched you playing cricket and every kind of game,
At football, golf and polo you men have made your name.'*

It was hard to concentrate on the shallowness of the words when trilled by attractive girls wearing very little. The English Roses, as they were called, floated across the stage like a flock of exotic birds.

*'But now your country calls you to play your part in war,
And no matter what befalls you
We shall love you all the more.'*

Sebastian folded his programme into a fan. *Well, that's very good of you. So when I come back missing a leg, or don't come back at all, you will sigh more deeply over my photo? What a steaming pile of tosh.*

Des elbowed Sebastian in the ribs. "There she is again – the one in the white dress. Isn't she a peach?"

Sebastian murmured something suitable in reply, but he found it hard to distinguish Des's Flora from the dozen or so beautiful blondes and brunettes striking artistic poses on the stage while the soprano belted out the lyrics. Flora's smile was just as false, perhaps even more strained than those of the girls around her.

Then finally, thank the Lord, it was over.

At the end of the encore, the soprano interrupted the applause with a modest wave, dismissing it as if the performers were not worthy.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, we have a number of our brave boys on leave in the audience tonight. In recognition of their courage, I am sure you will all want to join with me in a special round of applause – for it is their bravery that we wish to salute this evening. Stand up, the army boys!’ She gave a delighted wriggle that did interesting things to her sequined bodice as a scattering of men got to their feet. ‘Not to forget our lads in the navy – hoist your sails, seamen!’ Des and a few others in the stalls rose out of their seats to a robust cheer. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the flower of England’s youth!’

Sebastian joined in the tumultuous clapping that followed. Despite his blush, Des was lapping up every moment of this adulation. Good for him. Yet it made Sebastian feel guilty to do nothing but applaud. He realized the evening was all staged to make him uncomfortable, but perhaps he should give a thought to joining up. Could he continue to let Neil and Des defend Britain when he was doing no more than fiddling about with paints and canvas? That wasn’t real men’s work, was it?

The applause died down, the servicemen took their seats with much sheepish shrugging and slaps on the back from neighbours and the soprano made her final announcement. ‘If any of you boys sitting there have been moved to do your duty, then go to the officers wait-

ing for you in the foyer. Sign up quickly as it might all be over by Christmas before you've had a chance to prove your worth. You can find the officers under the Union Jack by the saloon bar.'

Should he? Teetering on the edge, Sebastian suddenly remembered how he had felt during a particularly fervent sermon given in Eton Chapel by a past pupil who had become a missionary. He had sat transfixed in his pew, wondering if really he should cast aside art and dedicate his life to the natives of Nyasaland, before coming to his senses. God had not been telling him to do something so beyond his capabilities – it had been his own imagination whipped up by well-chosen, evocative words. And how could he tell anyone else about God when his own grasp of the deity was distinctly feeble? Instead, he had decided never to take a decision when under the sway of someone with powerful charisma, recognizing that he would be in no condition to judge if what was being peddled was snake oil or the elixir of life. Being a missionary – or a soldier – could be the right thing, but not if the decision was taken because certain keys had been pressed like on one of those typewriting machines. He suspected that in most cases the letters typed on the sheet of paper would spell out 'gullible fool'.

True to form, Des had not noticed Sebastian's private moment of crisis as his thoughts were on getting to that stage door first. As soon as the curtains closed and the house lights went up, he was running for the exit like a horse out of the gate on Derby Day.

‘Come on, old chap, *broom-broom!*’ he called over his shoulder.

Sebastian took that to mean that he should both hurry and remember the reward that awaited him. He sighed and excused his way past the line of people slowly filing out, catching up with Des as they made it first out of the doors. It was very dark outside. The tops of street-lamp globes had been painted black to confuse German airships, leaving only a little feeble light to spill down on to the pavement. He thought he might lose Des in the gloom, almost as bad as a fog, but his friend had waited for him.

‘It’s just round here,’ Des said, walking what was evidently for him a well-worn path to the stage door. They were not quite the first to get there though: a rough-looking fellow was arguing with the doorman.

‘Flora Sandford. I tell you she’ll want to see me!’ the man bellowed.

‘Miss Flora ain’t receivin’ no visitors inside tonight,’ the man said pertly. ‘You’d best wait for ’er out ’ere, sir.’

‘But you let me in earlier, you cretin!’

‘Orders ’ave changed.’ The doorman cracked his knuckles, sizing up his opposition in case it came to violence. ‘She won’t be long. Just ’old your ’orses.’

Des made a sound of disgust. ‘Lord, Seb: he’s old enough to be her father. Poor Flora, having to fight off the attentions of people like that.’

A small crowd began to gather, Des’s early start proving false the adage about the bird and the worm. A whole flock of them were pecking about, trying to catch a

chorus girl or two for the evening. The angry man was pushing and shoving them out of his way, growling at anyone who dared to encroach on his position at the front.

‘Who do you think you are, sir?’ said one young gentleman, prodding the older man in the ribs with his cane. ‘I have an appointment within.’

‘If I’m not allowed in, then no one else is! No one goes near my Flora.’

‘She’s not yours,’ sneered the toff.

‘Yes, she is!’ Spit sprayed from his lips, driving the gentleman back more effectively than the shoving. Sebastian feared the older man was on the verge of apoplexy: his neck and face were scarlet. ‘She’s my daughter, you filth!’

Well, that put a damper on the crowd as nothing else could. It seemed fine to lust after the fantasy girls on the stage, but not in the presence of their very prosaic fathers.

‘Somehow I don’t think she’ll be pleased to find out he’s outside, do you, Seb?’ murmured Des.

‘I’d say that was a sure bet.’ Sebastian wondered if that meant he would not have to go through with this ridiculous double dinner outing. He was sorry if the girl had family problems, but really it would release him from an unpleasant duty.

Des must have learnt something about thinking on his feet in naval battle training for he had already come up with an alternative plan. ‘Come on, Seb, back to the theatre.’ Retracing their steps, they re-entered the foyer.

A cluster of men was still gathered round the recruiting tables, the bar doing good post-performance business as so many toasted ‘Devil take the Boche!’

Des tapped an usher on the shoulder. ‘Take a message backstage for me, old chap?’ A shilling appeared, pressed into the man’s palm.

‘Of course, anything to oblige the navy.’ The usher tapped his cap.

‘Tell Miss Flora Sandford that Desmond Pakenham has a solution to her problem at the back door. I’ll wait for her here.’ The messenger hurried off.

Sebastian raised a querying eyebrow. ‘Solution?’

‘Whisk her out the front of course.’

‘Ah. That’s positively Machiavellian of you. Why hasn’t the First Sea Lord put you on his staff already?’

Des smiled, but he was too worried that he would miss his chance with Flora to reply in kind. They did not have to wait long. Two girls accompanied the usher to the foyer, both muffled in coats with the collars turned up, doing their best to disguise themselves. Flora ran to Des with a little squeak of relief when she saw him.

‘Oh, Des, it is too, too awful. Our father’s come to drag poor Helen back home. He won’t give us a moment’s peace and I do so need her.’

The Helen in question hung back, looking away as her sister clung to the naval officer’s arm.

‘I know you need her, Rosebud. Don’t worry your pretty little head about it.’ Des tapped her nose. ‘He’s out

the back. We can jump into a cab and be away before he suspects.'

She gave a little moue of disappointment. 'But that doesn't solve anything, darling. What am I to do about Helen?'

'We can talk about that later. Let's take this step by step, eh? Rome wasn't built in a day and all that.'

'Oh, Des, I'm so glad you're here.' Flora's bright blue eyes flooded with an attractive sheen of tears. Sebastian did not like it – talk about pushing the right buttons. For genuine emotion, he preferred the quiet sister's pale cheeks and drawn expression. She was not as plump as Des had led him to expect; in fact, she looked rather thin in the face, her eyes dark and shuttered by long lashes. The rest of her under the coat was anyone's guess. Not a beauty by modern standards, she looked . . . well, interesting, in a Mona Lisa way. He felt less reluctant to spend an evening trying to work out what was going on behind that closed expression.

'Des, if you are planning to put your escape plan in action, then you'd better look sharp,' Sebastian reminded Des. 'The young ladies' father will probably work out that they are not going to walk right into his arms and might think to try the front like you did.'

Tearing himself from Flora's worshipful gaze, Des signalled the same usher who had already earned himself a shilling. He held up a second. 'Find us a cab, will you?'

The man darted outside and practically threw himself

in the path of the first black cab to circle Cambridge Circus.

‘There’s our lifeboat, ladies. Follow me.’ Des swaggered out of the theatre, thoroughly enjoying his chance to rescue his lady love. Not quite a white charger – and he had the annoying details of her sister and Sebastian in tow – but very nearly the perfect evening for his knightly instinct.

Sebastian stood at Des’s shoulder as he offered his hand to assist the girls into the cab. The usher had summoned one of the petrol versions rather than a horse-drawn hackney; it had a wide seat at the rear, the driver up front behind a glass partition. Sebastian thought again of the father waiting at the stage door. ‘What now?’ he asked in a low voice. ‘You’ve only put off the problem, not solved it.’

‘Putting off the unpleasant to do something very pleasurable makes a lot of sense to a man on forty-eight hours’ leave,’ Des said blithely. ‘Where to? The Cavendish?’

Sebastian shrugged. ‘This is your party.’

But the party would have to wait, for Mr Sandford appeared at the corner. ‘Stop!’ The two girls ducked down and buried their heads in the seat. ‘Flora! Flora Sandford! Come back here!’

‘Quick, man!’ Des barked the address at the driver, then jumped in the cab, Sebastian on his coat-tails.

‘Flora!’ shouted her father, running after the moving vehicle. ‘It’s me – it’s your dad!’

But the motor car was already heading down Shaftesbury Avenue and Mr Sandford had to give up his pursuit.

‘That’s that, eh? Safe and sound, sweetheart, as I promised.’ Des helped Flora to a seat, squashing up his body against the far door. This left Sebastian the tiny space next to the other sister. Apologizing, he manoeuvred himself into the gap. She said nothing, staring at her hands linked tightly in her lap. A working girl’s fingers – nails short, skin slightly reddened from frequent immersion in water – the exact opposite of his mother’s which had probably never seen a wash tub and harsh soap, the manicure always perfect.

‘So I understand, Miss Sandford, that you have a training position?’ Sebastian purposely ignored the very obvious subject of the angry father, hoping to help her calm down with talk of ordinary matters.

Big chocolate-brown eyes darted to his face like some wary wild creature. She glanced behind, fearing to see another cab in pursuit. There was no sign of one.

‘You’re safe now. He won’t have followed us.’

She turned her attention back to him. ‘What was your question, sir?’

‘You have a training position.’

‘Yes, I do. How did you know?’

‘Des told me. Nursing or teaching, he thought.’

‘Nursing. Queen Charlotte’s Hospital, Marylebone.’

The conversation flagged when she gave no more information. Sebastian tried to ignore the warmth radiating through his trousers where their thighs were touching.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said suddenly, ‘but who are you?’

Sebastian re-ran the conversation since they arrived in

the foyer and realized that, in the flurry of the escape, Des had neglected to introduce him. 'I beg your pardon, Miss Sandford. I'm Sebastian Trewby, a friend of Des's, as you no doubt guessed.'

'Are you in the navy too?'

'No, nothing like that. I'm in training, but as an artist.'

Her eyes widened as if he had declared himself the Sultan of Zanzibar. 'Gracious! I don't think I've ever met a real artist before.'

He smiled. 'I meet rather too many of them so I think you're lucky. I'm at the Slade, a college for us aspiring Rembrandts and Constables. Do you like art, Miss Sandford?'

But the little flash of interest from her had been bottled up again, like a genie afraid to emerge from the lamp. 'Doesn't everyone, Mr Trewby?' She looked past him out of the window, the faint glow of the streetlights flickering across her face like the end of a newsreel.

'No, actually, they don't. My brother Neil thinks the only good painter is one with a bucket of whitewash.'

'Oh.' Her lips formed a perfect little circle lifting at the corners. There, he had summoned up another smile.

'And my mother doesn't understand why I can't confine myself to gentle landscapes and still life, the sort of thing she did as a girl in the schoolroom. I tell her that that isn't art; that is passing the time with watercolours. We have fearful arguments on the subject.'

'Fearful?' She wrinkled her nose at that. Sebastian wondered what she would consider 'fearful'.

‘Yes, the usual thing.’ He imagined the Trewby rows as a series of caricatures. ‘Father burying his head in his soup, brothers deserting the table – or going under the table if we reach the throwing-bread-rolls stage – servants taking sides and laying bets on who is going to come out on top.’

‘And who does?’

‘It’s always a stalemate. You see, we are as pig-headed as each other: an immovable object meeting an unstoppable force.’

‘Which are you?’

‘Sorry?’

‘Object or force?’

‘My mother is definitely the object. Definitely.’ He grinned. This was an oddly frank discussion to be having with someone he had only met a few moments ago, but he was enjoying himself.

‘Sounds lovely.’ She nestled down in her coat, only the tip of her nose and eyes now visible.

He chuckled. ‘You wouldn’t think that if you had dinner with us.’