

## CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS A slow Sunday afternoon, the kind Walden loved. He stood at an open window and looked across the park. The broad, level lawn was dotted with mature trees: a Scots pine, a pair of mighty oaks, several chestnuts, and a willow like a head of girlish curls. The sun was high and the trees cast dark, cool shadows. The birds were silent, but a hum of contented bees came from the flowering creeper beside the window. The house was still, too. Most of the servants had the afternoon off. The only weekend guests were Walden's brother George, George's wife Clarissa, and their children. George had gone for a walk, Clarissa was lying down, and the children were out of sight. Walden was comfortable: he had worn a frock coat to church, of course, and in an hour or two he would put on his white tie and tails for dinner, but in the meantime he was at ease in a tweed suit and a soft-collared shirt. Now, he thought, if only Lydia will play the piano tonight, it will have been a perfect day.

He turned to his wife. 'Will you play, after dinner?'

Lydia smiled. 'If you like.'

Walden heard a noise and turned back to the window. At the far end of the drive, a quarter of a mile

away, a motor car appeared. Walden felt a twinge of irritation, like the sly stab of pain in his right leg before a rainstorm. Why should a car annoy me? he thought. He was not against motor cars – he owned a Lanchester and used it regularly to travel to and from London – although in the summer they were a terrible nuisance to the village, sending up clouds of dust from the unpaved road as they roared through. He was thinking of putting down a couple of hundred yards of tarmacadam along the street. Ordinarily he would not have hesitated, but roads had not been his responsibility since 1909 when Lloyd George had set up the Roads Boards – and that, he realized, was the source of his irritation. It had been a characteristic piece of Liberal legislation: they took money from Walden in order to do themselves what he would have done anyway, then they failed to do it. I suppose I'll pave the road myself in the end, he thought; it's just annoying to pay for it twice.

The motor car turned into the gravel forecourt and came to a noisy, shuddering halt opposite the south door. Exhaust fumes drifted in at the window, and Walden held his breath. The driver got out, wearing helmet, goggles and a heavy motoring coat, and opened the door for the passenger. A short man in a black coat and a black felt hat stepped down from the car. Walden recognized the man, and his heart sank: the peaceful summer afternoon was over.

'It's Winston Churchill,' he said.

Lydia said: 'How embarrassing.'

The man just refused to be snubbed. On Thursday

he had sent a note which Walden had ignored. On Friday he had called on Walden at his London house, and had been told that the Earl was not at home. Now he had driven all the way to Norfolk on a Sunday. He would be turned away again. Does he think his stubbornness is impressive? Walden wondered.

He hated to be rude to people but Churchill deserved it. The Liberal government in which Churchill was a Minister was engaged in a vicious attack on the very foundations of English society – taxing landed property, undermining the House of Lords, trying to give Ireland away to the Catholics, emasculating the Royal Navy, and yielding to the blackmail of trade unions and damned socialists. Walden and his friends would not shake hands with such people.

The door opened and Pritchard came into the room. He was a tall Cockney with brilliantined black hair and an air of gravity which was transparently fake. He had run away to sea as a boy, and had jumped ship in East Africa. Walden, there on safari, had hired him to supervise the native porters, and they had been together ever since. Now Pritchard was Walden's major-domo, travelling with him from one house to another, and as much of a friend as a servant could be.

'The First Lord of the Admiralty is here, my lord,' Pritchard said.

'I'm not at home,' Walden said.

Pritchard looked uncomfortable. He was not used to throwing out Cabinet Ministers. My father's butler would have done it without turning a hair, Walden thought; but old Thomson is graciously retired, growing

roses in the garden of that little cottage in the village, and somehow Pritchard has never acquired that unasailable dignity.

Pritchard began to drop his aitches, a sign that he was either very relaxed or very tense. 'Mr Churchill said you'd say not at 'ome, my lord, and 'e said to give you this letter.' He proffered an envelope on a tray.

Walden did *not* like to be pushed. He said crossly: 'Give it back to him—' Then he stopped, and looked again at the handwriting on the envelope. There was something familiar about the large, clear, sloping letters.

'Oh, dear,' said Walden.

He took the envelope, opened it, and drew out a single sheet of heavy white paper, folded once. At the top was the royal crest, printed in red. Walden read:

*Buckingham Palace*  
*May 1st. 1914.*

*My dear Walden*

*You will see young Winston.*

*George R. I*

'It's from the King,' Walden said to Lydia.

He was so embarrassed that he flushed. It was *frightfully* bad form to drag the King into something like this. Walden felt like a schoolboy who is told to stop quarrelling and get on with his prep. For a moment he was tempted to defy the King. But the consequences . . . Lydia would no longer be received by the Queen, people would be unable to invite the Waldens to parties

at which a member of the Royal Family would be present, and – worst of all – Walden's daughter Charlotte could not be presented at court as a debutante. The family's social life would be wrecked. They might as well go and live in another country. No, there was no question of disobeying the King.

Walden sighed. Churchill had defeated him. In a way it was a relief, for now he could break ranks and no one could blame him. *Letter from the King, old boy*, he would say in explanation; *nothing to be done, you know*.

'Ask Mr Churchill to come in,' he said to Pritchard.

He handed the letter to Lydia. The Liberals really did not understand how the monarchy was supposed to work, he reflected. He murmured: 'The King is just not firm enough with these people.'

Lydia said: 'This is becoming awfully boring.'

She was not bored at all, Walden thought, in fact she probably found it all quite exciting; but she said that because it was the kind of thing an English countess would say, and since she was not English but Russian she liked to say typically English things, the way a man speaking French would say *alors* and *hein?* a lot.

Walden went to the window. Churchill's motor car was still rattling and smoking in the forecourt. The driver stood beside it, with one hand on the door, as if he had to hold it like a horse to stop it wandering away. A few servants were gazing at it from a safe distance.

Pritchard came in and said: 'Mr Winston Churchill.'

Churchill was forty, exactly ten years younger than Walden. He was a short, slender man who dressed in a way Walden thought was a shade too elegant to be quite

gentlemanly. His hair was receding rapidly, leaving a peak at the forehead and two curls at the temples which, together with his short nose and the permanent sardonic twinkle in his eye, gave him a mischievous look. It was easy to see why the cartoonists regularly portrayed him as a malign cherub.

Churchill shook hands and said cheerfully: 'Good afternoon, Lord Walden.' He bowed to Lydia. 'Lady Walden, how do you do.' Walden thought: What is it about him that grates so on my nerves?

Lydia offered him tea and Walden told him to sit down. Walden would not make small talk: he was impatient to know what all the fuss was about.

Churchill began: 'First of all my apologies, together with the King's, for imposing myself on you.'

Walden nodded. He was not going to say it was perfectly all right.

Churchill said: 'I might add that I should not have done so, other than for the most compelling reasons.'

'You'd better tell me what they are.'

'Do you know what has been happening in the money market?'

'Yes. The discount rate has gone up.'

'From one-and-three-quarters to just under three per cent. It's an enormous rise, and it has come about in a few weeks.'

'I presume you know why.'

Churchill nodded. 'German companies have been factoring debts on a vast scale, collecting cash and buying gold. A few more weeks of this, and Germany will have got in everything owing to her from other

countries, while leaving her debts to them outstanding – and her gold reserves will be higher than they have ever been before.’

‘They are preparing for war.’

‘In this and other ways. They have raised a levy of one billion marks, over and above normal taxation, to improve an army which is already the strongest in Europe. You will remember that in 1909, when Lloyd George increased British taxation by fifteen million pounds sterling, there was almost a revolution. Well, a billion marks is equivalent to *fifty* million pounds. It’s the biggest levy in European history—’

‘Yes, indeed,’ Walden interrupted. Churchill was threatening to become histrionic: Walden did not want him making speeches. ‘We Conservatives have been worried about German militarism for some time. Now, at the eleventh hour, you’re telling me that we were right.’

Churchill was unperturbed. ‘Germany will attack France, almost certainly. The question is, will we come to the aid of France?’

‘No,’ Walden said in surprise. ‘The Foreign Secretary has assured us that we have no obligations to France—’

‘Sir Edward is sincere, of course,’ Churchill said. ‘But he is mistaken. Our understanding with France is such that we could not possibly stand aside and watch her defeated by Germany.’

Walden was shocked. The Liberals had convinced everyone, him included, that they would not lead England into war; and now one of their leading Ministers was saying the opposite. The duplicity of the

politicians was infuriating, but Walden forgot that as he began to contemplate the consequences of war. He thought of the young men he knew who would have to fight: the patient gardeners in his park, the cheeky footmen, the brown-faced farm-boys, the hell-raising undergraduates, the languid idlers in the clubs of St James's . . . then that thought was overtaken by another, much more chilling, and he said: 'But can we win?'

Churchill looked grave. 'I think not.'

Walden stared at him. 'Dear God, what have you people done?'

Churchill became defensive. 'Our policy has been to avoid war; and you can't do that and arm yourself to the teeth at the same time.'

'But you have failed to avoid war.'

'We're still trying.'

'But you think you will fail.'

Churchill looked belligerent for a moment, then swallowed his pride. 'Yes.'

'So what will happen?'

'If England and France together cannot defeat Germany, then we must have another ally, a third country on our side: Russia. If Germany is divided, fighting on two fronts, we can win. The Russian army is incompetent and corrupt, of course – like everything else in that country – but it doesn't matter so long as they draw off part of Germany's strength.'

Churchill knew perfectly well that Lydia was Russian, and it was characteristically tactless of him to disparage her country in her presence, but Walden let it pass, for

he was highly intrigued by what Churchill was saying. 'Russia already has an alliance with France,' he said.

'It's not enough,' Churchill said. 'Russia is obliged to fight if France is the victim of aggression. It is left to Russia to decide whether France is the victim or the aggressor in a particular case. When war breaks out both sides always claim to be the victim. Therefore the alliance obliges Russia to do no more than fight if she wants to. We need Russia to be freshly and firmly committed to our side.'

'I can't imagine you chaps joining hands with the Czar.'

'Then you misjudge us. To save England, we'll deal with the devil.'

'Your supporters won't like it.'

'They won't know.'

Walden could see where all this was leading, and the prospect was exciting. 'What have you in mind? A secret treaty? Or an unwritten understanding?'

'Both.'

Walden looked at Churchill through narrowed eyes. This young demagogue might have a brain, he thought; and that brain might not be working in my interest. So the Liberals want to do a secret deal with the Czar, despite the hatred which the English people have for the brutal Russian regime – but why tell me? They want to rope me in somehow, that much is clear. For what purpose? So that if it all goes wrong they will have a Conservative on whom to put the blame? It will take a plotter more subtle than Churchill to lead me into such a trap.

Walden said: 'Go on.'

'I have initiated naval talks with the Russians, along the lines of our military talks with the French. They've been going on for a while at a rather low level, and now they are about to get serious. A young Russian admiral is coming to London. His name is Prince Aleksei Andreivitch Orlov.'

Lydia said: 'Aleks!'

Churchill looked at her. 'I believe he is related to you, Lady Walden.'

'Yes,' Lydia said, and for some reason Walden could not even guess at she looked uneasy. 'He is the son of my elder sister, which makes him my . . . cousin?'

'Nephew,' Walden said.

'I didn't know he had become admiral,' Lydia added. 'It must be a recent promotion.' She was her usual, perfectly composed self, and Walden decided he had imagined that moment of unease. He was pleased that Aleks would be coming to London: he was very fond of the lad. Lydia said: 'He is young to have so much authority.'

'He's thirty,' Churchill said to Lydia, and Walden recalled that Churchill, at forty, was very young to be in charge of the entire Royal Navy. Churchill's expression seemed to say: The world belongs to brilliant young men like me and Orlov.

But you need me for something, Walden thought.

'In addition,' Churchill went on, 'Orlov is nephew to the Czar, through his father the late Prince, and – more importantly – he is one of the few people other than Rasputin whom the Czar likes and trusts. If anyone

in the Russian naval establishment can swing the Czar on to our side, Orlov can.'

Walden asked the question that was on his mind. 'And my part in all this?'

'I want you to represent England in these talks – and I want you to bring me Russia on a plate.'

The fellow could never resist the temptation to be melodramatic, Walden thought. 'You want Aleks and me to negotiate an Anglo-Russian military alliance?'

'Yes.'

Walden saw immediately how difficult, challenging and rewarding the task would be. He concealed his excitement, and resisted the temptation to get up and pace about.

Churchill was saying: 'You know the Czar personally. You know Russia and speak Russian fluently. You're Orlov's uncle by marriage. Once before you have persuaded the Czar to side with England rather than with Germany – in 1906, when you intervened to prevent the ratification of the Treaty of Bjorko.' Churchill paused. 'Nevertheless, you were not our first choice to represent Britain at these negotiations. The way things are at Westminster . . .'

'Yes, yes.' Walden did not want to start discussing *that*. 'However, something changed your mind.'

'In a nutshell, you were the Czar's choice. It seems you are the only Englishman in whom he has any faith. Anyway, he sent a telegram to his cousin the King, insisting that Orlov deal with you.'

Walden could imagine the consternation among the Radicals when they learned they would have to involve

a reactionary old Tory peer in such a clandestine scheme. 'I should think you were horrified,' he said.

'Not at all. In foreign affairs our policies are not so much at odds with yours. And I have always felt that domestic political disagreements were no reason why your talents should be lost to His Majesty's Government.'

Flattery now, Walden thought. They want me badly. Aloud he said: 'How would all this be kept secret?'

'It will seem like a social visit. If you agree, Orlov will stay with you for the London season. You will introduce him to society. Am I right in thinking that your daughter is due to come out this year?' He looked at Lydia.

'That's right,' she said.

'So you'll be going about a good deal anyway. Orlov is a bachelor, as you know, and obviously very eligible, so we can noise it abroad that he's looking for an English wife. He may even find one.'

'Excellent idea.' Suddenly Walden realized that he was enjoying himself. He had once been a kind of semi-official diplomat under the Conservative governments of Salisbury and Balfour, but for the last eight years he had taken no part in international politics. Now he had a chance to go back on stage, and he began to remember how absorbing and fascinating the whole business was: the secrecy; the gambler's art of negotiation; the conflicts of personalities; the cautious use of persuasion, bullying or the threat of war. The Russians were not easy to deal with, he recalled; they tended to be capricious, obstinate and arrogant. But Aleks would be manageable. When Walden married

Lydia, Aleks had been at the wedding, a ten-year-old in a sailor suit. Later Aleks had spent a couple of years at Oxford University, and had visited Walden Hall in the vacations. The boy's father was dead, so Walden gave him rather more time than he might normally have spent with an adolescent, and was delightfully rewarded by a friendship with a lively young mind.

It was a splendid foundation for a negotiation. I believe I might be able to bring it off, he thought. What a triumph that would be!

Churchill said: 'May I take it, then, that you'll do it?'  
'Of course,' said Walden.

Lydia stood up. 'No, don't get up,' she said as the men stood with her. 'I'll leave you to talk politics. Will you stay for dinner, Mr Churchill?'

'I've an engagement in Town, unfortunately.'

'Then I shall say goodbye.' She shook his hand.

She went out of the Octagon, which was where they always had tea, and walked across the great hall, through the small hall, and into the flower-room. At the same time one of the under-gardeners – she did not know his name – came in through the garden door with an armful of tulips, pink and yellow, for the dinner table. One of the things Lydia loved about England in general and Walden Hall in particular was the wealth of flowers, and she always had fresh ones cut morning and evening, even in winter when they had to be grown in the hothouses.

The gardener touched his cap – he did not have to

take it off unless he was spoken to, for the flower room was notionally part of the garden – and laid the flowers on a marble table, then went out. Lydia sat down and breathed the cool, scented air. This was a good room in which to recover from shocks, and the talk of St Petersburg had unnerved her. She remembered Aleksei Andreivitch as a shy, pretty little boy at her wedding; and she remembered *that* as the most unhappy day of her life.

It was perverse of her, she thought, to make the flower room her sanctuary. This house had rooms for almost every purpose: different rooms for breakfast, lunch, tea and dinner, a room for billiards and another in which to keep guns, special rooms for washing clothes, ironing, making jam, cleaning silver, hanging game, keeping wine, brushing suits . . . Her own suite had a bedroom, a dressing-room and a sitting-room. And yet, when she wanted to be at peace, she would come here and sit on a hard chair and look at the crude stone sink and the cast-iron legs of the marble table. Her husband also had an unofficial sanctuary, she had noticed: when Stephen was disturbed about something he would go to the gun-room and read the game book.

So Aleks would be her guest in London for the season. They would talk of home, and the snow and the ballet and the bombs; and seeing Aleks would make her think of another young Russian, the man she had not married.

It was nineteen years since she had seen that man, but still the mere mention of St Petersburg could bring

him to mind, and make her skin crawl beneath the watered silk of her tea-gown. He had been nineteen, the same age as she, a hungry student with long black hair, the face of a wolf and the eyes of a spaniel. He was as thin as a rail. His skin was white, the hair of his body soft, dark and adolescent; and he had clever, clever hands. She blushed now, not at the thought of his body but at the thought of her own, betraying her, maddening her with pleasure, making her cry out shamefully. I was wicked, she thought; and I am wicked still, for I should like to do it again.

She thought guiltily of her husband. She hardly ever thought of him without feeling guilty. She had not loved him when they married, but she loved him now. He was strong-willed and warm-hearted, and he adored her. His affection was constant and gentle and entirely lacking in the desperate passion which she had once known. He was happy, she thought, only because he had never known that love could be wild and hungry.

I no longer crave that kind of love, she told herself. I have learned to live without it, and over the years it has become easier. So it should – I'm almost forty!

Some of her friends were still tempted, and they yielded, too. They did not speak to her of their affairs, for they sensed she did not approve; but they gossiped about others, and Lydia knew that at some country-house parties there was a lot of . . . well, adultery. Once Lady Girard had said to Lydia, with the condescending air of an older woman who gives sound advice to a young hostess: 'My dear, if you have the Viscountess and Charlie Stott at the same time you simply *must* put

them in adjoining bedrooms.' Lydia had put them at opposite ends of the house, and the Viscountess had never come to Walden Hall again.

People said all this immorality was the fault of the late King, but Lydia did not believe them. It was true that he had befriended Jews and singers, but that did not make him a rake. Anyway, he had stayed at Walden Hall twice – once as Prince of Wales and once as King Edward the Seventh – and he had behaved impeccably both times.

She wondered whether the new King would ever come. It was a great strain, to have a monarch to stay, but such a thrill to make the house look its very best and have the most lavish meals imaginable and buy twelve new dresses just for one weekend. And if this King were to come, he might grant the Waldens the coveted *entrée* – the right to go into Buckingham Palace by the garden entrance on big occasions, instead of queuing up in The Mall along with two hundred other carriages.

She thought about her guests this weekend. George was Stephen's younger brother: he had Stephen's charm but none of Stephen's seriousness. George's daughter Belinda was eighteen, the same age as Charlotte. Both girls would be coming out this season. Belinda's mother had died some years ago and George had married again, rather quickly. His second wife, Clarissa, was much younger than he, and quite vivacious. She had given him twin sons. One of the twins would inherit Walden Hall when Stephen died, unless Lydia gave birth to a boy late in life. I

could, she thought; I feel as if I could, but it just doesn't happen.

It was almost time to be getting ready for dinner. She sighed. She felt comfortable and natural in her tea-gown, with her fair hair dressed loosely; but now she would have to be laced into a corset and have her hair piled high on her head by a maid. It was said that some of the young women were giving up corsets altogether. That was all right, Lydia supposed, if you were naturally shaped like the figure 8; but she was small in all the wrong places.

She got up and went outside. That under-gardener was standing by a rose tree, talking to one of the maids. Lydia recognized the maid: she was Annie, a pretty, voluptuous, empty-headed girl with a wide, generous smile. She stood with her hands in the pockets of her apron, turning her round face up to the sun and laughing at something the gardener had said. Now *there* is a girl who doesn't need a corset, Lydia thought. Annie was supposed to be supervising Charlotte and Belinda, for the governess had the afternoon off. Lydia said sharply: 'Annie! Where are the young ladies?'

Annie's smile disappeared and she dropped a curtsey. 'I can't find them, m'lady.'

The gardener moved off sheepishly.

'You don't appear to be looking for them,' Lydia said. 'Off you go.'

'Very good, m'lady.' Annie ran toward the back of the house. Lydia sighed: the girls would not be there, but she could not be bothered to call Annie back and reprimand her again.

She strolled across the lawn, thinking of familiar and pleasant things, pushing St Petersburg to the back of her mind. Stephen's father, the seventh Earl of Walden, had planted the west side of the park with rhododendrons and azaleas. Lydia had never met the old man, for he had died before she knew Stephen, but by all accounts he had been one of the great larger-than-life Victorians. His bushes were now in full glorious bloom, and made a rather un-Victorian blaze of assorted colours. We must have somebody paint a picture of the house, she thought; the last one was done before the park was mature.

She looked back at Walden Hall. The grey stone of the south front looked beautiful and dignified in the afternoon sunshine. In the centre was the south door. The farther, east wing contained the drawing-room and various dining-rooms, and behind them a straggle of kitchens, pantries and laundries running higgledy-piggledy to the distant stables. Nearer to her, on the west side, were the morning-room, the Octagon, and at the corner the library; then, around the corner along the west front, the billiard-room, the gun-room, her flower-room, a smoking-room and the estate office. On the first floor, the family bedrooms were mostly on the south side, the main guest-rooms on the west side, and the servants' rooms over the kitchens to the north-east, out of sight. Above the first floor was an irrational collection of towers, turrets and attics. The whole facade was a riot of ornamental stonework in the best Victorian rococo manner, with flowers and chevrons and sculpted coils of rope, dragons and lions and

cherubim, balconies and battlements, flagpoles and sundials and gargoyles. Lydia loved the place, and she was grateful that Stephen – unlike many of the old aristocracy – could afford to keep it up.

She saw Charlotte and Belinda emerge from the shrubbery across the lawn. Annie had not found them, of course. They both wore wide-brimmed hats and summer frocks with schoolgirls' black stockings and low black shoes. Because Charlotte was coming out this season, she was occasionally permitted to put up her hair and dress for dinner, but most of the time Lydia treated her like the child she was, for it was bad for children to grow up too fast. The two cousins were deep in conversation, and Lydia wondered idly what they were talking about. What was on my mind when I was eighteen? she asked herself; and then she remembered a young man with soft hair and clever hands, and she thought: Please, God, let me keep my secrets.

'Do you think we'll *feel* different after we've come out?' Belinda said.

Charlotte had thought about this before. 'I shan't.'

'But we'll be grown up.'

'I don't see how a lot of parties and balls and picnics can make a person grow up.'

'We'll have to have corsets.'

Charlotte giggled. 'Have you ever worn one?'

'No, have you?'

'I tried mine on last week.'

'What's it like?'

‘Awful. You can’t walk upright.’

‘How did you look?’

Charlotte gestured with her hands to indicate an enormous bust. They both collapsed laughing. Charlotte caught sight of her mother, and put on a contrite face in anticipation of a reprimand; but Mama seemed preoccupied, and merely smiled vaguely as she turned away.

‘It will be fun, though,’ said Belinda.

‘The season? Yes,’ Charlotte said doubtfully. ‘But what’s the point of it all?’

‘To meet the right sort of young man, of course.’

‘To look for husbands, you mean.’

They reached the great oak in the middle of the lawn, and Belinda threw herself down on the seat beneath the tree, looking faintly sulky. ‘You think coming out is all very silly, don’t you?’ she said.

Charlotte sat beside her and looked across the carpet of turf to the long south front of Walden Hall. The tall Gothic windows glinted in the afternoon sun. From here the house looked as if it might be rationally and regularly planned, but behind that facade it was really an enchanting muddle. She said: ‘What’s silly is being made to wait so long. I’m not in a hurry to go to balls and leave cards on people in the afternoon and meet young men – I shouldn’t mind if I never did those things – but it makes me so angry to be treated like a child still. I hate having supper with Marya, she’s quite ignorant, or pretends to be. At least in the dining-room you get some conversation. Papa talks about interesting things. When I get bored Marya suggests we play cards.’

I don't want to *play* anything, I've been playing all my life.' She sighed. Talking about it had made her angrier. She looked at Belinda's calm, freckled face with its halo of red curls. Charlotte's own face was oval, with a rather distinctive straight nose and a strong chin, and her hair was thick and dark. Happy-go-lucky Belinda, she thought; these things really don't bother her, *she* never gets intense about anything.

Charlotte touched Belinda's arm. 'Sorry. I didn't mean to carry on so.'

'It's all right.' Belinda smiled indulgently. 'You always get cross about things you can't possibly change. Do you remember that time you decided you wanted to go to Eton?'

'Never!'

'You most certainly did. You made a terrible fuss. Papa had gone to school at Eton, you said, so why shouldn't you?'

Charlotte had no memory of that, but she could not deny that it sounded just like her at ten years old. She said: 'But do you really think these things can't possibly be different? Coming out, and going to London for the season, and getting engaged, and then marriage . . .'

'You could have a scandal and be forced to emigrate to Rhodesia.'

'I'm not quite sure how one goes about having a scandal.'

'Nor am I.'

They were silent for a while. Sometimes Charlotte wished she were passive like Belinda. Life would be simpler – but then again, it would be awfully dull. She

said: 'I asked Marya what I'm supposed to *do* after I get married. Do you know what she said?' She imitated her governess's throaty Russian accent. 'Do? Why, my child, you will do *nothing*.'

'Oh, that's silly,' Belinda said.

'Is it? What do my mother and yours do?'

'They're Good Society. They have parties and stay about at country houses and go to the opera and . . .'

'That's what I mean. Nothing.'

'They have babies—'

'Now that's another thing. They make such a *secret* about having babies.'

'That's because it's . . . vulgar.'

'Why? What's vulgar about it?' Charlotte saw herself becoming *enthusiastic* again. Marya was always telling her not to be *enthusiastic*. She took a deep breath and lowered her voice. 'You and I have got to have these babies. Don't you think they might tell us something about how it happens? They're very keen for us to know all about Mozart and Shakespeare and Leonardo da Vinci.'

Belinda looked uncomfortable but very interested. She feels the same way about it as I do, Charlotte thought; I wonder how much she knows?

Charlotte said: 'Do you realize they grow inside you?'

Belinda nodded, then blurted out: 'But how does it start?'

'Oh, it just happens, I think, when you get to about twenty-one. That's really why you have to be a debutante and come out – to make sure you get a husband

before you start having babies.’ Charlotte hesitated. ‘I think,’ she added.

Belinda said: ‘Then how do they get out?’

‘I don’t know. How big are they?’

Belinda held her hands about two feet apart. ‘The twins were this big when they were a day old. She thought again, and narrowed the distance. ‘Well, perhaps this big.’

Charlotte said: ‘When a hen lays an egg, it comes out . . . behind.’ She avoided Belinda’s eyes. She had never had such an intimate conversation with anyone, ever. ‘The egg seems too big, but it does come out.’

Belinda leaned closer and spoke quietly. ‘I saw Daisy drop a calf once. She’s the Jersey cow on the Home Farm. The men didn’t know I was watching. That’s what they call it, “dropping” a calf.’

Charlotte was fascinated. ‘What happened?’

‘It was horrible. It looked as if her tummy opened up, and there was a lot of blood and things.’ She shuddered.

‘It makes me scared,’ Charlotte said. ‘I’m afraid it will happen to me before I find out all about it. Why won’t they *tell* us?’

‘We shouldn’t be talking about such things.’

‘We’ve damn well got a right to talk about them!’

Belinda gasped. ‘Swearing makes it worse!’

‘I don’t care.’ It maddened Charlotte that there was no way to find out these things, no one to ask, no book to consult . . . She was struck by an idea. ‘There’s a locked cupboard in the library – I bet there are books about all this sort of thing in there. Let’s look!’

‘But if it’s locked . . .’

‘Oh, I know where the key is, I’ve known for years.’

‘We’ll be in terrible trouble if we’re caught.’

‘They’re all changing for dinner now. This is our chance.’ Charlotte stood up.

Belinda hesitated. ‘There’ll be a row.’

‘I don’t care if there is. Anyway, I’m going to look in the cupboard, and you can come if you want.’ Charlotte turned and walked toward the house. After a moment Belinda ran up beside her, as Charlotte had known she would.

They went through the pillared portico and into the cool, lofty great hall. Turning left, they passed the morning-room and the Octagon, then entered the library. Charlotte told herself she was a woman and entitled to know, but all the same she felt like a naughty little girl.

The library was her favourite room. Being on a corner of the house it was very bright, lit by three big windows. The leather-upholstered chairs were old and surprisingly comfortable. In winter there was a fire all day, and there were games and jigsaw puzzles as well as two or three thousand books. Some of the books were ancient, having been here since the house was built, but many were new, for Mama read novels and Papa was interested in lots of different things – chemistry, agriculture, travel, astronomy and history. Charlotte liked particularly to come here on Marya’s day off, when the governess was not able to snatch away *Far from the Madding Crowd* and replace it with *The Water Babies*. Sometimes Papa would be here with her, sitting at the

Victorian pedestal desk and reading a catalogue of agricultural machinery or the balance sheet of an American railroad, but he never interfered with her choice of books.

The room was empty now. Charlotte went straight to the desk, opened a small, square drawer in one of the pedestals, and took out a key.

There were three cupboards against the wall beside the desk. One contained games in boxes and another had cartons of writing-paper and envelopes embossed with the Walden crest. The third was locked. Charlotte opened it with the key.

Inside were twenty or thirty books and a pile of old magazines. Charlotte glanced at one of the magazines. It was called *The Pearl*. It did not seem promising. Hastily, she picked out two books at random, without looking at the titles. She closed and locked the cupboard and replaced the key in the desk drawer.

‘There!’ she said triumphantly.

‘Where can we go to look at them?’ Belinda hissed.

‘Remember the hideaway?’

‘Oh! Yes!’

‘Why are we whispering?’

They both giggled.

Charlotte went to the door. Suddenly she heard a voice in the hall, calling: ‘Lady Charlotte . . . Lady Charlotte . . .’

‘It’s Annie, she’s looking for us,’ Charlotte said. ‘She’s nice, but so dim-witted. We’ll go out the other way, quickly.’ She crossed the library and went through the far door into the billiard-room, which led in turn

to the gun-room; but there was someone in the gun-room. She listened for a moment.

‘It’s my Papa,’ Belinda whispered, looking scared. ‘He’s been out with the dogs.’

Fortunately there was a pair of French doors from the billiard-room on to the west terrace. Charlotte and Belinda crept out and closed the doors quietly behind them. The sun was low and red, casting long shadows across the lawns.

‘Now how do we get back in?’ Belinda said.

‘Over the roofs. Follow me!’

Charlotte ran around the back of the house and through the kitchen garden to the stables. She stuffed the two books into the bodice of her dress and tightened her belt so that they should not fall out.

From a corner of the stable yard she could climb, by a series of easy steps, to the roof over the servants’ quarters. First she stood on the lid of a low iron bunker which was used to store logs. From there she hauled herself on to the corrugated tin roof of a lean-to shed where tools were kept. The shed leaned against the wash-house. She stood upright on the corrugated tin and lifted herself on to the slate roof of the wash-house. She turned to look behind: Belinda was following.

Lying face down on the sloping slates, Charlotte edged along crabwise, holding on with the palms of her hands and the sides of her shoes, until the roof ended up against a wall. Then she crawled up the roof and straddled the ridge.

Belinda caught up with her and said: ‘Isn’t this dangerous?’

‘I’ve been doing it since I was nine years old.’

Above them was the window of an attic bedroom shared by two parlourmaids. The window was high in the gable, its top corners almost reaching the roof which sloped down on either side. Charlotte stood upright and peeped into the room. No one was there. She pulled herself on to the window-ledge and stood up.

She leaned to the left, got an arm and a leg over the edge of the roof, and hauled herself on to the slates. She turned back and helped Belinda up.

They lay there for a moment, catching their breath. Charlotte remembered being told that Walden Hall had four acres of roof. It was hard to believe until you came up here and realized you could get lost among the ridges and valleys. From here it was possible to reach any part of the roofs by using the footways, ladders and tunnels provided for the maintenance men who came every spring to clean gutters, paint drain-pipes and replace broken tiles.

Charlotte got up. ‘Come on, the rest is easy,’ she said.

There was a ladder to the next roof, then a board footway, then a short flight of wooden steps leading to a small, square door set in a wall. Charlotte unlatched the door and crawled through, and she was in the hideaway.

It was a low, windowless room with a sloping ceiling and a plank floor which would give you splinters if you were not careful. She imagined it had once been used as a storeroom: anyway, it was now quite forgotten. A

door at one end led into a closet off the nursery, which had not been used for many years. Charlotte had discovered the hideaway when she was eight or nine, and had used it occasionally in the game – which she seemed to have been playing all her life – of escaping from supervision. There were cushions on the floor, candles in jars, and a box of matches. On one of the cushions lay a battered and floppy toy dog which had been hidden here eight years ago after Marya, the governess, had threatened to throw him away. A tiny occasional table bore a cracked vase full of coloured pencils, and a red leather writing-case. Walden Hall was inventoried every few years, and Charlotte could recall Mrs Braithwaite, the housekeeper, saying that the oddest things went missing.

Belinda crawled in and Charlotte lit the candles. She took the two books from her bodice and looked at the titles. One was called *Household Medicine* and the other *The Romance of Lust*. The medical book seemed more promising. She sat on a cushion and opened it. Belinda sat beside her, looking guilty. Charlotte felt as if she were about to discover the secret of life.

She leafed through the pages. The book seemed explicit and detailed on rheumatism, broken bones and measles, but when it arrived at childbirth it suddenly became impenetrably vague. There was some mysterious stuff about cramps, waters breaking, and a cord which had to be tied in two places then cut with scissors which had been dipped in boiling water. This chapter was evidently written for people who already knew a lot about the subject. There was a drawing of a naked

woman. Charlotte noticed, but was too embarrassed to tell Belinda, that the woman in the drawing had no hair in a certain place where Charlotte had a great deal. Then there was a diagram of a baby inside a woman's tummy, but no indication of a passage by which the baby might emerge.

Belinda said: 'It must be that the doctor cuts you open.'

'Then what did they do in history, before there were doctors?' Charlotte said. 'Anyway, this book's no good.' She opened the other at random and read aloud the first sentence that came to her eye. 'She lowered herself with lascivious slowness until she was completely impaled upon my rigid shaft, whereupon she commenced her delicious rocking movements to and fro.' Charlotte frowned, and looked at Belinda.

'I wonder what it means?' said Belinda.

Feliks Kschessinsky sat in a railway carriage waiting for the train to pull out of Dover Station. The carriage was cold. He was quite still. It was dark outside, and he could see his own reflection in the window: a tall man with a neat moustache, wearing a black coat and a bowler hat. There was a small suitcase on the rack above his head. He might have been the travelling representative of a Swiss watch manufacturer, except that anyone who looked closely would have seen that the coat was cheap, the suitcase was cardboard, and the face was not the face of a man who sold watches.

He was thinking about England. He could remember

when, in his youth, he had upheld England's constitutional monarchy as the ideal form of government. The thought amused him, and the flat white face reflected in the window gave him the ghost of a smile. He had since changed his mind about the ideal form of government.

The train moved off, and a few minutes later Feliks was watching the sun rise over the orchards and hop fields of Kent. He never ceased to be astonished at how *pretty* Europe was. When he first saw it he had suffered a profound shock, for like any Russian peasant he had been incapable of imagining that the world could look this way. He had been on a train then, he recalled. He had crossed hundreds of miles of Russia's thinly populated north-western provinces, with their stunted trees, their miserable villages buried in snow, and their winding mud roads; then, one morning, he had woken up to find himself in Germany. Looking at the neat green fields, the paved roads, the dainty houses in the clean villages, and the flower beds on the sunny station platform, he had thought he was in Paradise. Later, in Switzerland, he had sat on the verandah of a small hotel, warmed by the sun yet within sight of snow-covered mountains, drinking coffee and eating a fresh, crusty roll, and he had thought: People here must be so happy.

Now, watching the English farms come to life in the early morning, he recalled dawn in his home village: a grey, boiling sky and a bitter wind; a frozen swampy field with puddles of ice and tufts of coarse grass rimed with frost; himself in a worn canvas smock, his feet

already numb in felt shoes and clogs; his father striding along beside him, wearing the threadbare robes of an impoverished country priest, arguing that God was good. His father had loved the Russian people because God loved them. It had always been perfectly obvious to Feliks that God hated the people, for He treated them so cruelly.

That discussion had been the start of a long journey, a journey which had taken Feliks from Christianity through socialism to anarchist terror, from Tambov province through St Petersburg and Siberia to Geneva. And in Geneva he had made the decision which brought him to England. He recalled the meeting. He had almost missed it . . .

He almost missed the meeting. He had been to Cracow, to negotiate with the Polish Jews who smuggled the magazine, *Mutiny*, across the border into Russia. He arrived in Geneva after dark, and went straight to Ulrich's tiny back-street printing shop. The editorial committee was in session: four men and two girls, gathered around a candle, in the rear of the shop behind the gleaming press, breathing the smells of newsprint and oiled machinery, planning the Russian revolution.

Ulrich brought Feliks up to date on the discussion. He had seen Josef, a spy for the Ochrana, the Russian secret police. Josef secretly sympathized with the revolutionaries, and gave the Ochrana false information for their money. Sometimes the anarchists would give him

true but harmless tidbits, and in return Josef warned them of Ochrana activities.

This time Josef's news had been sensational. 'The Czar wants a military alliance with England,' Ulrich told Feliks. 'He is sending Prince Orlov to London to negotiate. The Ochrana know about it because they have to guard the Prince on the journey through Europe.'

Feliks took off his hat and sat down, wondering whether this was true. One of the girls, a sad, shabby Russian, brought him tea in a glass. Feliks took a half-eaten lump of sugar from his pocket, placed it between his teeth, and sipped the tea through the sugar in the peasant manner.

'The point being,' Ulrich went on, 'that England could then have a war with Germany and make the Russians fight it.'

Feliks nodded.

The shabby girl said: 'And it won't be the princes and counts who get killed – it will be the ordinary Russian people.'

She was right, Feliks thought. The war would be fought by the peasants. He had spent most of his life among those people. They were hard, surly and narrow-minded, but their foolish generosity and their occasional spontaneous outbursts of sheer fun gave a hint of how they might be in a decent society. Their concerns were the weather, animals, disease, childbirth and outwitting the landlord. For a few years, in their late teens, they were sturdy and straight, and could smile and run fast and flirt; but soon they became

bowed and grey and slow and sullen. Now Prince Orlov would take those young men in the springtime of their lives and march them in front of cannon to be shot to pieces or maimed for ever, no doubt for the very best reasons of international diplomacy.

It was things like this that made Feliks an anarchist.

'What is to be done?' said Ulrich.

'We must blaze the news across the front page of *Mutiny!*' said the shabby girl.

They began to discuss how the story should be handled. Feliks listened. Editorial matters interested him little. He distributed the magazine and wrote articles about how to make bombs, and he was deeply discontented. He had become terribly civilized in Geneva. He drank beer instead of vodka, wore a collar and a tie, and went to concerts of orchestral music. He had a job in a bookshop. Meanwhile Russia was in turmoil. The oil workers were at war with the Cossacks, the parliament was impotent, and a million workers were on strike. Czar Nicolas II was the most incompetent and asinine ruler a degenerate aristocracy could produce. The country was a powder barrel waiting for a spark, and Feliks wanted to be that spark. But it was fatal to go back. Joe Stalin had gone back, and no sooner had he set foot on Russian soil than he had been sent to Siberia. The secret police knew the exiled revolutionaries better than they knew those still at home. Feliks was chafed by his stiff collar, his leather shoes and his circumstances.

He looked around at the little group of anarchists: Ulrich, the printer, with white hair and an inky apron,

an intellectual who loaned Feliks books by Proudhon and Kropotkin but also a man of action who had once helped Feliks rob a bank; Olga, the shabby girl, who had seemed to be falling in love with Feliks until, one day, she saw him break a policeman's arm and became frightened of him; Vera, the promiscuous poetess; Yevno, the philosophy student who talked a lot about a cleansing wave of blood and fire; Hans, the watch-maker, who saw into people's souls as if he had them under his magnifying glass; and Piotr, the dispossessed Count, writer of brilliant economic tracts and inspirational revolutionary editorials. They were sincere and hardworking people, and all very clever. Feliks knew their importance, for he had been inside Russia among the desperate people who waited impatiently for smuggled newspapers and pamphlets and passed them from hand to hand until they fell to pieces. Yet it was not enough, for economic tracts were no protection against police bullets, and fiery articles would not burn palaces.

Ulrich was saying: 'This news deserves wider circulation than it will get in *Mutiny*. I want every peasant in Russia to know that Orlov would lead him into a useless and bloody war over something that concerns him not at all.'

Olga said: 'The first problem is whether we will be believed.'

Feliks said: 'The first problem is whether the story is true.'

'We can check,' Ulrich said. 'The London comrades could find out whether Orlov arrives when he is sup-

posed to arrive, and whether he meets the people he needs to meet.'

'It's not enough to spread the news,' Yevno said excitedly. 'We must put a stop to this!'

'How?' said Ulrich, looking at young Yevno over the top of his wire-rimmed spectacles.

'We should call for the assassination of Orlov – he is a traitor, betraying the people, and he should be executed.'

'Would that stop the talks?'

'It probably would,' said Count Piotr. 'Especially if the assassin were an anarchist. Remember, England gives political asylum to anarchists, and this infuriates the Czar. Now, if one of his princes were killed in England by one of our comrades, the Czar might well be angry enough to call off the whole negotiation.'

Yevno said: 'What a story we would have then! We could say that Orlov had been assassinated by one of us for treason against the Russian people.'

'Every newspaper in the world would carry *that* report,' Ulrich mused.

'Think of the effect it would have at home. You know how Russian peasants feel about conscription – it's a death sentence. They hold a funeral when a boy goes into the army. If they learned that the Czar was planning to make them fight a major European war, the rivers would run red with blood . . .'

He was right, Feliks thought. Yevno always talked like that, but this time he was right.

Ulrich said: 'I think you're in dreamland, Yevno.'

Orlov is on a secret mission – he won't ride through London in an open carriage waving to the crowds. Besides, I know the London comrades – they've never assassinated anyone. I don't see how it can be done.'

'I do,' Feliks said. They all looked at him. The shadows on their faces shifted in the flickering candlelight. 'I know how it can be done.' His voice sounded strange to him, as if his throat was constricted. 'I'll go to London. I'll kill Orlov.'

The room was suddenly quiet, as all the talk of death and destruction suddenly became real and concrete in their midst. They stared at him in surprise, all except Ulrich, who smiled knowingly, almost as if he had planned, all along, that it would turn out this way.