

A Picnic at Port Meadow

Tuesday, 10th September, 1912

"I always say that September is the best month to be in England, don't you agree?"

Stanley Walker caught the remark and considered it. It seemed to have been directed at him, but the slender woman who had spoken was stepping out of a motor car with friends and, by the time he had turned around, her attention had moved on.

"Happy birthday, dear Jimmikin! This is for you!"

"Not ... Cristal?"

"What else?"

"Oh, Theda, you shouldn't have!"

"Oh, but I did!"

Walker watched from some remove as a welter of guests developed around Jimmy Barrington and his sister. Walker knew little about women, but this one was eye-catching, expensively-dressed in cream satin with a broad hat and dainty shoes. She wore a striking gold sautoir, designed to draw attention to her neckline. Her voice had a velvety quality that was hard to ignore, and she certainly knew how to signal her arrival. She embraced Jimmy theatrically, and handed over what looked like a large bottle wrapped up in paper and tied with a pink silk bow. He took it with his right hand, and she made a point of touching the knot that secured the black silk sling cradling Jimmy's arm.

"Look at you, poor lamb!"

Jimmy recoiled, a stranger to self-pity. "Toodles threw me, but I soon got up again."

"Toodles! Anyone would think it was a horse instead of a horrid motor car."

"Toodles is not horrid, she's a perfect lady, and the fault is all mine. I hope you brought along a silver bucket for that bottle. Anything else would be heresy."

"You can cool it in the river, for all I care."

"Theda, you're a barbarian!"

Walker's view was obscured, but he had seen enough for the moment. There was a marked family likeness that ran through the Barringtons — thick, dark hair, brown eyes and strong features, as well as vivacity and irresistible charm. She must be Theodosia, Walker thought, the younger of Jimmy's sisters. There were five brothers and two sisters in all, a testament to Sir Edmund's ambition to sire five sons. Four had come in speedy succession. Jimmy, as was his nature, had made them all wait.

So there, it seemed, was the infamous Theda, a slim vision in cream, but barbarian or no, she was right about September. It was a beautiful day, sunny and breezeless, with the warmth of an unusually hot summer baked into the ground. The ancient grass of Port Meadow had yellowed and now stretched away a couple of miles to the sweet, hazy city of Oxford with her dreaming spires. Here the banks of Wolvercote mill-stream were becoming crowded. A couple of dozen university men, most of them Jimmy's fellow St. John's undergrads or Eton school-pals who had come up to Oxford in the same year. More Barringtons were arriving by

the minute, and others whom, Walker was fairly sure, represented the cream of London Society.

He wandered along the row of nine cars that had now drawn up, several bearing the badge of the Royal Automobile Club. What Jimmy had said would be a small impromptu picnic had developed into a full-blown family circus, and attended now by numbers of Barrington servants. They were busy setting up tables and carrying hampers and deck-chairs and Indian carpets from two furniture lorries parked on the Godstow Road. Crates of bottles were carried out, a mountain of prepared food appeared and a Victrola began to play, the latter attended by a portly servant in Barrington livery and white gloves.

Such a casual deployment of wealth was quite overwhelming to one unused to elevated society. Here were people who had the power to make those not of their intimate circle feel the pain of sheepish inferiority. Walker decided therefore to listen rather than speak. He reflected that his father, Arthur, as owner of a bicycle shop, earned a respectable £250 a year. It was three times what a police constable might take home, but there was no way to gauge how fast a Barrington might run through that sum. Judging by this afternoon's display it might be a matter of minutes.

Much as he enjoyed Jimmy Barrington's company, an enormous gulf did lie between them. Walker himself was a scholarship boy from the industrial North. If he had failed to win his grammar school's prize he could not have attended university, let alone entered a prestigious college. Fortunately, he had a mathematical bent and was attuned to hard work. It had taken a retentive mind and an immense amount of effort to get here, but his Oxford was not Jimmy's Oxford. He had not been invited to become a member of any of the smart student sets, nor could he have accepted if he had. Jimmy had suggested he join the university's Officer Training Corps, and he had done so, mainly because it afforded inexpensive excitement. The OTC, Jimmy had said, was subsidised by a government concerned about maintaining an officer reserve but opposed to the continental practice of compulsory national service.

Jimmy was certainly no snob, but the gulf between them was not just a matter of slender means, there was a palpable separation of cultures too. Because the Walkers were not born to opulence, Stanley Walker had grown up a scrimper and a saver like his parents. Even if he made millions one day, as Mr Morris said he might, such lavish fruits could never be enjoyed guiltlessly — by his children or grand-children perhaps. But never by him.

Walker sipped his wine, consoling himself that, on the other hand, there was nothing very blue about Barrington blood either. Sir Edmund was certainly the wealthiest man in the British Empire, but his wealth was not founded on the ownership of land. Rather it came from the charging of interest. The bank which was to become Barrington & Co. had originally been created in 1672 by a goldsmith called Jeremiah Esmond, who had set up business in the Strand under the sign of a smiling golden sun. There was today a branch not two miles away in the High, trading under the same famous "gilty smile."

"The British aristocracy always professes to look down on what they like to call 'new money,'" Walker's father had once told him. "But it knows better than to exclude newcomers. Instead, they absorb them."

That explained Jimmy's father's title — Sir Edmund was Lord Horsley, and he behaved in all respects as if his ancestors had come over with William the Conqueror. But if there was

both wealth and class standing between Stanley Walker and Jimmy Barrington, there was nature too. Jimmy was quick-minded, unfettered, bold. Walker was anything but devil-may-care. Painfully aware of his own methodical mind and his social diffidence, he saw himself as a tongue-tied plodder. He had wondered more than once how he had managed to be taken up by one of Edmund Barrington's accomplished sons.

To most people the answer was obvious. What Stanley Walker lacked in social effervescence he made up for in knowledge of mechanical matters: the car that had disgorged Theda and her friends he had instantly identified as a Roi des Belges tourer by Messers Rolls and Royce, a 40/50 H.P. beast with coachwork by Hooper & Co. Wonderful! He suppressed the desire to investigate more closely, knowing that to engage the chauffeur in conversation was probably not the done thing.

"And you are?"

He turned, lifted the brim of his straw boater. "I ... I'm Stanley. Stanley Walker. How do you do?"

"We used to have a butler named Stanley. He's dead now, poor fellow."

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that."

"Don't be. I'm Theda, by the way." The velvet tones were husky, her enunciation as precise as that of an Oscar Wilde character. "You're one of Jimmy's student friends, aren't you?"

"That's right."

"Mods? Greats?"

"I'm afraid reading Classics wasn't for me. Engineering."

"Good grief!" She wrinkled her nose. "Can you study that at Oxford?"

"Well, yes. Under Professor Jenkin. It's a fairly new department, but —"

She looked at him with a candidly appraising eye. "Engineering. Yes, I suppose it's quite the coming thing."

"I hope so." An uncomfortable silence began to unfold, so he said, "I was just admiring your motor car. It's a Silver Ghost, isn't it?"

"Silver? No, it's dark blue. That one over there."

"What ... what I meant was —"

"You know, Stanley — may I call you Stanley? — poor Jimmy's obsessed with speed. He always liked to race about. I gather his shoulder's black and blue."

"I shouldn't be surprised."

"If you count yourself his friend you mustn't encourage him. Personally, I can't think of anything more boring than being flung out of a machine and killed."

"I think being flung out and killed is more of a by-product of racing, rather than the main aim."

But she had already turned her back on him, her attention caught by some new arrival, and then she was gone.

A glass of Chablis was immediately thrust into Walker's hand.

"I say, Stanley. You must have some of the Cristal, but only when it's cold enough." It was Jimmy. "Louis Roederer. Theda gave it to me — she knows it's my favourite — though I can't think where she could have found a bottle, unless from some Russian prince. There are

probably dozens of them here to watch the autumn manoeuvres. Actually, I think Constantine Benckendorff is around somewhere. He's the son of their ambassador. You must meet him."

"How's the arm today?"

"It'll be right as rain next week. Too late for the army manoeuvres, alas."

"I thought you said this was supposed to be a small picnic."

"Oh, that's down to Hugh, I'm afraid. Took it upon himself to fix things properly — me being the incapable runt of the litter. He wanted us all to descend on Sisley Park, but I told him that the mountain must come to Mahomet. Still, quite a gathering of the old clan, eh? They're all turning up, except Moz and Guy, of course."

Walker nodded, knowing that Hugh was one of Jimmy's older brothers, and a Member of Parliament. There was also Guy, an artist who lived abroad somewhere and was, from what little was said of him, something of a black sheep. Moz — Mozelle — was his married elder sister who had married a foreign aristocrat who was much older than her. She also lived abroad. Sisley Park, Walker surmised, was yet another of the Barrington country house estates.

"Have you met Saul Graham? He's terribly amusing."

"I don't think so."

"What? You haven't met him, or you don't think he's amusing?" Jimmy grinned. "He's the tall chap over there in the boating blazer. His people are from Boston, and he wants to be a diplomat. He's on a scholarship — some endowment or another set up by old Natty Rothschild after Cecil Rhodes died, so I expect you'll have plenty in common."

The American was in his late twenties and seemed immensely mature. He was a keen rower and a postgraduate student of modern history. He talked seamlessly about Harvard and the Charles River and his impressions of England in which he had now been resident for a year. Walker quickly confirmed what he had suspected from the first: that they had hardly anything in common. Having parked the two outsiders with one another, Jimmy had set off in pursuit of his birthday host's duties, and Walker monitored him from afar, admiring his easy manner and complete lack of self-consciousness.

"He's quite a fellow, isn't he?" Graham said, following his gaze.

"Yes. If he doesn't get himself killed. Or if he does I suppose I shall get the blame."

"If his father lets him keep that Sunbeam I'd rate his chances at no more than fifty-fifty."

"Can I ask you something?" Walker said, anxious to change the subject.

"Sure."

"What on earth is 'Louis Roederer?'"

"Champagne. I gather Theda brought him a magnum of Cristal."

"It sounds expensive."

"Hardly. The entire stock belongs to the Tsar. You can't buy the stuff on the open market. Do you want to know the story behind it?"

"Go on."

"Most champagnes come in green bottles, but not Cristal. The present Tsar's grandfather commissioned Monsieur Roederer to create the finest champagne and deliver it in bottles made of lead crystal glass so he could have the immense pleasure of seeing the bubbles rising."

"How decadent."

"That's autocracy for you." Graham lowered his voice. "But the real reason was so that nobody could hide a bomb in one of his bottles and blow the son of a bitch to kingdom come."

Walker smiled, suddenly liking the man. "To be fair, I suppose our current noble ally has to be more careful than most when it comes to being bumped off."

"You bet. Russia is bubbling with revolution. And, you know what? I reckon Tsar Nicholas will start a war with Germany if things get any worse for him."

"Do you really believe that? Over what?"

"Any pretext that comes to hand. If you'd had the chance to put a couple of million starving peasants into your army instead of letting them run around fomenting revolution, wouldn't you do that?"

"I don't know. I was never a Tsar."

"Sure, you would. Only there's a problem: the Russians have an alliance with France, so if the Russians start a war with Germany, it'll bring the French in. France has been frantic to retake her lost provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, so they won't hold back. And since Britain has the entente with France, you'll be drawn in too."

"No ... I don't believe that." The idea seemed far-fetched. What right-thinking statesman would let such a thing happen? "What reason do we have to want a fight with Germany?"

Graham shrugged. "You might want to sink their navy."

"We don't need to. We're out-building them."

"For the moment, yes, but your Liberal government has other ideas. Prime Minister Asquith wants to spend money on pensions for old people and lunches for schoolchildren and a dozen other worthwhile reforms. As for Germany, she's getting stronger every year. She wants a fleet as big as yours and an overseas empire of her own — one just like yours. She feels hemmed in by hostile powers. Can you blame her for wanting what other Powers have already?"

"Is that really how the Germans see us?"

"On the idle hill of summer, sleepy with the flow of streams," Graham quoted. "Far I hear the steady drummer drumming like a noise in dreams." He reached out to touch the sleeve of a thick-set man of about forty, another American. "Hello, H.C., isn't Lou with you?"

H.C. nodded, caught Walker's eye amiably. "Sure. She won't let me go anywhere without her."

As the American ambled away, Graham said. "He's a mining engineer — Australia and China. A good friend of Leo's, as well he might be: he's made Barrington's — and himself — a very great deal of money. He agrees with me about Germany. After all, without an empire of their own how are they going to get hold of the raw materials their industry needs?"

Walker wanted to push the sound of far away war drumming aside, but he could hardly maintain that he had not heard it too. He looked across the gathering, surprised to see now several faces made famous by the illustrated magazines, the writer H.G. Wells, the sculptor Epstein and the celebrated barrister Raymond Asquith among them. All were now turning their faces skyward.

Twenty yards away the thin strains of "Alexander's Ragtime Band" had tailed off, and in that

momentary quiet, the sound of a distant engine was droning. He took off his boater and shielded his eyes. There it was!

A flying machine ...

"Extraordinary, isn't it?" Walker muttered, as he watched the fragile object slowly battling forward. He had read in the papers a few weeks ago that a new height record had been set by a machine climbing to over ten thousand feet.

"Don't you wish you were up there?" Graham asked. "What a god-like view they must have."

He shook his head. "You'd never get me up in one of those things. I get a pain in my vitals whenever I stand at the top of a flight of stairs. I'm not even happy being this tall."

"I guess it must be flying to the Army manoeuvres at Cambridge."

"That guess would be perfectly correct."

The remark had come from a passing third party, a man in his late thirties with Barrington features, pomaded hair plastered flat and a clipped moustache. He carried a stick and a bowler in his left hand, and though he wore no uniform, his stiff collars and general bearing seemed to Walker to be that of a man who was accustomed to military discipline.

They introduced one another and shook hands. The newcomer turned out to be Jimmy's eldest brother, Charles. Walker realized that his presence here probably explained that of Raymond Asquith's, who happened to be the prime minister's eldest son. Jimmy had once let slip the fact that Charles was a frequent guest at the Asquith's house at Sutton Courtnay. Walker felt a frisson of revelation as he briefly glimpsed the web of invisible strands that held the nation together. It was rather like being able to look into an engine and see the inner workings.

"Mark my words," Charles said, "that little damsel-fly will revolutionize how the next war will be fought."

"The next war," Graham repeated. "You see. It's not just me who believes it's inevitable."

"When has war ever been anything else?" Charles grunted. "Walker — ah, yes. I hear you're the chap who's been trying to get Jimmy killed."

Walker grinned. "Jimmy drives like a maniac without any help from me. I just tinker with his engine from time to time, and try to knock all the dents out."

Graham sipped at his wine. "Jimmy said you spent the whole summer vac right here, working in a garage in Longwall Street."

"Yes. Mr Morris is assembling his cars there. I've been trying not to get in his way too much."

"How are they powered?" Charles asked suddenly.

Walker was surprised. He had hardly expected a technical question. "Four-cylinder side-valve engines, just over a litre capacity. Sixteen horsepower. He buys them in from White and Poppe in Coventry."

"So ... not big enough to power a flying machine?"

"Not really. I saw Mr. Bleriot's machine when it was on display in Selfridges department store. That engine was twenty-five horsepower, as I recall. But current machines have engines that develop twice that power."

Charles put a finger to his lips thoughtfully. "Is your Mr Morris looking to expand his business?"

Walker scratched his head. "Well, yes. I'm sure he'd welcome backers if that's what you're suggesting."

Charles gave a bridge player's non-committal smile.

Even so, Walker's enthusiasm dropped into gear. "Mr. Morris has got plenty of ideas and bags of get-up-and-go. He wants to build a factory out at Cowley on the site of the old military college. I think eventually he plans to compete with Henry Ford — at least in British Empire markets."

Charles straightened. "I'm not connected in any way with Barrington's Bank, you understand, but I may just mention your Mr. Morris to some of my friends."

When Jimmy's parents arrived, Walker was listening to Saul Graham's notions about Realpolitik and eating excellent game pie from crockery emblazoned with the Barrington arms. He put his plate down and joined everyone else in the welcome. Sir Edmund, tweedy and bewhiskered, waved his stick. Lady Flora looked on, her expression as imperious as that of Queen Mary. It was, Walker supposed, clearly a marriage of equals.

"More a merger of interests than a marriage," Graham muttered.

"They look as though they were made for one another." Still, Walker thought, they've managed seven children. Lord knows how.

Saul Graham seemed to have made a detailed study of it. Forty years ago, the Barrington marriage had eclipsed the Marquis of Bute's reign as Britain's richest man. Lady Flora had brought with her a considerable dowry, coming as she did from a family that still controlled much of the sea-borne trade of India and the East. The financial Panic of 1890 had forced Barrington's to change from a limited company to a partnership, as a partnership the Barrington family would have been personally liable for all deposits in a crisis. Fortunately, the Panic had not resulted in a crisis for Barrington's, whose exposure to South American debt had been slight. So it was that in the last year of the old century, the bank was able to move into magnificent new premises in the Strand, a building designed by Charles Holding and decorated with nudes by Jacob Epstein. Last year, Sir Edmund had taken over Lorimer, Barnes & Co., thereby gaining another seat at the London clearing house.

Wider still and wider, Walker thought as he finished his third glass. He realized that he was beginning to get a little squiffy and cautioned himself. It would not do to get drunk. He wished he could pluck up courage to introduce himself to Mr Wells, whose novel of Martian invasion had so thrilled him as a schoolboy. But the opportunity seemed to have passed. Birthday speeches were now the order of the day — good-natured words of praise and a humorous caution from Sir Edmund, a ripple of applause, a well-received toast and a joke about Jimmy's lack of consideration, having had the bad manners to be born in the middle of the grouse season.

Lady Flora, who seemed to have a calculating side to her, spoke of the greater inconvenience she had been put to in the autumn of 1893: "My husband and I had been spending the summer with the Astors, and we were aboard the Royal Mail Ship *Campania*. She was steaming down New York Harbor when James, out of sheer impatience, decided to

make his debut. If he had managed to stay put for just five days longer, he would have been born a Liverpoolian."

Everyone laughed, and perhaps embarrassed by mention of the liner, a very well-known figure, Lady Cunard, received several curious glances. To see such celebrated socialites in the flesh was a new experience for Walker. A meaningful look from Jimmy to Hugh, perhaps concerning Lady Cunard, was lost on Walker, though he did recall that one of the Astor family had died six months ago in the Titanic disaster.

Perhaps fortunately, Lady Flora had stopped speaking, and Sir Edmund was thanking Hugh for having organized the gathering. The wherewithal had come from his house at Sisley Park, which was close by at Burford. Hugh, the third-born son, was the image of a country nobleman, a typical huntsman, who, of all the sons present, most resembled his father physically, except that he had the complexion of a man who loved the open air. Also standing next to his father was Leo, the second-born son, stouter and less handsome than the others. He listened to the patriarch's words with solemn but distracted interest.

Graham pointed him out. "Jimmy is truly honoured. Leo hardly sets foot outside Belgravia, unless it's to visit his club in St James's. He's the numbers man. A natural-born genius for figures, so they say. He's being groomed for great things."

"The succession?"

"If you mean the chairmanship of the board, certainly. Sir Edmund knows he won't live forever. He's lucky to have Leo. You know, within the family, they call him 'Mycroft.'"

Walker smiled, recognizing the reference to Sherlock Holmes' brother. "And Charles? He said earlier that he had no connection with Barrington's Bank."

"What about that?"

"Well, it just seems odd. After all, he's the first-born."

Graham looked at him for a moment, then said, "If you want to know about Charles, you'll have to ask Jimmy. My lips are sealed."

Walker raised an eyebrow and enquired no more, but as he let his gaze run along the guests, he could not fail to notice that Charles Barrington was now absent from their immediate number. Perhaps he had taken himself off altogether.

As the warmth of the afternoon waned and the willow trees threw shadows across the mill-stream, the gathering began to dissolve. Walker sat down among the scattering of empty deck-chairs. The better-known faces had already disappeared. Family motor-cars crunched over the gravel and began to meander back through Wolvercote village, until the only members of the Barrington family who remained were Jimmy and Theda. Informality was now the motif, and a steady trickle of wine helped to push the conviviality. Walker was lounging with Graham and a couple of St John's men, discussing the world, while Bullivant, Jimmy's attentive valet, periodically refilled glasses.

Bullivant's broad beaming face and yeoman presence seemed benign to Walker, feudal loyalty personified. Walker saw him note the re-appearance of Charles and go to him with inquiries. When Charles sat down in conversation with friends, Jimmy and Theda pulled over chairs and settled down too, attracted by the debate. Somebody had broached the subject that no one wanted to talk about.

"Who says they won't?" One of the St John's men was asking. "German society is wholly militarized. They'll do what their generals tell them."

"Don't forget that France also has half a million men under arms," the other said.

"And they need every man jack of them with six or seven German armies sitting on their frontier."

"What about Russia?" Constantine Benckendorff said. "Thirty-six cavalry divisions, one hundred and fourteen divisions of infantry. Two and a half million soldiers. Would the Kaiser dare to turn his back on them?"

Theda said, "Among father's friends there are few who feel there's any possibility that Germany will back away from the next crisis."

Graham sat back and laced his fingers behind his head. "In May, the Reichstag voted through a new military spending bill, enough for three new dreadnoughts and an increase in army numbers to over 650,000 men. The essential problem is that Germany is a country of sixty-five millions, whereas there are only forty million Frenchmen. There are already whisperings that French conscription will be raised from two to three years. Should it come to war, the Germans will be able to field four million troops. France will be lucky to manage half that figure."

"How do you know all this?" Theda asked.

"Saul's been dining with us in Lowndes Square while you were in Nice," Jimmy told her. "He's keen to have Charles introduce him to one of his friends in the U.S. State Department. He must have kept his ears open when Winston came to dinner last month."

"Indeed I did."

"It seems obvious to me," Theda said, "that even the most intelligent person has little chance of thinking worthwhile thoughts if he's not in possession of salient facts."

"I agree. But what I've heard from men who do know was far from comforting."

Theda looked to Walker and murmured. "Winston's First Lord of the Admiralty. He may well be along later."

"Thank you. I have actually heard of Winston Churchill."

"I'm so sorry, but it's hard to tell with engineers."

Walker hated to be patronized, but at the same time any remark received from Theda Barrington felt like manna from heaven. He said, "Well, I'm not an engineer yet."

A glint was in Graham's eye as he persisted. "All I'm saying is that if the Kaiser wants to engineer an attack on France, he'll have to think about France's allies too. France's big ally is Russia with potentially five million soldiers, although the quality of their leadership is probably debateable."

"And that brings us to Britain," Jimmy said.

"Yes. Not much of an army, I'm afraid. A tenth the size of either Germany's or France's. But then, you're an island. You've learned to depend solely on your navy for protection."

After a pause that seemed as if it would end the conversation, Walker asked, "Do you really think Britain would go to war to defend France? What use would we be if we did?"

Graham laughed. "It does seem a ludicrous idea, I grant you. But things have changed somewhat since you caught Napoleon by the toe and sent him to live out his days on a rock in the middle of the South Atlantic. If only you could persuade the Emperor of Germany to do likewise."

Jimmy sipped at his glass, and as Charles went to stand behind his chair, Theda said, "Why don't we ask Charles what he thinks? After all, he's the expert."

All eyes turned to Charles.

"Every new war brings new weapons," he said. "And every new weapon requires new tactics. No one knows how the coming war is going to turn out because no one knows how it will have to be fought."

Walker watched Bullivant carve open the last of a dozen scones, lay a doily carefully on a plate and bring out a pot of strawberry jam.

Charles went on, "I'll offer you just one example. You all saw that flying machine that came over earlier. Eight machines will be taking part in the army manoeuvres — General Haig opposing General Grierson across the Gog Magog Hills. I want you to try to imagine how hard it's going to be for either of them to keep his troop movements secret."

"Impossible, I would think," Graham said. "And the U.S. army agrees."

Jimmy asked. "Do you have military aeroplanes in America yet?"

"Sure we do." Graham lay back. "Things have advanced a lot since that hop among the dunes at Kittyhawk."

Charles nodded. "And we expect them to advance a lot further. It may have escaped your attention, Mr. Graham, but we're no longer an island. We stopped being that three years ago."

The conversation reached an impasse, then Graham said suddenly, "What you think about the Germans, Mr Bullivant?"

Walker wondered if Graham was doing it deliberately, asking a servant's opinion to make some kind of point, but Jimmy's grin showed that Barrington attitudes were often a challenge to the usual protocol.

"Germans?" Bullivant said, unperturbed. "Wicked bastards, the lot of them, sir. If you'll excuse my French."

"And what brings you to that unhappy conclusion?" Graham pressed.

"Because they're shaping up for another piece of infamy, Mr Graham. Any fool can see that."

"Oh, is that right?"

"Yes, sir." Bullivant's eyes flickered from Graham to Jimmy, seeking permission to go on. "Well, sir, them Prussians are pushing the other, more peaceable Germans along, just like they done last time."

"Last time? Why don't you enlighten us about that Mr Bullivant."

"Yes," Jimmy said. "Remind us what happened, Bully."

Bullivant knew very well that Graham was trying to sport with him, but he was undeterred. "Last time the Germans made short work of the French army, then they surrounded Paris to starve them out. Then they squeezed the French government for a big bag of gold and gobbled up a couple of their eastern counties to boot. Blow me, if that didn't leave the Germans with a rare old taste for invading. Next time they'll be after getting a hold on Channel ports, homes for their dreadnoughts, all the better to starve us out, I daresay. So that's why I call them wicked bastards, sir."

Graham looked the servant in the eye and said softly. "I'll have you know, Bullivant, that my mother was born in Hamburg."

"Begging your pardon, sir. I didn't know that, and I'm sure she's a very nice lady, but that don't alter my opinion of the Kaiser's generals."

"Bully, I think we'll have some apple pie now," Jimmy said quietly and Bullivant took himself away. "I hope you'll forgive him, Saul, he does get his information mainly from the Daily Graphic."

"I can't complain." Graham said, making light of it. "I did ask for his opinion, and to his credit he gave me a straight answer."

"But, you know, there's a great deal of truth behind what Bully says," Charles said levelly. "A single Germany, forcibly united under Prussian leadership — a great vision if you're German, but it was hardly going to benefit the rest of Europe. And so it has proved. Bismarck warred with Denmark then Austria then France, in the later case most profitably. Bully's 'big bag of gold' was, I suppose, the war reparations imposed by the Treaty of Frankfurt. That ran, if memory serves, to five billion francs. And that staggering sum was to be paid over three years, or German troops would not leave French soil. Both Alsace and Lorraine were indeed, 'gobbled up.' And let us not forget that Bismarck's Realpolitik has become today's increasingly dangerous Weltpolitik. More champagne, anyone?"

As the conversation dissolved into small-talk, Walker watched a speck growing beyond Charles Barrington's head. It rose higher and higher into the sky like some insect repelled by the oil of his pomade. But this was no insect, it was the day's second aeroplane. As Walker's eyes followed it, it banked then levelled out.

"Look! There's another one!" someone said, pointing.

"Extraordinary!"

"Goodness! I believe it's trying to come back down to earth."

All eyes turned to watch the machine as it began an awkward descent. There were two men aboard seated in tandem, pilot and observer, their flying helmets clearly visible. The number 263 was painted in black on the white tail. It was hard to judge, but the machine had already descended to perhaps three or four hundred feet. It looked for a moment as if the pilot contemplated a landing on Port Meadow, and Walker looked to Jimmy, suspecting that some kind of stunt had been planned to add even more glamour to his birthday picnic.

But as the machine cruised over them there was a sudden, alarming change of direction. Its angle of descent steepened. The flight seemed all at once ominous, as if there was something not quite right about the control. The sick movement riveted them all. And then, as everyone watched, at perhaps two hundred feet above the ground, something tore away from the right wing and it collapsed upward.

There were immediate gasps.

"Oh, no!" Theda whispered.

Walker felt a stiletto enter his heart. It was horrible to watch, but impossible to turn away from. The machine was plummeting now, falling vertically toward a point a couple of hundred yards away to the north. Then one of the occupants separated from the machine and began to tumble through the air towards the trees. Both man and machine vanished. The witnesses heard a brief soughing of foliage and a dull percussion that Walker felt through the soles of his shoes.

He found himself running like a hare towards the road. His boater flew off but he paid it no heed. Some of the other guests were following. Ahead there was a low wooden fence and

he vaulted it. On the far side of the road a grey stone wall ran towards the mill-stream bridge. It was breast-high and he climbed over it easily and jumped down into the stinging nettles beyond. The wall enclosed a copse, and Walker groped forward through the trees, penetrating the undergrowth toward the place where it seemed the machine had hit.

Lord! He thought. What do I do if they're dead? What do I do if they're still alive?

Others behind him were jumping the wall and fanning out with varying degrees of success. He hacked his way onward through the greenery for perhaps fifty more yards until he began to smell burned castor oil. That was familiar enough, and conclusive — castor oil was what lubricated engines.

"Over here!" he shouted, his breath ragged now.

He pushed his way through brambles and interlaced boughs, the sharp tang of bruised vegetation sharp in his nostrils, drawn onward by a strange pool of light.

When he saw the wreckage he froze. Foliage had been shredded from several trees and was strewn around. Dappled sunshine filtered down through the hole that had been ripped in the leaf canopy, and in the middle was a heap of torn fabric, wooden struts, broken metal tubes. There was no longer any shape to it. It looked more like a tent that had been pulled down by a gale, except that here was a white board with the number 263 lying at an angle beside it, a crushed wicker-work seat and a large metal mass, half buried, still smoking and leaking hot oil.

And then he saw the observer.

Stanley Walker had never seen a dead man before. The sight of the white face, the crimson smears, the limbs positioned at repellent angles — all was profoundly shocking to him. He cried out, and a physical frisson ran through his flesh at the sound.

The shriek was quite involuntary, but it had the effect of drawing the others towards him. They too stood still, not daring to step closer. It was as if they were in the grip of an ancient animal instinct. He heard Jimmy say, "Oh, Jesus Christ!" Then Charles Barrington arrived and broke the spell. He began to pull the corpse from the wreck, motioning others to help.

"Give me a hand here, gentlemen."

And as the others went grimly forward, so did Stanley Walker.