

CHAPTER SIX

Celia Beytagh returned to School reluctantly and low in spirit.

When she received no letter in the days immediately following, hope and the bright memory of him gradually receded. Later, she learned that her mother had received a friendly bread-and-butter note, although that was little consolation.

In her calmer, more rational moments, the absurdity of their relationship was all too clear. How could she, a not-too-attractive schoolteacher of almost 37, hope to capture the affections of a youth of 22 or thereabouts? More than that, one who was a national hero, constantly in the public eye, and who was the recipient of scores of letters - fan-mail - from admirers the length and breadth of the country? Including girls of his own age, no doubt, plus those others in the Air Force. She had never met any but she knew of them, the WAAF officers and airwomen who manned the Operations Rooms and lived on the same fighter stations, some of them in the same officers' messes, all of them sharing his way of life if not all of its dangers. How could she compete with them? - for competition it most certainly was.

The more she thought about it, the more depressed she became. Her enthusiasm for pretty well everything wilted, so much so that her friends and immediate colleagues noted her moods and raised their eyebrows knowingly behind her back. Jennifer Draper said little but, opportunism outweighing irritation, plied her with small attentions, even to the extent of placing flowers in her bedroom and buying her a succession of small, seemingly thoughtful gifts. Through their thick lenses, her grey eyes observed what was, to her certain knowledge, the slow disintegration of her house-mate's morale. Her time would come, of that she was in no doubt at all.

Meanwhile, Christmas came and went with merely a card from him - one with a picture of an aircraft on the centre-page - addressed both to her parents and herself. It contained no personal message, nothing other than the simplest of seasonal good wishes.

Then January, the weather cold, wet, and depressing. The days passed, monotonously grey and empty, until the commencement of the new term loomed.

She returned to the 'Tommy B.' on the tenth of the month and, with sharp pangs of remembrance, crossed the Great Hall on her arrival. Feeling his eyes upon her as she walked to the Common-room, she tried hard not to raise her eyes, and nearly succeeded. But, not quite! With a flutter in her heart she looked up at him again. The same quiet, downward gaze. The curve of his mouth. The eyes, as always. The portrait, silent yet vibrantly alive, as though he were trying to communicate - tell her something. Instead of which -

Then, on the Wednesday of the third week his long-awaited letter arrived, being delivered to her Worsley address.

She picked it up from the mat behind the door, having arrived home a little earlier than usual. Excitement rising within her like milk on the boil, she nevertheless sighed with relief; what a blessing that Jenny had not been with her to see it!

Surreptitiously, almost, she slipped it into her pocket and hurried up to her bedroom. There, seated on her bed and without bothering to remove her hat or coat, she read it. Breathlessly. Eager. Her eyes skimming along the lines.

It was not very long.

'Dear Celia, (it ran)

I purposely delayed writing until I had definite news of my future. But, first, thank you for a wonderful week-end. Next to Lancashire, I think Yorkshire is the very bestest county! I wrote to your parents, needless to say. I had a medical last week and I'm happy to learn that I am now A1G1, which is the Air Force way of saying that I'm fit for anything. Also - and gather yourself! - I'm to be given command of one of the most famous fighter squadrons in the RAF, with just about the best record in the last war and this - for security reasons, I can't tell you which one precisely. My appointment takes effect from 12th February, at which time I shall be promoted to Squadron Leader - acting, of course, which isn't quite so grand. But please don't tell anyone about this until it happens.

Meanwhile, I have to do another mill-touring stint in Lancashire, only five days this time, but more than enough! Which brings me to the point. I shall be in the Blackburn area the last few days of this month and the beginning of next. So, if you are in a receiving mood, I shall drop in on you at your Worsley digs (I'm not sure that 'digs' is a sufficiently grand description for your very superior living accommodation), in the early evening of Friday, 5th February. I've wangled sufficient petrol to come by car so I shan't need meeting or anything like that. Also, I've arranged to stay at the Cock Hotel. No more until we meet. Expect me when you see me!

Yours aye,

Tom.'

Painfully aware that his letter had caused a turmoil of unrest in her middle regions, the first thoughts that came to her fevered mind were: where might the boy wish to stay? how was she to entertain him? and, not least of all, the weekend of 5th February was that on which both she and Jenny would normally be away visiting their family homes. She could change her own plans, of course, but what about Jenny? Which surely meant that she would need to keep absolutely quiet about his letter, not breathe a word about his intended visit, and, horror upon horror, not even hint about him possibly staying overnight in their shared abode. Oh Lord! The possible problems growing in her mind like a cancer, with a hand to her throat and galvanised into pacing agitatedly around her

bedroom, she considered the possible repercussions if Jenny should choose not to go away that weekend, or that she should find out.

The following morning, which was Saturday and a non-school day, Celia arose early having spent a restless night thinking about the letter and the potential problems it could raise. Sitting alone at the breakfast table, her mind unsettled, she toyed with a cold piece of toast and its inevitable smear of wartime margarine. The weather clear and fine, even the bright warming sun did little to help.

Hearing Jenny's footsteps on the stairs, she braced herself for what might become a touchy encounter and put on her most expressionless, deadpan face; her colleague, she knew from experience, was a past master at worming things out of her so, on no account must she be talked into revealing her secret!

Offering the briefest of 'Good mornings' in Celia's general direction, Jenny poured herself a cup of tea before quietly seating herself in a chair opposite her companion. Then eyeing her colleague speculatively whilst sipping the now only lukewarm brew, she observed cheerlessly: 'You look as though someone is standing on your foot! What's the matter?'

Celia attempted an off-hand shrug. 'Nothing especially. Just an early morning misery.' Then, with a ghost of a smile, 'A spot of exercise in the sun and a good lunch will probably help.'

Jenny acknowledged this remark with a raised eyebrow, continued to sip her tea, but did not respond.

Then after some moments, 'Your bemedalled hero has been very quiet lately. Nothing in the press. No communication with the headmaster, I understand. Have you heard anything? Do you know if he's still in the land of the living?'

Celia frowned, her voice ominously quiet. 'He's not MY bemedalled hero, Jenny. He's the hero of all of us - the school, the headmaster, everyone - including you, I hope. Why do you object to him so much? I am well aware that the war upsets you. But why take it out on him? He's just doing what he sees to be his bit - his duty. And he's doing it very well in my opinion.'

Jenny produced a glance very close to a sneer. 'Sweetie, it's not him I object to particularly, it's your attitude towards him, a kid who is young enough to be your own child. I simply regard him as a posturing, uniformed adolescent who at the moment is being idolized by silly people like you who ought to recognize that he and his mates in the RAF are nothing more than legalised killers!'

'Legalized killers!' Celia's outraged voice rose an octave. 'Jenny, what are you saying? We are at war, you silly woman, and he is a fighting airman, acting on OUR government's instructions and doing a vital, very dangerous job. You are being ridiculous and you know it; either that or you're being purposely provocative. Really! As one who purports to be a teacher, guide and example for the young, I am ashamed of you.'

But as though Celia's reprimanding words were never uttered, Jenny, now flushed and vehement, set off on another tack.

'And another thing. I'm informed, and not by you I may add, that you invited him to your home in Yorkshire some weeks ago, and had a lovey-dovey affair with him over a weekend. So off the record, in fact, that you never thought fit to mention it to me, your long-time house mate and closest friend. Which leads me to believe that something pretty disreputable took place. True, or false?'

'Jenny, for heaven's sake, what are you hinting at?' Celia's voice was shrill. 'The boy's visit to the Lancashire mills was known to you at the time as it was in all the papers, and it was then that my mother invited him to speak at one of her 'Wings for Victory' meetings to help raise funds. He was happy to oblige and spent the weekend at my home. I was only indirectly involved and merely helped to entertain him; it was nothing more sinister than that and it is wrong for you to suggest anything otherwise.'

'Your mother invited him? Or you?'

'Oh, I don't remember precisely, but who cares? He was invited and he came. And I would remind you, Jenny, that although we share this house you are not the house mistress round here and I shall meet and write to whom I like, male or female. I don't tell you now and then because, as you are usually so jealous and vindictive for no reason at all, I simply avoid discussing such matters with you and the arguments that usually follow.'

Her companion, however, was not to be persuaded and, her face now contorted into its familiar grimace of disbelief and dislike, exclaimed in a high pitched voice, 'Ah! Now the facts are beginning to emerge. You and he are obviously constantly in touch and you are probably already planning another visit.'

'Jenny, I have been planning no such thing!' Celia heard her own voice rising to screech level. 'But as you insist on being told - alright, I heard from him only yesterday that he is coming up to Blackburn about a fortnight hence to give another series of talks. Also, that he hopes to visit this area again, at which time I, the school, and even you if you so wish, will probably be able meet him again.'

'Meet him again!' Almost a cry. 'Me? I would die first!' Then, after a moment's reflection, 'But, I shall be away anyway that weekend, and so will you. But then, of course, you won't be, will you? You will arrange to be here in order to carry on your sordid little love affair. Yes, your devious little plan is becoming crystal clear, isn't it? My trusty, whiter-than-white house partner is planning another bit of nasty deception. Ten out of ten for craftiness! What a joy to behold!'

'Jenny, for God's sake!' Celia's voice was almost a scream. 'There is no love affair! He will come. I shall offer him a meal. I have no idea what his plans are, or where and if he will be staying. You are simply making mischief.'

'I'm making mischief? What a laugh! I bet a pound to a penny, you will have him staying at this house, so let me tell you this loud and clear - I don't want him poking about in my room or sleeping in my bed!' Jenny gave a derisive laugh. 'But I dare say

you and he will spend most of your time on the settee, with one of his hands mauling your tits and the other up your skirt!

Visibly shocked by this grossly obscene remark, Celia shot to her feet and shouting at the top of her voice, cried, 'Stop! Stop! you vicious, hateful woman!'

Then, on a sudden impulse, she snatched at the marmalade jar on the breakfast table and hurled it at Jenny's face.

Her companion, ducking instinctively, parried the blow inflicted by the heavy cut-glass receptacle, causing it to fly off at a tangent and smash into a glazed china cabinet immediately to her rear, the sound of shattering glass and scattering crockery, momentarily stunning both women into petrified silence.

Within moments, however, Celia, after uttering a cry of grief, fled from the room weeping and Jenny, with eyes closed, heard her feet thumping on the stairs. Still in a mild state of shock, she counted her partner's rhythmic steps - nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen - followed by the sound of a bedroom door being violently banged shut and locked. Standing amid a small heap of broken glass, she came to her senses and, breathing deeply, put her hand to her throat. 'Dear, dear God! What had she done?'

Deeply depressed and the tears edging down her face, she slowly moved aside the shards of glass at her feet and left the room before climbing quietly, step by step, up the stairs. Outside Celia's bedroom she tried unsuccessfully to turn the knob on the locked door.

'Ceelie, my love. Please open the door. I upset you I know and I'm deeply, deeply sorry. Ceelie... please speak to me?' Ceelie, darling, you know we love each other so please speak to me. You must speak to me.'

A muffled voice from within, choking with emotion 'Go away! I don't love you, so please go away.'

'Ceelie...'

This time a minor scream, 'Go away, will you? I hate you and always will do, so please go away!'

Outside the door, and still clutching the door-knob, Jenny Draper sank slowly to her knees - and sobbed bitterly.

Friday came. The first Friday in February, 1943.

Four days had elapsed since Celia Beytagh's tempestuous argument with Jenny, during which they had successfully contrived to avoid each other. At home, Celia had sought sanctuary in her own room whenever possible and Jenny had stayed out each evening, returning to mount the stairs immediately and disappear. Each had listened for the other in the morning and used the kitchen at different times. During Assembly, they had faced each other blankly across the Great Hall and in the Staff Common-

room they neither spoke nor made any sign of acknowledgement. When it did become necessary to converse, the fewest words possible passed between them. Their coolness was apparent to all but no one mentioned it - except through guarded lips.

The day following their altercation, Jenny had attempted a reconciliation, but without success. Celia had responded curtly, 'We'll sort out our future when I'm good and ready!'

And now the week-end was here, or nearly so, and Jenny had left for Lancaster, Celia assumed. She glanced at her watch. Four o'clock! She couldn't leave the school before 4.45, but that would enable her to be home by half-past five and ready, she hoped, by 6.15.

Since receiving his letter there had been no confirmation of his visit. Even so, she was sure he would come; she had even worked out a hypothetical minute-by-minute programme of his final day and had estimated that he would be with her in Worsley around seven or seven-thirty. Super! Nice time for her to prepare.

With food rationing biting hard, it needed something more than a passing interest in the culinary art to put together a decent meal. After careful consideration, she decided on fish - steamed (which was fairly straight-forward), with parsley sauce, potatoes, and two vegetables - dehydrated unfortunately. And for a sweet, there'd be a precious and long-hoarded tin of fruit salad, followed by a morsel of mousetrap - to take away the taste of all the rest!

At a quarter-to-seven she changed, made herself up carefully, (with just a trace of self-satisfaction), then arranged the table. She stood back and rubbed her hands: the blackout properly in place, the fire flickering a welcoming glow, the chairs and cushions just so, everything perfect. She glanced around, appraisingly, then quickly put a hand to her mouth. Heavens! Drinks! She flew to the sideboard cupboard and, searching, extracted two glasses and a half-empty bottle of gin. She saw that there were two bottles of beer - relics of a, earlier, almost forgotten party - but little else. No whiskey! What if he drank whiskey? Surely not! Not at his age! Or was she totally out of touch with the drinking habits of the RAF? Sherry, then. Of course! She dived into the kitchen and salvaged half a bottle of some obscure brand from beneath the sink. Cooking sherry! Would it be drinkable? She smelt it suspiciously and was not encouraged. Never mind! The worst they could get was tummy-ache - she hoped! Anyway, there was a war on, wasn't there? She grinned. Of all people to say THAT to!

At 7.30, she made up the fire again and sat with an unread book in her lap. For an age, it seemed.

But, she couldn't read. She poked the fire again then switched on the wireless. Tommy Handley in ITMA - or was it a recording? - with that ridiculous charwoman parrotting, 'Can I do yer now, Sir?' Really! The mentality of studio audiences laughing at that sort of stuff. Where on earth WAS that boy? The meal wouldn't be worth eating if he delayed much longer. She went out to turn off the potatoes. Oh, LORD! They were almost ruined already.

Eight o'clock! She opened her book for the third time but did not get beyond the first page. Then nine o'clock! What an earth had happened to him? On impulse, she ran upstairs and re-read his letter for the umpteenth time. No, there was no mistake. She sank down slowly onto her bed. Could he have had an accident? Surely not! Fellows with his sort of life-style didn't run into things on the ground! She sighed. Not again! Not another London fiasco!

Returning slowly to the kitchen, she lifted the pan lids. Burnt offerings; the stuff was hardly worth eating. She was near to tears. Why oh why hadn't he come? It just wasn't fair. Suddenly the house seemed empty, very quiet, and very still.

She switched off the kitchen light and walked slowly into the sitting-room. The fire was low, grey ash almost. Was it worth making up again? She consulted her watch. Twenty-past nine. Well, she'd wait until nine-thirty, then - ! Oh heck! Resist them as she tried, tears began to well to the surface.

It was a minute or so before half-past nine when the telephone rang.

She hurried into the hall, her heart thumping, and picked up the receiver.

'Hello?'

'Celia? Tom! Tom Fitzgerald! I've just arrived. Hello? Are you still there?'

'Yes, I'm still here.' Her most resigned voice.

'Good. I thought for a moment we'd been cut off. Sorry I'm so late but I've just arrived at the Cock.'

A sudden premonition. 'The Cock! I see.'

'I had a heck of a job finding my way about in the dark. Believe me, if the Huns ever invaded England, with all the signposts removed, they'd never know where the hell they were. Look, I don't think I'll come round to you tonight. Would you mind very much? I feel like a piece of chewed string and more than anything else, I'm in need of a warm bed and a good night's kip.'

'So, could I suggest that we meet tomorrow morning? Does this make sense?'

Utterly crushed, she tried to keep dismay out of her voice.

'Whatever you say.'

'All right, then. Let's say ten o'clock tomorrow morning, should we? Are you well, by the way?'

'Well?' She gave a weary little laugh. 'Yes...'

'You're not sure!'

'Yes, I'm sure. Pretty sure, anyway.'

‘Fine! Couldn’t have you below par, what? And I was thinking; would you like to go to a rigger match tomorrow afternoon? Swinton versus Salford. It’s the local blood match, so it’ll be worth watching.’

‘Rigger!’ She heard her voice echo the word faintly, her spirits plunging. ‘Well... If you really want to, I suppose.’

‘Good! That’s fixed, then. See you in the morning. 10 o’clock, sharp. Don’t be late, now! Goodbye, then.’

She heard the telephone click but held on to the receiver for some moments, shattered into silence. Rigger match! Dear, dear God! Of all things, rigger!

As she replaced the receiver, she sank slowly onto the seat alongside, the old spectres looming - stark memories of baying voices, the reek of fetid, beery breath, the tearing yank and snap of her underwear and the terrible, ultimate indignity. What was she doing with this boy? Where was she heading? And his, ‘Don’t be late, now!’ Late, for God’s sake, when she’d been hanging about the whole of the wretched evening! She shook her head sadly, suddenly weary and overwhelmed by disappointment.

Then, suddenly, the smell of burning.

Rising quickly with an exclamation, she rushed into the kitchen.

The fish! She snatched the smoking pan off the heat and after a moment’s hesitation, thrust it under the tap amid a cloud of steam. Oh, NO! NOW look at it! Bloody fish! She hated the damned stuff anyway! Just LOOK AT IT! Damn! Damn! Damn! Why, oh why, must it happen to her?

Still holding the pan, motionless, and with eyes closed and in despair, Celia Beytagh’s face suddenly dissolved into tears.

He arrived promptly at 10.00 am. The Bentley drew up outside with a flourish and he walked jauntily through the wrought-iron gate and up the footpath, fairly bouncing with good spirits.

She watched him approach, standing discreetly behind the curtains, and her heart melted. He was such a healthy, vigorous animal; like a colt, long-legged, his fair hair flopping in a cow-lick over his right eye.

She opened the door, smiling, and he seemed ten feet tall.

‘Th’ top o’ th’ mornin’ to yer!’ He grinned, and when she did not respond, added, ‘You’re supposed to reply: “An’ th’ rest o’ th’ day to yerself!” Hello, anyway.’

‘Hello.’ She laughed in spite of herself. His spirits were infectious. ‘You’re not in uniform, I see.’

‘Certainly not! I can’t shout insults on the terraces this afternoon dressed up like an Air Force officer, can I? By the way, I forgot to ask: you do like rigger, I take it?’

Celia put on a pained face. 'If you like rugger, I like rugger!'

'Splendid!'

He walked in, rubbing his hands, then stood with his back to the fire.

'Where's your house-chum, as you so quaintly describe her? I've been polishing up my repartee expecting to cross swords with her again.'

'Jenny? She's away in Lancaster. She goes there once a month.'

'What for? Her parents?'

'I think so, yes.' Her voice was flat and she turned away. Then, facing him again, 'Would you like a cup of something?'

He shook his head. 'I had to say push to get my breakfast down this morning.' His smile began to fade as he sensed her melancholy. 'Is there something wrong? You're giving a very good impression of someone whose foot is being trodden on.'

She returned a wan smile. 'And you're beginning to sound like my mother. She's always divining some imaginary ailment or problem. No,' - her nose lifted - 'I'm perfectly all right.'

'I'm sorry I couldn't come last night. I was b... er, not very sociable. Let me put it like that.'

She said calmly, 'You were going to say, buggered, weren't you? So say it! I shan't break.'

His smile faded entirely. 'No, I wasn't, as a matter of fact. Bushed was the word I had in mind. But yours describes exactly how I felt.'

His blue eyes were inspecting her. 'Come on, Celia Beytagh. What's wrong? Is it something I've done, or not done? Or something else entirely?'

'Nothing I want to talk about, if you don't mind.'

'It could spoil the day, you know.'

'It won't spoil the day, I'll see to that.'

'Well...?' He sounded unconvinced, 'if that's the way you want it.'

Later, they drove into Manchester and spent several hours shopping before motoring into the back streets of Swinton to watch the rugby.

As they stood on the terraces amid a growing crowd of cloth-capped, fag-smoking men and some highly vocal boys, Celia glanced around furtively, praying that not even one of her pupils would be among them.

He asked, 'Have you ever watched rugger before?'

She shrugged. 'Once or twice.'

'Well, just shout when I shout and don't, whatever you do, pick a quarrel with anyone. Otherwise I'm liable to get my nose punched.'

'I have no intention of shouting and even less of picking a quarrel.'

'Splendid!' He flashed her a pointed glance. 'I see you're here to enjoy yourself!'

As they stood, watching the ground fill up as kick-off time approached, she felt her feet slowly turning to stone. He looked over at her pinched face. 'You look cold. Are you all right?'

She nodded, not too emphatically. 'My feet and hands are like ice.'

'Never mind.' He was grinning heartlessly, 'Only another 80 minutes to go. Stick it out!'

'By then I shall be like Lot's wife - crystallized'

'Nonsense! It's all in the mind. Stamp your feet!'

'Certainly not! Anyway, I can't in these shoes.'

At that moment, the players ran out on to the field and, the game starting soon after, Fitzgerald's attention was elsewhere.

For the next 40 minutes, Celia watched the play with growing bewilderment and waning interest. From time to time, she was dragged from her numbing torpor by the cries of the multitude around her, uttered in a language she barely recognised and containing words and advice which made her cringe. Alongside but oblivious to her presence, Fitzgerald watched with rapt attention, even joining in the shouting when the home team scored or achieved some success.

By half-time, her body and mind had congealed into total immobility, but, as the second half progressed, there came the additional nagging urge to answer the call of nature. In a mounting fever of apprehension that she might disgrace herself on the spot, she remained silent and rigid with straining concentration.

After an age, it seemed, the shrill note of the final whistle sounded and she was borne along towards the stadium entrance by a garrulous, evil-smelling tide of humanity, predominantly grey-black in colour and all noisily profane.

'Did you enjoy it?' Fitzgerald was grinning down at her.

In a strangled voice she answered - 'Look, I simply must find a 'Ladies'.

'But, did you enjoy it?'

She said querulously, 'Listen, if I don't find a 'Ladies' in fifteen seconds, I warn you -' Her eyes widened. 'Stop a moment! Please? No, don't you DARE push me! Oh Lord!'

Recognising for the first time the urgency of the situation, Fitzgerald craned his neck above the crowd, then pointed. 'Over there!'

He was grinning. 'Do you want me to carry you?'

'SHUT UP, you unfeeling beast!'

Her face pinkly mortified, she crept towards the labelled door in a grimy, stone building covered in crudely picturesque graffiti. Heavens, what a place! She would catch some terrible disease, she knew. Only another twenty yards to go. Hang on! Hang on! Please, God, don't let it happen. Not here. Not in front of - The door loomed but as she clutched at the handle, she stopped with - closed eyes, horrified and scarcely daring to breathe. Down below, a warm, most unpleasant dampness indicated that nature was taking its course.

The twenty minute drive from Swinton to Worsley did something to restore her morale. In the soft leather cushions of the Bentley, with warm air from the engine caressing her feet, she sat back and watched as Fitzgerald manoeuvred the big car effortlessly among the crowds and Saturday afternoon traffic. Presently, they were bowling along the East Lancashire Road with Fitzgerald humming quietly to himself, clearly oblivious of the recent torment and embarrassment of his passenger.

From her position on his left, she covertly observed his profile through half-closed eyes. He was obviously much more relaxed in her company now, feeling it less of an obligation to amuse her with conversation. She sensed, too, that he saw her much more as a woman - a girl would have been too much to ask - and that her schoolteacher image was fast disappearing. In fact, he was becoming noticeably offhand, a development she found almost as disturbing as it was encouraging.

Even so, she sighed contentedly. After the horrors of the afternoon, she simply had to have a hot bath (with perhaps more than the patriotic five inches of water as suggested by His Majesty), after which there would be a leisurely meal, followed by a relaxing evening before the fire - tête-à-tête, of course - with a little recorded Brahms and Mozart to create the appropriate atmosphere. Mmmm! She saw it all in her mind's eye, as clear as clear, and had she been equipped to do so, she would have purred.

At the Worsley turn-off, Fitzgerald swung the car to the left and turned in her direction.

'I'll drop you off at your house and go back to clean up and change. Then, I'll call for you and we'll have a session at the Cock, should we? And, wait for it -' he rolled his eyes ' - they're showing a good flick in Eccles - 'The Werewolf of London!' A real blood-curdler! I saw it a year ago with a female cousin of mine and it took years off her life!'

Her mouth dropping, Celia returned an anguished stare. 'But... well, I'm not exactly a pub person. Look, I don't really think -'

'Nonsense! As a matter of fact, I met your colleague McPherson in the Cock last night, I quite forgot to tell you. He was in sparkling form.'

'You mean McPherson the Latin master? Our Mr. McPherson?'

‘The very same!’

‘But, I couldn’t possibly see him there!’ Her voice rose in panic. ‘He’s well, don’t you see? It would be all over the school in no time.’

He grinned. ‘Your being with me, you mean? Or our being in the pub?’

‘Well, now that you ask, both! In any case, Mr. McPherson and I are not well, not really compatible.’

Fitzgerald laughed. ‘I had no idea there were such sinister undercurrents among the staff. ‘All right then, what about a meal at the Cock and the flick afterwards? No pub, no boozing, everything totally non-alcoholic.’ His grin broadened. ‘Have you ever been pixilated, by the way?’

‘Pixilated?’

‘Pixilated! Elephant’s trunk! Drunk! Paralyzed!’

‘Certainly not! And I’ve no intention of starting at the Cock, either.’

Fitzgerald threw back his head and laughed again, his blue eyes disappearing, his teeth evenly white. Her heart fluttered. Damn the boy! Why did he always succeed in totally disarming her? Just at the point when - ! Oh, dear! She shook her head and was forced into a smile.

The meal that evening was not a success. The boy cheerfully relaxed, Celia Beytagh was on tenterhooks throughout. What if that wretched man McPherson turned up? Her constant, swift glances around had Fitzgerald smiling to himself.

‘If your mate arrives,’ he said wilfully, ‘it would be sound politics to bring him across, don’t you think?’ Celia’s fork stopped mid-way between plate and mouth. Don’t you DARE! It’s as much as I can do to get my food down just thinking about him. You’ve no idea how much I dislike that man.’

‘Why?’

‘Oh... he’s... well, he’s just a MAN!’

‘You dislike men?’

She hesitated. ‘With about two exceptions, heartily!’ Then, when she saw his faintly quizzical smile, she instantly regretted her admission. What on earth was she doing? Baring her soul again! To a boy, an ex-pupil!

As the meal progressed, however, she began to relax, some of the obvious tension in her melting away. Then, over coffee, she drew from her handbag her cigarettes and holder.

‘I know you don’t smoke so I won’t embarrass you by asking for one of yours.’

She saw his face darken. ‘You shouldn’t,’ he said bluntly. ‘It’s unladylike and it makes you pong like an ash-tray.’

Celia’s eyes widened and she swallowed before she could collect herself.

She said primly, ‘That’s not a very nice thing to say, you know.’

‘It’s true, all the same.’ The boy was relentless. ‘Smokers never seem to understand how revolting their rotten habit is to those who don’t. How everything about them reeks - their clothes, their hair, and so on.’

Cigarettes and holder were halted in their tracks as she said with as much dignity as she could muster. ‘My, we are being masterful tonight! Tell you what then, I’ll make a bargain with you.’ She glanced up at him defiantly. ‘I won’t smoke if you promise not to take me to that ghastly film.’

‘But you promised!’

‘I did no such thing. You presented your plan and I was not even asked to make a suggestion. No, fair dos. No smoking, no picture! Take it or leave it!’

Fitzgerald suddenly smiled. ‘Very well.’ He eyed her with amusement. ‘In which case, it’s your responsibility to entertain ME!’

She gave a knowing smile. ‘I have it all worked out. I intend to improve your mind, so let’s find our coats.’

‘Where are you taking me?’

‘Home.’

‘Home!’

‘What will Mr. McPherson say about that?’

‘Mr. McPherson won’t know.’

Shortly before midnight, he took his leave of her.

‘Thank you for a lovely evening.’ He proffered his hand. ‘You were right, Mozart is a cut above ‘The Werewolf of London’. I enjoyed the music. And, of course, the company.’

Celia inclined her head in acknowledgement.

‘We didn’t talk very much, did we? Which is a pity.’ She was still holding his hand.

‘What did you want to talk about?’

‘Oh, nothing in particular. But, there’s a great deal I want to know. About you. About what you do, on and off duty. About what you think. Your future and your friends.’ She smiled. ‘You don’t give much away, you know. You’re inscrutable. Young, and at the same time, old. Hard, yet soft. Thoughtful, considerate, sweet, even - when

you try! Then suddenly, tactless and rude - jolly rude! My smoking tonight, for example. Yes, you're a fascinating mixture.'

She smiled again and pushed him playfully. 'Be off with you! I shall expect you here at 9.30 tomorrow morning. I'm taking you to church.'

'Church!'

'That's right.'

'Don't you think the Lord has enough on his plate?'

'I daresay He'll measure up. I'll let Him know tonight that you're on your way. Give Him a bit of warning!'

When Fitzgerald arrived at her house a minute or so before nine-thirty on that cold but fine February morning, Celia Beytagh had never felt so proud. Unobserved, through her sitting-room curtains, she watched him walk up the short drive from the road, a tall figure in service dress and gloves, the ribbons of his DSO and DFCs, together with his wings, brightly complimenting the light blue of his uniform and the gold of his hat.

She stood at the open door to greet him, blocking his entrance but unable to speak.

He said easily, 'Wotcher! Am I early?'

Celia shook her head in silent confusion. 'You look... Oh, I'm so PROUD of you!' She moved so quickly towards him that he retreated a step in surprise.

Then, throwing her arms around his middle she pressed her face against his chest. After which, she looked up, gulping and a little flustered. 'Silly me! I mustn't put lipstick on your tunic.'

He said gently, 'Not to worry. It'll come off.'

She sniffed then rooted for a handkerchief. 'Why on earth do we cry when we're happy?'

He smiled down at her, on the verge of embarrassment. 'Are you really happy?'

She nodded, and turned away. 'You really shouldn't do this to me, you know. My defences are right down and it's all your fault. You must promise never to take advantage of me when I'm like this.'

'I promise.' He held out a hand. 'Come on! We'll walk. I don't think a Bentley parked outside Worsley Church would be quite the thing, do you?'

Her tears evaporating, she laughed. 'My thoughts exactly.'

The church was much as he remembered it, the tall spire, palely grey in the morning light, the building vast and austere magnificence.

As he crossed the threshold, he sniffed in recollection. The old scent, a mixture of candles, moth-balls and furniture polish. Inside, silence, the occasional cough echoing between the tall pillars and arches. In the distance, pin-pricks of unblinking light, thin wisps of smoke curling into the still air. More coughs. A few heads turning. A girl in a straw hat with pink ribbons, gazing at him with interest in her eyes and a half smile on her face. Did he know her? He offered a half smile in response.

They selected a pew and knelt together. The service was unremarkable. He listened with only half an ear but he found the ritual and the well-remembered prayers and responses comforting. Beside him, Celia glanced in his direction from time to time to smile, but only with her eyes. She was wearing a dark, fur hat, like a Cossack, her nose slightly pink with the cold, and he thought how attractive she looked. He noted that she did not refer to the prayer book and even sang the hymns without looking down, her lips working but no sound emerging. Then, it was all over and they were out into the bleak sunshine and on grass still damp with dew and littered with dark leaves uncollected from the late autumn. He was introduced and spoke a few words to the Vicar, then shook hands with several people who said they remembered him, gradually moving towards the church gate at the end of the shingled path. After which, with final nods and goodbyes, they both left and walked back up the road, their feet echoing in the Sunday morning silence.

‘Well, do you feel better after that?’ She was smiling in his direction.

He shrugged. ‘Why do prelates treat us as adults out of church, particularly when they’re collecting money, and as five-year-olds in church?’

‘You shouldn’t be so cynical.’ She spoke with mock severity.

‘Well, if you can give up smoking, I suppose I ought to give up cynicism. But it won’t be easy.’

Back in the house, he was standing with his back to the fire when she approached with a tumbler half-full of amber liquid. ‘Here you are.’

‘Whiskey?’

‘Special purchase. But you really shouldn’t be drinking at your age.’

‘I don’t drink, as you put it. I have an occasional whiskey because I can’t stomach beer in any quantity and I hate gin.’

‘Well, you shouldn’t!’ She smiled before turning and motioning him to a seat. ‘Now. May we talk?’

‘If you want to.’

For some moments, she twisted her handkerchief. Then, quietly, ‘Tell me, what is going to happen to you?’

‘I thought I’d already explained. I take over a squadron a week or so hence and start flying in earnest. In fact, I may do a little flying before then, just to get my hand in.’

'Where from?'

'Biggin Hill. Just south of London. To start with, anyway.'

She studied her hands for some seconds. 'Then, I take it, we shan't be seeing you up here for quite some time?'

'Probably not. Though I may get an occasional break.'

'I -' She broke off. 'You will keep in touch, won't you?'

'I don't see why not.'

Silence.

'I imagine you'll spend what time off you have with your parents.'

'I usually do. They're very spasmodic as the war doesn't stop for week-ends, private arrangements or Bank Holidays.'

'You will try, though, won't you?'

'Try what?'

'To come up here. When you can, of course.'

'I'll try.'

'Promise?'

'I don't need to promise. If I say I'll come, I'll come!'

'Well -' Feeling slightly rebuffed, she patted her knees in a gesture of finality. 'If you intend leaving mid-afternoon, I'd better get you something to eat. Soup? A sandwich? Would that do?'

'Anything.'

She disappeared into the kitchen and he heard the subdued clatter of dishes. After a time, her raised voice reached him. 'By the way, I don't think I mentioned it, but I may be moving from here in the not too distant future. Before I see you again, anyway.'

'Moving! Why is that?'

'Oh... reasons. Jenny and I have more or less agreed to go our separate ways. Which one of us stays, we haven't decided.'

'Has something happened?'

'No... not really. It's just that... oh, it's a bit complicated to explain.'

'She doesn't like me very much, does she?'

'I don't think there's anything personal in it. She's died-in-the-wool anti-war, as you know, and we have words about that from time to time. Especially since you've come on the scene.'

Fitzgerald snorted. 'Anyone would think that only she and her mates had the virtue of compassion and brotherly love. Frankly, I find them a pain in the arm.'

Celia came in carrying a tray. 'I do love your euphemisms. Pain in the arm, indeed! She grinned and handed him a bowl of soup. 'You don't think much of her, do you?'

'I don't think much of anyone who spends all her time bleating about her conscience whilst sheltering behind the bulwarks provided by the people she alleges to despise.'

'Or people who smoke.' She grinned.

'Or people who smoke. Right.'

They drank their soup in silence.

'Tell me.' She kept her face lowered. 'I've never asked you before. Do you have any girl-friends? Special ones, I mean?'

He glanced up at her quickly. 'Of course I do! I believe there's safety in numbers.'

'Heavens! You sound like Casanova himself!'

'Do you really want the story of my love-life?' His tone was teasing.

'Certainly not! That is... not unless you insist. But you must get tons of fan-mail, I imagine. Do you?'

'Some. Not tons. I think most of us do. After publicity in the press, decorations, that sort of thing'

'Who writes to you - apart from me?' She grinned. 'Or, is that too personal a question?'

'Oh, a variety of people. Mostly fifteen and sixteen year-olds. But some others, too. Quite unusual people, in fact.' He smiled. 'Most of 'em want to mother me. They think I'm far too young to be away from home.' He grinned again. 'Probably the way I look.'

'For example?'

He hesitated. 'Well, there was one girl - woman, I suppose - with a double-barrelled name. She rang me up one night and sounded terribly blue-blooded. After that, we exchanged a few letters until she let it be known that she would like to meet me in London. I could take her to dinner at the Dorchester.'

'Goodness! What did you say?'

'I said that on twelve bob a day, I couldn't take myself to the Dorchester, far less anyone else.'

'Then, what?'

'Well, after that she invited me to her home, something Park in Gloucestershire. We could meet her parents and do some riding.' He chuckled. 'At that point, I felt that

things had gone far enough. She sounded fine but the prospect of being forced to ride to hounds frightened me to death.'

She took away his plate, laughing.

'I think you're fibbing. I think you have nubile young ladies in every county and that you visit them regularly. No?'

Fitzgerald shook his head in mock despair.

'I simply can't pull the wool over your eyes, can I?'

They talked on about nothing of substance, after which they washed the dishes and sat in front of the fire. Feeling closer to him than at any time before, some instinct warned her, even so, against turning the conversation into more personal channels. The boy seeming relaxed and quietly happy, she was content to leave things as they were.

Shortly after half-past three, when the afternoon light showed the first signs of fading, he rose and stretched. Automatically, she stood up and faced him.

'It's dreadful to think you have to go so soon. Are you making the whole journey tonight?'

'I think so. One hundred-and-eighty-two miles: I know the journey to a foot. Ten o'clock and I should be there.' He looked down on her drawn face and smiled. 'Don't look so tragic: It's not the end of the world.'

'It could be such a long time before I see you again. But, you will write?'

'Of course I will.'

'Otherwise I shan't know your address. And if you ever need to get away, don't forget there's always Yorkshire and Drover's Road. The moors are so beautiful in the spring. Now -' she held out her hands, 'will you... I'm almost too embarrassed to ask... could you bear to kiss an older woman?'

She saw him hesitate before he bent down and put his lips to hers; but there was no pressure. No passion. Just a gentle, faintly dry if lingering touch. For one wildly improbable moment, she thought of opening her lips and using her tongue but before she could decide, he had gently moved away. Oh, God! She so desperately wanted him to hold her. Collect her in his arms. Crush his young body hard against her own. If only -

When they were at arm's length, she said quietly, 'That was nice. I'm afraid things will always be dull for you here. Or even at home.'

'I'm content.'

'You'll never let me bore you, will you? I'm so afraid that -'

'I shan't let you bore me.'

'Promise?'

'Promise.'

She still held his hands, reluctant to release him.

‘Goodbye then, and take care.’

‘Goodbye, and thank you.’

‘Celia! I’m Celia... remember?’

‘Celia.’

CHAPTER SEVEN

The days of 1942 had trudged to a miserable close and, in the area of the English Channel, the early winter weeks of the new year had slowly limped towards spring, burdened with frost, snow, rain, and fog.

But, all was not just gloom and misery; very much the reverse. Mr. Churchill was later to describe the events of the period as 'The Hinge of Fate,' declaring that: 'Before, we never had a victory; after, we never had a defeat.'

The Battle of Alamein, fought on the Egyptian/Libyan border, had marked the first triumph of British arms over the combined German and Italian forces and, in the months that followed, the 1st and 8th British armies, with American and French assistance, had succeeded in capturing or expelling all remaining Axis troops from North Africa. Meanwhile, away to the north and east, the Russians, suffering catastrophic losses, had managed to halt Germany's headlong surge and had even inflicted the first of many defeats on the invading masses.

So, with the Allies either consolidating or advancing everywhere, there was talk of invasion. The invasion of Europe! Of Germany, even!

But where, precisely? Would it be southern France? Sicily? The Italian mainland itself, or the Channel coastline of France and Belgium? Speculation was rife, Russian demands for 'invasion now', backed up hysterically by left-wing apologists in Britain, becoming increasingly hectoring.

Meanwhile, Tom Fitzgerald, leading his squadron and occasionally his wing, flew constantly over the inhospitable winter waters of the English Channel and through tens of thousands of feet of rain-laden cloud, whose icy depths enrobed his unheated Spitfire in a white mantle of frost and reduced his body and mind to leaden torpor.

Occasionally, there were swift and deadly encounters with the enemy as German fighters joined them in brief, savage flurries of activity in the frigid blue of the heavens, but mostly it was patrols - endless patrols, high and low, the German flak, black puff-balls of crimson-centred venom at the higher altitudes and soaring red balls and streaks of tracer nearer the ground.

Day in and day out, it was the same nerve-wracking routine - take-off, climb, patrol or bomber escort duty, a skirmish or running fight, followed by the long journey home, sometimes damaged and short of fuel, before finally, and wearily, landing. The perpetual tension and strain of it all, operating in all types of weather and against a capable and calculating enemy, gradually sapped his reserves of stamina and courage.

Even so, in Service messes the length and breadth of the country - as well as in the Common Room of the 'Tommy B.' - the turn of events resulted in universal relief and an uplifting of the spirit.

To Celia Beytagh, however, the rejoicing was tempered by concern.

Now that the war had exploded into life in the Mediterranean and showed every sign of spreading into southern Europe, would Fitzgerald, with his unique background and experience, be drawn into the action there? Fighting, she mused bitterly, must be the easiest part of any war; those at home knew full well that worry was the real killer, the long drawn-out agony of separation and of not knowing.

Somewhat to her surprise, she had received a brief note from him soon after his return to his new squadron. Mainly a bread-and-butter letter, it had been chatty but impersonal and, as he had neglected to give details of where exactly he was, she had been unable to reply, thinking, a little uncharitably at the time, that the omission might not have been entirely accidental.

Meanwhile, she continued to carry out her duties in a noticeably lack-lustre manner, more than once chiding herself privately that she was not doing either herself or her pupils justice. One example in particular gave her cause for concern.

There had been a so-called Spring Ball, the normal pre-Christmas event having been cancelled because of an outbreak of 'flu, which she had felt bound to attend. In the event, she had been devastatingly bored. At one point, she had stood alone, surveying the scene before her - giggling, ogling girls; pimply, posturing male adolescents; and a solid, cheerless group of self-important, do-nothing staff, most - if not all - grinding their mean little axes. What a thoroughly third-rate lot. And, sad to say, she was one of them; no better or worse than the rest.

At one point her eyes had wandered up to his portrait, high up above the party lights and barely visible in the gloom. Like some tranquil, quietly smiling angel, she thought sadly but fondly. If he could see her now, what would he be thinking? Would he be as disheartened as she was at that moment? As frustrated? As irritated? In a deep fit of gloom, it was all she could do to restrain herself from walking out into the night and disappearing for all time.

She received a further letter from him towards the end of April written on headed notepaper which gave his address as RAF Biggin Hill. This item of news improved her morale considerably - at least she now knew where he was - but, other than that, the letter contained only an impersonal and somewhat circumspect description of his daily routine in the squadron.

She read it several times, a dulling melancholy sitting like a lump in her chest. Somehow, he seemed less of the boy she once knew; the old enthusiasms were clearly missing, no graphic descriptions of air battles or the glories of the winter skies with their frowning masses of cloud and the frigid, brooding majesty of the countless dawns and sunsets in the sky that seemed to be part of his everyday life. Now, there were only thinly veiled complaints - how miserably cold it was at altitude, the endless, fruitless patrols over enemy territory, even the mud and slush around the dispersal area on the airfield - filth they could not keep off their flying boots or out of their cockpits. There were all these, plus a score of lesser difficulties.

But, there had been no mention of a possible move to the Mediterranean or further afield, which was a comfort. At home, she at least felt him to be part of her life; abroad, he would be gone, possibly for all time. She was encouraged to sense that he regarded it as an obligation to keep in touch.

Obligation! Duty! Was that all she meant to him? How did he regard her? 'Celia' had never come comfortably to his lips and in her heart she knew that he still saw her as his former schoolmistress. His several visits and half-a-dozen letters had never included a single word of affection, nor even the hint that anything more existed than a formal association or a brother and sister relationship, at best. But, at her age, what did she expect? She sighed. Yet, surely, he must know of her feelings, have sensed them, anyway. Or, was his indifference contrived?

She spent her usual monthly week-ends in Yorkshire, and her parents, noting her moods, tactfully refrained from mentioning the boy's name except in the most general of terms. She did the shopping as a duty, walked the hills alone and, back in the house, she said little and kept her own counsel.

And it was whilst she was in Yorkshire that one of her colleagues sent her a copy of a Friday edition of the 'Manchester Evening News', on the inside page of which was a picture of Fitzgerald and a caption which stated:

'Manchester Air Ace Promoted.'

There followed the usual brief details of his career and background, this time with news of his advancement to Squadron Leader and the comment that, at barely 22, he was now one of the youngest officers of that rank in the Air Force. Old hat, she thought, but it took time for such news to circulate, no doubt.

After the brief surge of happiness and pride had seeped away, she folded the paper slowly, then went upstairs to her room where she stored it lovingly in a drawer which contained every item of publicity she had assiduously collected over the past year.

After that, she sat on the bed and slumped. Another summer of fighting and heartache - the news broadcasts each day, the press headlines, the speculating and worrying, the eternal imagining. The waiting!

She turned suddenly in spasm of irritation. Why him? He had done enough, for God's sake! No, he was too young, too brave, too beautiful to die! It wasn't right! He was HERS! More than anything else in the world, she wanted him. WANTED him, LOVED him, YEARNED for him!

For some minutes, she remained there, bitterly silent and resentful. What more could they ask of him? How long could he go on? But, more to the point, how long could SHE go on?

CHAPTER EIGHT

The two squadrons of Spitfires, more than six miles into the heavens, extruded gossamer threads of white against a background of frigid, flawless blue.

Twenty-five years before, to the day and almost to the hour, the renowned German fighter pilot, Baron Manfred von Richthofen, was being shot to death exactly beneath the point at which the Spitfires were turning, a few miles to east and north of Amiens.

At the head of the formation of 24 aircraft, loosely disposed around him in battle order, Tom Fitzgerald methodically scanned the vast cupola of space through slitted eyes, before dropping his gaze to the far horizon and working around it from left to right in an unhurried, unblinking stare. He had no thoughts of the Red Baron or the famous all-red triplane in which he had been killed, none even for the millions who had died so tragically and horribly in the Flanders trenches, immobilised in mud and filth, the by-product of a million guns and five years of static warfare. His mind was on the Luftwaffe, or more particularly, that part of it he knew to be in his immediate vicinity.

The two squadrons were acting as high cover to a bombing raid carried out by twelve Blenheims of the RAF, closely escorted by an additional 48 Spitfires. The Blenheims were at 14,000 feet and out of sight beneath a carpet of white cloud far below, the close escorts stepped up, around, and behind them to a height of 25,000 feet. But, they, too, a mile or more below Fitzgerald's formation, were invisible to the high cover leader, though in radio communication both with him and the Blenheims.

There were enemy fighters around, Fitzgerald was aware. Not only had Sector Control in England warned him of approaching 'hostiles', but a sixth sense, cultivated by every fighter pilot and in Fitzgerald honed to the keenest of edges, was confirming the information he had already received from the far-off Biggin Hill Operations Room. It was a mixed blessing having his own aircraft trailing; the Huns would be trailing too at this height and therefore equally conspicuous.

Within seconds, he had seen them, a big formation, slightly higher than themselves and at ten o'clock - twenty or more white pencil-lines moving swiftly and obliquely across the front of his aircraft, from left to right. The enemy! His scalp tingled.

Turning to head them off, Fitzgerald led his Spitfires towards the German aircraft, now distinguishable as shining coloured dots at the leading end of each white trace.

They were moving very fast now and diving slightly, so that Fitzgerald was obliged to drop the nose of his own aircraft as he pushed wide the throttle of his engine. His Spitfire, turning hard, tightened perceptibly and trembled, like a sprint racehorse keyed up to explosion point in the starting stalls.

The Germans had seen them without a doubt. Would they turn and fight? Or what!

Fitzgerald felt the controls stiffen under his hands and bent forward with taut attention. He observed the needle on this airspeed indicator moving steadily around the dial, passing the 320 mark. He did the swiftest of calculations: at 30,000 feet, that meant a ground speed of 480, or thereabouts. Fast, though not fast enough. If they were gaining on the enemy, it wasn't immediately apparent. The Germans, descending still and now at the same level, were streaking away to his right, a spreading, undulating fan of thin white plumes, trailing from their exhausts.

Less than 2,000 yards distant now, he recognised them as Focke Wulf 190s, the latest snub-nosed fighters of the Luftwaffe which were replacing some of the older, more familiar Messerschmitt 109s. Having frequently encountered them in recent weeks, Fitzgerald knew the 190s to be difficult aircraft to deal with but by no means invincible. His Spitfire IXb had a comparable performance except, possibly, in the initial dive, so that catching a 190 was never an easy matter, especially if the Hun saw you first and didn't wish to be caught. And these chaps certainly showed no signs of dallying.

Having decided that they had lost the vital element of surprise, the Germans began to dive away even more steeply, so that Fitzgerald and his straining formation had to press even harder to keep in touch.

As he strove to draw a bead on one of the rearmost 190s, he felt his aircraft begin to buffet and stall, the thin atmosphere at altitude being unable to sustain his aircraft in so tight a turn. But his adrenalin in flood, he pressed on to the limit and, in a despairing effort, fired his cannons and machine guns, at around 800 yards, too great a range, he knew, for very much hope of success.

As the Spitfire shuddered with the heavy, thumping recoil of the cannons and the tracer from his machine guns reached out with smoky, weaving fingers to clutch at the enemy ahead, he experienced the savage exultation of the primitive hunter. To the death. Kill! Kill! Kill!

But the German aircraft in front continued its wild, precipitous descent apparently unharmed and, after chasing determinedly for almost 8,000 feet and aware that he and his colleagues were being drawn out of position, Fitzgerald gave up. Instructing his formation to break off the engagement, he soared back into the heavens, levelling out at 28,000 feet to continue his patrol. The Blenheims and their close escort, still unseen, would be well away by now. He used his radio to verify their position and learned that they were in mid-Channel and going home. Success? Well, success in a negative sort of way.

As they continued on their patrol line, first south to Beauvais then northwards, a further formation of German fighters - Me. 109s this time - came surging towards them from the west. However, as he led his Spitfires in an aggressive curve in their direction, the Huns pulled up and, flying across the top, sat off to one side, a mile or two distant, like so many observers.

The Spitfires, airborne now for more than an hour and with their fuel tanks barely one-quarter full, watched them warily. A prudent and experienced leader despite his 22 years, Fitzgerald knew when to fight, when to stand and watch, and when to make a

strategic withdrawal. This clearly was not the time to fight. In any case, his major task had been accomplished.

Vigilant still and with swords drawn, the Spitfires turned homewards across the Channel and after a time, the German formation pulled away and disappeared, to Fitzgerald's considerable relief.

Eight minutes later, his two squadrons were over Beachy Head at 18,000 feet and began letting down through the first of several banks of cloud. Relaxing somewhat, they closed up into a more manageable formation and commenced to drop rapidly towards their home base on the southern outskirts of London.

In the lead, Fitzgerald, not for the first time conscious of great physical and mental relief, watched the aircraft alongside him surge and sway as they maintained position, the nearest a mere six feet beyond his own wingtips, their airscrews pale discs of motion, the duck-egg blue of their spinners contrasting sharply with the dark camouflage of green and brown and the yellow, red and blue roundels on wings and fuselage.

He felt a deep and satisfying thrill of pride. This was what he had always dreamed of and a sight that never failed to pull at his heart-strings, though, God knew, he had seen it often enough before. The appeasers, the do-gooders, the rationalisers, the glib-talkers, the watchers on the side-lines; they would never understand nor experience moments like this. The sheer joy of being part of a vital and efficient fighting formation, of taxing oneself and one's machine to the limit, with death the savage penalty for failure. This was how life should be lived! Not skulking in holes or bleating about morals and conscience. Christ! How he despised those people. For the next several minutes, flying almost by instinct, he let his mind wander. This would be his 46th show in the nine weeks he had been with the squadron, his 53rd, if the seven low-level 'Rhubarbs' - which he hated - were included.

But, it was much less fun now than in the past; the war was becoming less of a game and more of a business. Reluctantly, he recognised that he was not the man he used to be; the constant action was becoming too much of a strain, sapping his resolve and energy, wearing him down. Two years ago - a year, even - those 190s would not have escaped so easily. If necessary, he would have followed them right down to the ground, to their home base, perhaps.

But now? Well, he was beginning to play safe, wasn't he? And why not? Other than the few months he had spent convalescing, he had been on the go continuously for three years. Celia Beytagh was right, he couldn't go on forever. He had to admit that he was tired both physically, and mentally, but, strangely, not sleeping well in spite of his fatigue. Short-tempered, too; the chaps in the squadron were beginning to notice, he was pretty sure. Nothing really nasty, just the tell-tale signs of exhaustion he had so often witnessed in others. But nothing vital... yet. Everything... well, just that little bit more difficult. Just on the border-line of being acceptable.

The aerodrome in sight and the camouflaged hangars and runways plain to see, he motioned his squadron with hand-signals into sections echelon-starboard, and silently, like well-drilled guardsmen on parade, the Spitfires veered away, regrouped, then spread out for landing.

Fitzgerald taxied in and, being waved onto the chocks by his crew, stopped the engine. As the big four-bladed airscrew tottered to a clanking standstill, he wearily removed his face-mask and threw off his straps.

One of his crew jumped quickly on to the wingroot to assist, encouraged by the blown gun patches.

‘Shot something down, Sir?’

Fitzgerald pulled a face. ‘Not today, Josephine. Didn’t really get close enough to the blighters, who didn’t want to fight anyway.’

‘They’re not stupid, Sir.’

Fitzgerald smiled wearily. ‘You don’t think so? Sometimes I think we’re the stupid ones, flogging over there all day, every day. Giving them target practice.’

‘You’re knocking the socks off ‘em, Sir.’

The boy snorted. ‘I’d have to be persuaded.’

It was then he noticed the Adjutant. In forage cap and raincoat, his hands in his pockets, the man was standing there patiently. What now? Fitzgerald wondered. He released his parachute harness and stepped out stiffly on to the wing before dropping to the ground, bulky still in his Mae West. He greeted the man without enthusiasm. ‘Wotcher, Adj! More messages from Garcia, I take it?’

The Adjutant smiled. ‘Something like that, Sir. The Station Commander wants to see you when you’ve finished your debriefing.’

‘Any idea why?’

‘He didn’t say, Sir.’

Fitzgerald shrugged. ‘Where’s my car?’

‘Outside dispersal, Sir.’

‘Right. Tell him I’ll be with him in about twenty minutes.’

Then, as though a reflex act of relaxation, Fitzgerald turned and watched the other members of his squadron dismount, their hair flattened by their helmets, their faces soiled and lined by the pressure of their oxygen masks.

He counted them automatically. All back. No casualties, thank God. Eleven of them, twelve including himself. Not one of them over 23 years of age, either, mostly nineteen and twenty, in fact. At 22, he was one of the oldest members of the unit. Still, two casualties this week, one, a prisoner of war for certain. Not bad. Not good, either.

He sighed and turned.

‘Take my parachute back to my office, will you Jones?’

‘Very good, Sir.’

The Station Adjutant, ‘Chalky’ White, preceded Fitzgerald to the Commanding Officer’s door. He knocked and entered.

‘Squadron Leader Fitzgerald, Sir.’

A voice said, ‘Fine! Come in, Tom, and park your bustle.’ Then, to White, ‘I don’t want to be disturbed until I tell you. No ‘phone calls –anything’

‘Very good, Sir.’ The Adjutant, blank-faced, withdrew like a well-trained butler.

‘Well, how did it go?’ The Station Commander, a large, beefy man, leaned back and stretched his legs. ‘I heard you come back but the damned ‘phone went and I’ve been on it ever since. If there had been telephones in Nelson’s time, he’d have been court-martialled and not fêted as a hero.’

Fitzgerald smiled. ‘Not too badly, Sir, but nothing really positive. We didn’t see anything of the Blenheims or close escort because of cloud, but as they didn’t complain, I imagine they had a easy ride. Up top, we saw two Hun formations but couldn’t get to grips with the first and the second lot just stood off and pulled faces at us. For which I was duly thankful as we were getting a bit low on fuel.’

The Station Commander looked thoughtful. ‘Surprising, really. If the positions had been reversed, I can’t imagine us letting them get away with it quite so easily.’

‘Oh, I don’t know, Sir. After all, they’re not protecting their own country. I don’t suppose it would worry them if 1,000 Spitfires sat over their heads, all day and every day, provided they stayed at 20,000 feet. Bombers would be different, of course. But fighters? We’re just a nuisance.’

The older man grinned. ‘Cultivate the offensive spirit, that’s our policy young Tom. You don’t win a war sitting on your backside.’

‘The Germans could. They’ve won their war - in the west, anyway. All they have to do now is to hang on to what they’ve got.’

The Station Commander smiled ruefully. ‘You need a few days off, I suspect. You’re beginning to think too much!’ There was a brief silence during which the man glanced at the paper in front of him and chose his words.

‘I was at Fighter Command Headquarters yesterday and had a long chat with the C-in-C. He was telling me about a rather special job that’s coming up and asked my advice as to the best chap to do it. I said that you might well be the bloke but I added that I would have to discuss it with you first. Naturally, he agreed.’

The Station Commander glanced up and saw Fitzgerald’s eyes bright with interest, but wary. Very wary. And speculating.

The Group Captain nodded. ‘But first, I have to make it absolutely clear that what we are about to discuss now is to go no further than this room. At any time. Not one word is to be repeated within your squadron or to anyone else - family, friends, female

or female. It's that important. And if you and I have to discuss it in the future, we will only do so only by arrangement and behind closed doors. Understood?

Fitzgerald found himself swallowing. 'Of course.'

'Right!' The man settled back in his chair and drew a deep breath. 'First, what do you know about jet propulsion engines?'

Fitzgerald hesitated, frowning. 'Jet propulsion! You mean in ships? Other than for them, nothing. I have no idea.'

Another nod. 'In that case, let me explain. For some years now, an RAF boffin - an ex-Halton-boy engineer named Whittle - has been experimenting with a new form of aero engine based on jet propulsion; air is sucked in at the front, mixed with fuel and ignited, then shot out of the back at enormous speed. No propellers or anything like that. Just a few turbine wheels somewhere in the middle.'

'Now, the significance of it is, we now have a power source greater than anything we've ever imagined, enabling us to fly at more than the speed of sound - if we can design a suitable aeroplane, that is. And when I say the mind just boggles at future possibilities, I'm not exaggerating.'

'At the moment we have an experimental aircraft flying with one of these engines; if you've ever been in the Nottingham area you may have seen or heard it - very unusual. Moreover, it's not beyond the bounds of possibility that one or two of our squadrons may be equipped with these jet-engined aircraft, as soon as a year or two from now.'

'Unfortunately - and here's the rub - the Huns are also producing several jet and rocket powered aircraft, at least one of which is as advanced as ours, if not more so. Mr. Messerschmitt, we learn, has a twin-engined fighter in being at this moment, whose potential, we believe, is quite frightening. In fact, if those aircraft get into squadron use much before ours, it could well upset the whole balance of air power in Europe.'

Here, the Station Commander paused, as if to refresh himself. After which, he continued in a quieter and more dramatic tone of voice.

'From intelligence sources, we know that it is the Hun's intention to send one of these Messerschmitt jet fighters on a tour of their major fighter bases in France, so that a number of their key chaps can have a look at it and assess its potential. Which brings me to the point. At some as yet unspecified date in the near future, we are pretty sure it will fly into the Hun airfield at Cherbourg and stay there for several days. And if it does, we intend to pinch it!'

Stunned initially by his senior's remark, Fitzgerald, after being unable to speak for a moment or two, could merely echo, 'Pinch it! You mean steal it?'

His face showed utter surprise and disbelief. 'Steal it! But, how can we possibly do that?'

The Station Commander's face achieved an almost fanatical luminosity.

‘We’ll put in a Commando raiding party, lift it, either at dusk or dawn, then fly it back to England. Right under their noses.’ He leaned forward, his eyes intense. ‘Which is where you come in, young Tom. I’ve suggested to the C-in-C that you should be the pilot.’

As Fitzgerald listened to his Station Commander explaining the contingency plan to capture the new German jet aircraft, it had not occurred to him initially that he might be in any way involved, so that when his name was suddenly mentioned, it came almost as a physical blow.

For some seconds, he stared unbelievably at his senior.

‘You mean you want ME to fly the aircraft back? ME? But, I don’t know anything about these... these so-called jet engines; I don’t know anything about German aircraft even, except, how to shoot at them. I’m... I just don’t know what to say.’

The elder man smiled. ‘I can understand your surprise; I was completely thrown myself when I first heard of the plan. But, when I thought about it and chewed it over with the C-in-C, not only did it become less alarming, it actually began to make sense.’

He spread his big hands over his desk and began to explain.

‘Look, this is by no means the first time a raid such as this has been carried out. The Commando boys are well used to them and most have been successful. There was that attack on the German heavy water plant in Norway, the several attacks on Hun radar stations on the French and Belgian coasts that were made public, besides a dozen others you, I, and the man in the street, know absolutely nothing about. For example - and this will shake you to the roots - when the Focke Wulf 190 first came on the scene in the spring of 1942 and began to make hay of our Mark V Spits, a similar raid was planned to lift one, and it was only when, by some quite unique stroke of good fortune, a Hun pilot landed a 190 intact on Pembrey in Wales on 23rd June last year, that the raid was called off within days of it being launched. No, these things are very much a regular occurrence and the one I’ve outlined will be one of the most important - and the most daring. We must get hold of that Hun aircraft, young Tom, because we have to assess the threat it poses and our reaction to it.’

Fitzgerald still felt stunned and his face showed it. Eyeing him keenly, the Group Captain continued in a more conversational tone.

‘As I indicated at the start, this is a job for a volunteer. If you don’t feel up to it, you have only to say so, and it will certainly not be held against you. If, on the other hand, you agree to take part and you are successful, I can guarantee that you will be well rewarded. In addition, you will be taken off Ops. for a goodly period and given a lengthy lecturing trip around the States, with all the nice things that go with it. However -’ he studied his hands for several moments, ‘the C-in-C has especially instructed me to tell you that, should you be captured, in line with Hitler’s directive vis-a-vis Commando raids, you are not likely to be spared. In short, you will be executed.’ He smiled without humour. ‘War is a nasty business, young Tom, and it’s important that you know the worst that might happen.’

Fitzgerald let out a long breath. 'And when do I have to decide?' He could not completely control the tremor in his voice.

The Station Commander said simply, 'Now, I'm afraid.'

'I see. Then, can you tell me a little more?' He was suddenly ashamed of the faintly pleading tone to his question and knew he was playing for time. 'I feel I ought to know something about what I'm supposed to do and when.'

'Of course. But first, a cuppa is in order, don't you think?'

When the tea had been brought by the Adjutant, the Station Commander settled himself companionably in a nearby chair. In his own mind the decision had been made; it only needed him to provide some convincing detail to ease the boy's mind.

'The way I see it is this. First, we'll get you down to Tangmere, which is the nearest spot to Cherbourg, either with your own squadron or as a supernumerary squadron leader in one of the two Spitfire squadrons already down there. Then, you'll very quietly take as much time off as is necessary to get yourself to Farnborough, to learn something about German aircraft - how's your German, by the way? - then, up to the Midlands to fly the one jet aircraft we have there and be instructed on the engineering aspect. And, of course, in between times, you will get together with the leader of the Commando group whose job it is to deliver you to the right place at the right time. As regards timing, I've been told that we have four weeks to prepare, the exercise taking place at any time thereafter. In fact, you may have to hang about for a month or two; although we know it's going to happen, we don't know when, precisely.'

'So, I lose my squadron, it would seem?'

'Probably, yes.'

'I don't speak any German, you know that?'

'They can teach you as much as you need - how to read the instruments, the cockpit, and so on.'

'Then assuming everything works out, where do I take this thing?'

'That has not been decided, but Boscombe Down and Farnborough are the best bets. That's not important, though, at this stage.'

Fitzgerald swallowed before remaining silent for a time. Then: 'I really can't believe this is happening to me. You ARE serious, I suppose?'

'Never more so, I'm afraid.'

'And I have to say 'yes', don't I?'

'It's your decision.'

Fitzgerald smiled grimly. 'As though you didn't know.'

The Group Captain gave him a long look of sympathy mingled with admiration. Of love, even. Then he stood and put out a hand to touch the boy's shoulder.

'I thought you'd say yes, but I had to give you the opportunity of refusing. And in some ways, I'm sorry now that I've lumbered you with this. But... this is a time for duty and for the greatness of special people. I'm proud of you. Without the likes of chaps like you, we could never win this war.'

Fitzgerald, embarrassed, nodded in acknowledgement and looked away.

'So... when do I start?'

'Tomorrow morning. You have an appointment with the C-in-C at 10 am.'

'You've fixed it already?'

'I knew you wouldn't let me down.'

It was during the afternoon, shortly after 3 pm. Celia Beytagh was halfway through second period French when she suddenly became aware of an atmosphere of restlessness among her charges.

Looking up, she became aware that the door had been opened silently and that the school Secretary was advancing towards her, her outsize breasts, magnificently pointed, wobbling like two ecstatic jellies. She thought: 'Dear God! Someone will have to have a word with this woman before she causes a riot.'

Helen Madder, glinting with crystal intensity and with a fixed smile, bent towards her confidentially, everything hanging provocatively.

She whispered, 'There's a 'phone call for you, Miss Beytagh. In my office.'

Celia, suddenly and inexplicably, found herself short of breath, her right hand finding its way to her throat. Then, in a deceptively controlled voice she asked, 'Who is it, do you know?'

'I don't know, I'm afraid. It was a woman's voice. No name, though.'

Celia's pulse rate slowed to resume its normal tempo. 'Thank you Miss Madder. I'll be there in a couple of secs.'

As she walked across the Great Hall, her heels tapping, she began to experience fear. A woman? Her mother was the only woman likely to telephone in the afternoon. An emergency? It was her father! He'd had a stroke! Some sort of accident. It had to be an emergency. Oh, Lord!

Her pace gathering, she almost ran into the Secretary's office and snatched up the receiver.

'Miss Beytagh here. Celia Beytagh.'

‘Miss Celia Beytagh?’ A woman’s voice. ‘Just a moment, please. I have someone for you.’ But it was only when there had been a series of clicks and a single, male voice had emerged through the cacophony of buzzing and atmospherics, that she allowed herself a ripple of excitement. The voice said, ‘Miss Beytagh? Celia?’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s me!’ A chuckle. ‘Or should I say, tis I?’

‘Oh! Goodness, you gave me a fright!’ She was laughing with relief.

‘Did I? Why?’

‘Well... Oh, never mind, I’ll explain later. Anyway, where are you?’

‘Oh, thousands of miles away. But that’s not important. Look, I’ve got a little time off. An unexpected bonus.’

‘Why?’ She was immediately suspicious. ‘Are you all right? You haven’t been damaged again, I hope.’

‘No, nothing like that. Anyway, I thought of going - coming - up to Yorkshire for the weekend. By train. Would you be there? If so, could you meet me in York, perhaps, and put me up?’

‘Oh, dear! I can’t! I can’t! Why didn’t you tell me earlier? I’m here this weekend as my parents are away. You really are a muggins! Oh, dear! What am I to do?’

‘Look. First of all, calm down! It’s Wednesday today. Right? I have to go home for a couple of days, which brings us to the weekend. So why don’t I come up to Manchester on, say, Saturday evening? But with one proviso. That is, that I don’t have to meet that battleaxe chum of yours. I’m sorry to have to say this but she really is a pain in the arse.’

Mildly shocked but amused, Celia heard herself saying, ‘My, my, young man!’ Then, laughing, ‘As a matter of fact, you won’t have to. You see, we don’t share a house anymore. I have other digs. In Roe Green, about a mile away. Very nice, too. You’ll like them.’

‘Who says I’m going to see them?’

‘Well, if you don’t, I shan’t know what to do with you.’

‘All right, then. I’ll be in Manchester at 7.35 pm, at London Road Station. I’ll then walk across town and come out to Worsley by train. Don’t start meeting me or anything like that. I’ll find my own way. All you have to do is tell me where your house is.’

She began to explain a little breathlessly, unconsciously giving directions with her hands. Then, he was repeating them whilst she nodded, her dark eyes dancing with happiness.

Finally, he said, ‘Saturday evening then. Look forward to seeing you.’

‘Me, too. And thank you for ringing. Such a lovely surprise.’

'Not a bit. Goodbye.'

'Goodbye.' She replaced the receiver and took several deep breaths. Goodness. What a surprise! And what a thing to happen. It was then that she became aware of Helen Madder, standing alongside.

'Nothing worrying, I hope, Miss Beytagh?'

'Er... worrying? Oh... no, not worrying. Just a bit well, a bit breathtaking, that's all.'

CHAPTER NINE

Fitzgerald's telephone call came at a time when Celia Beytagh's morale was experiencing one of its periodic slumps. It had been rather more than four months since she had last seen him and three weeks at least since she had received his last letter. And even the letter had been so impersonal as to persuade her that it was one of a number written at the same time - a circular, almost - to keep people informed of his recent movements and activities.

Days before, to add to her depression, there had been an incident which had succeeded in raising miserable doubts in her mind, an incident contrived, she later came to believe, by someone intent on mischief.

Arriving at the Common-room during a free period one morning, she had found a copy of 'The Sketch' lying prominently, face upwards, on a low table beside the chair she was in the habit of using. She had picked it up out of curiosity - 'The Sketch' seldom found its way into the Staff Common-room at the 'Tommy B.' - and had idly turned over the pages of what she knew to be a Society magazine.

Much of what she saw and read with little more than passing interest, related to functions of various kinds at the major hotels and places of entertainment in London - society engagements and marriages and the usual crop of activities among the County, Oxbridge and Service sets.

Prominent on one of the centre pages, however, was a picture, the caption of which read: 'RAF Air Ace Entertains Ice Skating Champion'. The photograph - a good one, too - was of Fitzgerald and Cecilia Creighton-More, Olympic Champion and current star in the world of international ice-skating. They were standing together, laughing and holding hands, at some function publicising the sale of Victory Bonds. And, although they were among a number of other guests, there was something unsettlingly intimate in the manner in which they leaned and looked in each other's direction.

Celia had examined the picture with a frown and read the small print with a sinking heart. She knew Cecilia Creighton-More to be a national celebrity whose grace and beauty were legendary, certainly more than sufficient to turn the head of any impressionable young man, in or out of the public eye. About the same age, they made an attractive pair, both picture and caption hinting at a romantic attachment without actually making a statement to that effect.

Celia had glanced up quickly, fearful that her interest in the photograph might have been observed, but apart from two junior members of staff at the far end of the room and the Deputy Head, engrossed in 'The Times' crossword puzzle, she was alone and apparently ignored.

Much as she tried to rationalize the situation away, the picture and caption proved to be something of a body blow, so that the early spring months had become for her a

period of leaden unhappiness. Even so, she carried her burden with composure, being unable to share or discuss it with anyone, not even her parents. Indeed, her mother and father had long since avoided mentioning the boy's name, believing him to be totally preoccupied with his Air Force duties and his own friends, Service and others. But, they grieved for their daughter, nevertheless, aware of her melancholy and the intensity of her feelings.

Despite all apparent setbacks, however, Celia Beytagh clung to the belief that her attachment to Fitzgerald could, and would, survive - she, and the unnamed person who had so maliciously planted 'The Sketch' for her to read and enjoy. So, for her, the brief telephone conversation with Fitzgerald amounted to something akin to a lifeline, the trials of the past being immediately forgotten.

For the rest of the day her mind was in a whirl, to the surprise and amusement of some of her older and more perceptive pupils, who instantly detected the change in temper of a mistress who, more often than not, dealt with them pretty severely. Love, they opined, was a wonderful thing, but for the life of them, they could not identify the male member of staff responsible for this windfall of good cheer.

Later, she had hurried home to consider in peace how best she might entertain the boy. Boy! She still thought of him as such, in spite of his accomplishments. Well, he was, wasn't he? To her he was, anyway. Fifteen years her junior, although, at the moment, she found herself feeling positively childish. She thanked God that Jenny would not be around the cramp her style. She laughed delightedly to herself. Pain in the arse, he had said. Come to think of it, she was, too. And had been for ages. Pity she hadn't thought of telling her before.

But, what could they do together? There were no moors to walk on around Worsley. No car to get them further afield, either. Sunday in suburban Lancashire Church? No, she didn't think he would take too kindly to that - not a second time! What else? What a business it was! Oh, heck! They'd jolly well think of something.

But first, she would meet him, whatever his views to the contrary. And feed him, of course. Heavens! What could she get him this time? More to the point, what was available on a single ration-book? Fish? Not again! A vision of the stiff and blackened cod-steak remained vividly in her memory.

Her mind in tumult, she sat down on the sitting-room settee and, fidgeting still, gave the matter further thought. Lord! Did everyone in love go through this... this purgatory?

Thursday and Friday dragged by interminably.

Saturday dawned, bright but cold, with a blustering wind. She shopped for food, bought some flowers - at great expense! - rearranged the furniture, straightened the pictures, polished everything in sight - and gave the lavatory a special wipe!

The afternoon wore on.

Shortly before six, she walked the half-mile to the station and caught the train into Manchester, her mind so preoccupied that she did not recall noticing the three stops en route.

Leaving Exchange Station, she walked across the city centre and arrived at London Road shortly before seven. Seven o'clock! What had possessed her to come so early? She had a good half-hour to wait. Longer, if the LMS had anything to do with it!

She sat on the slatted wooden seat and watched the world go by. Trains came and left; the whole nation, it seemed - most of it in uniform - appeared to be travelling by rail, all hurrying, all gawping at the arrival and departure boards, all laden down with cases, kit-bags, parcels and gasmasks. Always the gasmasks, and occasionally, rifles.

But, what if he had missed the train? She rose to her feet to ease the tension. She did have the right day, didn't she? And what if he decided to come to another station? She consulted her watch again, then the station clock, for the tenth time.

The train, when it came, slid in so quietly and unobtrusively that she failed to observe its arrival. Then, doors began to bang and another flood of humanity appeared. She watched the ticket barrier from a distance. It was going to be a surprise for him, she knew. A pleasant one, she hoped!

She saw him a long way off, moving slowly in the middle of a press of people, his face thoughtful, his mind obviously a mile away. He nodded to the ticket collector before looking about absently, all expectation missing from his face. Goodness, how tall he was! And so sad looking and thinly drawn!

She moved towards him and had to clear her throat.

'Hello, there!'

He turned towards her, his eyebrows raised in surprise. But he didn't really smile, she noticed.

'Hello! What on earth are you doing here? I thought I told you not to meet me.'

She grinned, still feeling nervous. 'You were overruled. By me!'

He shook his head in mock despair and they began to walk off slowly, she trying unsuccessfully to fall into step.

'You were limping, do you know that? Is your foot still giving you trouble?'

'Limping! Was I? No, it's all right.'

His voice as curiously flat, she noted. 'Well, it's lovely to see you again.' She took his arm. 'Am I permitted to say so? Or do you forbid that, too?'

He grinned in return. 'Nutter' Then, looking around, 'Let's take a taxi; I feel as though I've been travelling for a week.'

They found a taxi and climbed in. He flopped back with a sigh but did not speak.

She said, 'If we catch the No. 12 'bus instead of going by train, it will save us a half-mile walk the other end.'

'What did you say?' He did not appear very interested. 'Bus? If you want to. Where does it go from?'

'Same place, roughly. You should remember, anyway.' She patted his hand. 'You look jolly tired. Are you?'

'I am, a bit.'

'Not tired, tired, but worn out, tired.'

'If you say so.'

Rebuffed, she wrinkled her nose and said quietly, 'Boo!' After which she kept quiet. They found the 'bus waiting and climbed aboard. 'Up or down?' She was determined to ignore his mood.

'Down. I refuse to be kippered by proletarian fag-ends.'

'My, we do have a misery today!'

The 'bus set off and jogged them through the dingy streets of Salford then Swinton, before gradually emerging into green and more spacious parts.

Arriving in Worsley, it turned right up Greenleach Lane and deposited them on the edge of Roe Green, after which they walked several hundred yards before turning into a gate and a small drive.

'Is this where you live?' He glanced approvingly towards a solid, double fronted house with large bay windows. 'Yes, but not all of it. A third, in fact. I have half the ground floor, which is more than enough.'

'Are you alone?'

'Of course not! I live with Halle Selassie.' She kept her face straight.

He didn't smile. 'I thought he was back in Abyssinia.'

She put out her tongue. 'Did you now! Well, he comes back at weekends, cleverclogs.'

He nodded as they went inside and into the sitting-room. It was larger than he had expected and tastefully furnished. There was a fire, too, which immediately responded to some kind words from Celia and a bout of vigorous poking, so that it soon produced a cheerful, flickering glow.

'There now! She straightened up and smoothed her clothes in an automatic gesture. 'Let me take your things. The what's it is first right, if you need it. So, sit down or stand, or do a few handsprings. Whatever you like.' She grinned, still a little on edge. 'Whilst I make some tea.'

When she returned with a laden tray, Fitzgerald was standing, hands in pockets, examining a water-colour.

‘Where did you get this?’

‘That? From home. Mother’s had it for donkey’s years. It’s one of several. Why?’

‘It’s a Cotman. John Sell Cotman.’

‘Is that a good thing?’

‘You mean you don’t know?’

She began to pour the tea, her face averted. ‘I’ve never given it much thought, to tell you the truth. But I have the distinct feeling you’re just about to make me feel an inch high by giving me a lecture.’

Fitzgerald turned slowly and smiled. ‘He was one of the Norwich School - 19th Century. Very prolific, he painted hundreds. That one is of Norwich Cathedral from Mousehold Heath. He did quite a few of the same subject but they’re all highly prized. It’s worth a bob or two.’

She kept her voice coolly level. ‘Is it, indeed! I had no idea you were so knowledgeable. Or that I was so rich.’

He was still on his feet wandering about. His face quite straight, he said absently, ‘There’s no end to my talents, as well you know!’

Celia pursed her lips and the schoolmistress in her took over.

‘Look, young man! Would you kindly stop pacing about like a caged bear. Sit down, for heaven’s sake! What on earth’s the matter with you?’ Then, more gently, ‘If there’s anything wrong, I wish you’d tell me.’

The boy stopped, then collapsed into an easy chair.

‘I’m sorry. I feel I ought to be doing something.’ He ran his fingers through his hair. ‘The two days I had at home were very difficult. Poor parents! There was nothing for me to do and I just couldn’t settle.’

She handed him a plate. ‘Here. Have some of my home baking. Bang goes a month’s fat ration, I’ll have you know. So don’t you dare say you don’t like it!’

She watched him thoughtfully as he ate, his mouth working slowly as though his mind were far away. Then, brushing non-existent crumbs from her skirt, she said briskly, ‘Now. Tell me what this unexpected leave is all about. This bonus, as you described it.’

‘Nothing much. I’ve been moved, that’s all.’

‘Moved! Where to?’

‘Tangmere.’

‘Where’s that?’

‘Sussex. Chichester, about.’

‘For what reason?’ She was conscious of her heart beginning to thump. ‘You’ve only been where you are a matter of weeks.’

‘Oh, I won’t bore you with the details, but I - we - shall be engaged on some special work these next few weeks. Months, even.’

‘What sort of special work?’

He shrugged. ‘It’s all a bit involved. Anyway, I have to move down to Tangmere after I’ve had a week off. Then start again - sort of.’

‘And how long will you be there?’

‘I don’t know exactly. Not more than three months, I imagine.’ He stretched and stifled a yawn. ‘Then, a long break, thank God! Provided I’m in one piece, that is.’

Celia stopped eating and frowned. ‘I do wish you wouldn’t say things like that. You may consider it bravely offhand, but I find it very upsetting. So please don’t do it!’

Fitzgerald continued to stare into the fire, giving no sign that he had heard her. Then he turned and smiled.

‘I was so hoping we could have met in Yorkshire. I need a bit of loneliness and some wide open spaces. Somewhere to think. Dover’s Road, in fact.’

‘DROVER’S Road! Dover’s on the south coast, as well you know. Well, that’s out, so let’s forget it. But we can still go walking, if you like.’

‘Where? Around the Walkden coal pit?’

‘Don’t be difficult. No, why don’t we go to Derbyshire? There’s a train that will take us to Chapel-en-le-Frith, then we can walk around Mam Tor from there. I know a jolly good walk in that area, one that would really blow your miseries away.’

She was suddenly animated, her dark eyes bright with excitement. ‘We could be in Chapel by noon then walk until six at least. After that, we could come back here and have a quiet meal.’

He was silent for a time, then his face brightened. ‘All right, then. And I’ll take you to the Cock for dinner when we get back?’

‘You jolly well won’t! I’m not having another meal ruined by brother McPherson. We eat here, and that’s final!’

Suddenly, his eyes were smiling at her. The old smile, she saw. He said quietly, ‘You’re very good to me, Miss Beytagh, ma’am.’ He took hold of her hands - the first time ever, she thought. ‘And for me.’ She felt his caressing fingers. ‘I’m comfortable with you.’

She pulled away gently, unsure of herself, her heart beating. ‘I’m sure you’re comfortable with most people.’

‘No, not with everyone. Very few, in fact. But always with you.’

Embarrassed still, she moved the tea items on to the tray before stopping and looking at him directly. 'I'm worried about you. Really worried. You're not at all well, are you?'

'I'm certainly not ill, if that's what you mean. I'm tired, that's all. Just... Just running out of steam. It'll get better. I just need a little time.'

'But when, for heaven's sake?'

'I can keep going for a bit. For three months, anyway. Then I'll probably go on a lecturing tour. I'll be all right after that.'

'But - ?'

'No buts!' Fitzgerald's voice was suddenly firm. 'The die's cast. I'll do what I have to do. And in the meantime, I - we - will just have to live with it, won't we?'

'Do what?' She felt her face tightening.

'Duty!' He laughed. 'England expects - it happens to us all, sooner or later.'

Celia shook her head in exasperation.

'Oh... some people need shaking!'

Later, they sat by the fire with trays in their laps. After a bowl of soup, they shared an omelette. Celia dug her fork into the yellow mass before her. 'When the war's over, I'm never, ever, going to eat dried eggs again. Never, ever! Or spam! But especially dried eggs!'

'Your dried egg omelette is delicious. Just like -'

She joined him in unison, '- dried egg omelette!'

They laughed together. As she took the used dishes into the kitchen, she called over her shoulder. 'There's an orchestral concert on the wireless. Let's listen to it over a cuppa, should we?'

'I'd like to,' Fitzgerald called in return, 'but I shall have to put in an appearance at the Cock to claim the room I booked.'

Celia reappeared. 'You can do that later. They'll keep it for you. With trade so bad these days, they hang on to all the custom they can get.'

Kneeling down, she restored the fire for the third time and they settled back companionably. As he lay limply in his chair, she observed him covertly. Tonight was not the night for conversation, that was all too clear. She had never seen him so spent. Or so querulously short-tempered, either. He was restless, fidgety, yet oddly lethargic, unable to concentrate on anything, it seemed.