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The Coronation Party

This was the day that Daniel vaulted the wall. Not many weeks previously the tiny Queen had begun to lose her appetite. In Marseilles, President Kruger of South Africa, fleeing into exile laden with wealth stolen from his own people, raised the rabble to new frenzies of anti-Britishness, and hotels where British travellers were thought to be staying were besieged.

The Queen grew drowsy. She had never before shown any lapse of energy or attention, but now she nodded off even at crucial moments. She received a letter from a boy bugler in the Devons, telling her how he had been the one to sound the charge at Waggon Hill, and she managed to reply to it.

The Queen travelled from London to Osborne House, on the Isle of Wight. She loved it there, and had long considered it to be her real family home. She had her own little beach with a bathing hut, and there was a miniature house where her children, now scattered across Europe, used to play when Albert was still alive. Across the Solent she could visit the vast military hospital that she had set up at Netley, bringing the scarves that she liked to knit for the wounded soldiers.

The Queen found that she could not speak when the Brazilian ambassador came to present his credentials. She was forgetting how to talk. She failed to recognise Lord Roberts when he returned in triumph from South Africa in order to become the new Commander-in-Chief. He was bewildered and grief-stricken.

The Queen performed her last great imperial act, and proclaimed the establishment of the Commonwealth of Australia. Her visit to the Riviera was cancelled, and the Keeper of the Privy Purse was obliged to pay out £800 in compensation to the Hotel Cimiez.

It had been so long since the death of a sovereign that no one

knew what to say, or how to behave. Lord Salisbury refused to talk about the accession ceremonies because it was too upsetting. The well-to-do cancelled their dinner parties and balls, and the frivolous optimism that had accompanied the arrival of a new century evaporated. It was January, and the dark clouds that wept rain onto the land complemented the mood of the people beneath them.

The Queen's relatives and descendants converged on Osborne from all over Europe. In South Africa the war that was supposed to have been won already was carried on by Botha, Smuts and de Wet. Money and young men continued to be expended. The British troops were killed mainly by enteric fever.

The tiny Queen died. The Lord Mayor of London was informed, and then the rest of the world. Whilst the nation lay stunned, the Great argued about what should be done next. Lord Acton announced that King Edward VII could not call himself Edward VII because he was not descended from previous Edwards. Did the Lord Mayor of London count as an ex-officio member of the Privy Council? He decided that he did, and gatecrashed it. Who was in charge of the funeral? Was it the Lord Chamberlain or the Duke of Norfolk, even though he was a Catholic? The Duke insisted on his historic right, and the King conceded. Lady Cadogan received an invitation to the interment that was intended for her husband, in which she was requested to come wearing trousers.

The Queen's coffin was so minute that it might have been that of a child. King Edward and the Kaiser walked behind it as it was drawn through Cowes. It came across the Solent in a battleship, flanked by the greatest fleet in the world. In London the route from Victoria Station to Buckingham Palace then Paddington Station was blocked solid with mourners hoping to see the great procession of the gun carriage. Behind it rode King Edward, flanked by the Duke of Connaught and Kaiser Wilhelm, followed by the handsome and slim Crown Prince of Germany, the embodiment of hope for his nation, the guarantor of its great future as a beacon of civilisation.

The Queen's body was laid to rest at Windsor. The grandmother of Europe had gone, and everyone knew as if by instinct that a

momentous era had suddenly ended. She left behind railways that ran at sixty miles an hour, with carriages that nowadays had roofs on them. Vast liners crossed the Atlantic in two weeks. Bull-baiting had gone, and there was a society for the prevention of cruelty to animals and another for the prevention of cruelty to children. Swearing had become taboo in polite society, and aristocratic men no longer got so drunk at dinner parties that ladies had to make their escape through the windows. There were now aerated bread shops, and Lyons Corner Houses where one was served by 'Nippies' in white frilly aprons. Anybody these days could buy coffee. The River Fleet was no longer an open sewer. Many had electric light, and there was clean water laid on in the working-class districts for half an hour every day, except for Sundays, causing an awful elbowing on Saturdays. Motor cars no longer caught fire when you started them up. They had, however, spoiled the evening drive in hansoms through Hyde Park. The cult of respectability had introduced a blessed order into people's lives, and at the same time opened the door for marvellous hypocrisy.

Much as the people had loved their tiny Queen, there had been something dull about all that respectability, and the grief and stupefaction that had engulfed her subjects was tempered by the anticipation of something that might be more entertaining. The new King was a bon viveur. He loved France rather than Germany. He consorted with actresses. For the last ten years, in any case, the Victorian age had already been slipping away. Fast girls smoked, and wore the most shocking bloomers when they went out on their bicycles. Businesswomen of dubious morality were getting jobs in the City. Saddlers who specialised in side-saddles found their orders drying up. Crowds filled the music halls to hear smutty songs rendered by cheeky chappies and saucy doxies.

The new King, kept strictly in the dark about state matters during his mother's reign, grew impatient with precedent and forged a new path. He upset everyone at court. He gave the right to organise his coronation to the Catholic Duke of Norfolk and not to the Anglican Lord Chamberlain. There was a long and bitter dispute about whether the Lords should be robed, and the decision was changed four times. He sent Lord Carrington,

a notorious liberal, as his personal envoy to France, Spain and Portugal. This was the same Lord Carrington who had once, as one of a panel of magistrates that had tried him, scandalously paid the fine of a newly released convict, caught sleeping rough when he had not been able to walk to High Wycombe before darkness fell. The alternative had been several more months in prison, and Carrington had resigned from the bench immediately afterwards, saying that if this was justice he wanted nothing more to do with it.

The King dragged Lord Wolsey from retirement, and sent him abroad, with sashes and medals to present to foreign potentates, even the Shah of Iran, who thereby became the first Muslim to become a member of the Christian Order of the Garter. He cleared out his mother's immense accumulation of bric-a-brac, updated his plumbing, filled his court with men who were interesting rather than important, and with women who were both interesting and beautiful.

In Court Road, Eltham, on 9 August 1902, Mr and Mrs Hamilton McCosh held a coronation party, postponed from June. It was to be a kind of elaborate high tea. They borrowed long trestles from several firms of wallpaperers, covered them with beautiful damask cloths, and, at greatly inflated prices, hired enough plain china plates and silver-plated cutlery to see them through the day. The servants set up two long tables in the garden, to accommodate the buffet, and laid out rugs all over the lawn and in the orchard in order to create a grand *déjeuner sur l'herbe*. Chairs were brought out of the house for the elderly or stiff of limb. From the kitchen there appeared plates of ham and tongue, elaborate salads in the French style, Normandy cheeses, and fabulous heaps of fresh Kentish strawberries and Devon cream. For the children there was lemonade, and for the adults jugs of potent fruit cup with sprigs of mint floating on the surface. Chilled champagne would be brought out in time for a toast to the King after Mr McCosh had made his speech.

This was the beginning of the age when riches would finally come to count as much as rank. Court Road consisted of very large detached houses with substantial gardens at the rear. Most had two gateways connected by a small semicircular driveway out

in the front so that carriages could arrive and leave without any awkward manoeuvring. The McCosh entrance and exit had impressive brick pillars with THE GRAMPIANS set into them in Portland stone. Between them ran a low wall, just the right height for children to walk along. Mr McCosh had planted a small walnut tree just behind it, because he loved the way the leaves turned yellow in autumn, and was convinced that walnut was the hardwood of the future, without thought to the possibility that long after his death the tree's roots would topple the pillars and wall altogether, so that by the end of the century there would be no memory of the house ever having had a name at all.

Inside were large rooms with high ceilings and small coal fires. On the top floor were crudely furnished rooms with washstands for the servants, but on the floor below that there was a proper bathroom with a real lion-footed cast-iron bath that gave hot water from a boiler house attached to the side of the kitchen. In this boiler house was often to be found the boilerman, dozing in the warmth, or rolling cigarettes, and occasionally getting up to shovel in a new dose of coal. His was a life of bucolic idleness, disrupted only by the occasional breakdown of the whole system, which worked on the thermosyphon principle, without any need of a pump at all.

In general one could gauge the success of the householders of Court Road by the elaborateness of their cornices. Mr McCosh was an intelligent, charming, humane, ambitious, hard-working man with an eye to anything whatsoever that might turn a profit, and The Grampians had by far the most elaborate, extensive and delicate cornices of any house in Court Road. His chief weakness, which he was able to turn to profit even so, was an addiction to golf. He was often to be found playing rounds at the Blackheath when he was supposed to be in his London office.

One disadvantage of his speculations was that he might veer from fabulous riches to abject penury in the blink of an eye. He was accustomed to avoiding paying bills until such time as he recouped his wealth. This he always did, but it remained a sore point to the local tradesmen, who never knew when it was wise to accept his custom or decline it. Their one consolation was that he scrupulously calculated the interest on any debt he owed, and paid it in full.

On 9 August 1902 Mr Hamilton McCosh had plenty of money, it seemed unlikely that it was going to rain, and he was rejoicing in the pleasure of his own largesse.

By his side, frequently departing from it in order to direct the servants, stood his wife. Mrs McCosh had been a great beauty in her youth, and was to retain her comeliness into old age. She was seven years senior to her husband, and had married late owing to a long previous engagement to a milord who subsequently turned out to have had a wife already, locked up in an asylum in New York. It had taken her many years to recover from the mortification of the scandal having become public and being written up in the press, and she had virtually gone into seclusion until the gallant and impervious Hamilton McCosh had hauled her out of it. She had caused much gossip by playing tennis vigorously when pregnant, and was notorious for her outspoken belief that women should vote equally with men. She had become a warrior in what was being called 'the Sex War'. However, her husband would explain that this was because she wanted the right to vote Conservative. She had recently taken up cycling and was still somewhat bruised about the thighs after losing a wheel during a tour of Hayling Island.

Mrs McCosh's great weakness was for the royal family. She followed their doings avidly, and subscribed to *The Times* only to peruse the Court Circular. The coronation party was her idea, even though most of the nation had already feasted a month before, when the King had donated £30,000 to the poor of London, and 456,000 people had eaten and drunk at his expense. The King himself, recovering in bed from an operation, had sent his regrets to each Lord Mayor, and the Prince and Princess of Wales had made up for his absence by visiting twenty of the dinner parties in succession. It had all felt like a wonderful new start.

Mrs McCosh was looking forward to the coronation party, but also wondered if she could bear to see it through, because she was still in deep mourning for the Queen, and had only this very day given up wearing black. She was not at all sure that she approved of the new King, who kept racehorses and had dismissed many of the old Queen's retainers.

'I do hope that His Majesty is fully recovered,' she said to her husband, somewhat insincerely.

'What was it again?' he asked.

'Peritiphylitis.'

'Sounds dreadful. What on earth is it?'

'Darling, I've told you so many times. It's an infection of something that the appendix hangs from. Anyway, they say he's recovered, but won't be carrying the Sword of State to the altar. I do hope he doesn't collapse.'

'Kings of Scotland dinna collapse,' replied Mr McCosh. 'They die heroically in battle or get stabbed in their sleep.'

'My dear, I hope you are not suggesting that our dear present Queen Alexandra may be something of a Lady Macbeth? She is Danish after all.'

'Danish monarchs kill their brothers and nephews, if we are to believe the Bard. And women are strange, unscrupulous creatures. And queens are women. And the Danish Queen married her husband's brother, who killed him. A sorry lot, Danish queens.'

'You must stop being provocative, my dear. It's fortunate that I'm so used to your humour. If that is what one should call it. *Hamlet* is undoubtedly fiction, as you well know. I do wish one could have been there . . . at the coronation, I mean. I should have loved to see Lord Kitchener all done up in plumes, and Sir Alfred Gaselee. And the new Prime Minister, of course.'

'Well, my dear, we are exceedingly lucky with the weather. We couldn't have asked for a nicer day. And we have the Eltham aristocracy to entertain. Talking of which, have we set up the table for the tradesmen and artisans?'

'Of course. They'll be down there at the orchard end.'

'Ah, far below the salt.'

Affecting not to understand his humour, which is how the British love to spoil a joke, Mrs McCosh replied, 'Every table will have its own salt cellar and pepper pot. I'm just going to see that Nurse has got the children ready.'

'Ah, here is Mme Pitt and her little boys,' said Mr McCosh. 'I shall go and greet them, and you can chivvy up the girls, my dear.'

For a reason long forgotten, there was a blue door in the wall

that divided the garden of The Grampians from that of its neighbour on the left. The door was old and a little rotten at top and bottom. Its hinges were creaky and rusty, but it still worked, and it was kept unseized because of its frequent use by the children of the two families.

On the other side of the blue door dwelt the Pendennis family, recently arrived from Baltimore, complete with three young sons, Sidney, Albert and Ashbridge, all born a year apart, and each of the younger exactly six inches shorter than his immediate elder, so that they reminded some people of a set of library steps. Every morning these boys shook their father's hand when they came down to breakfast, and addressed him as 'sir'.

The McCosh family had four daughters, blue-eyed Rosie, with her long rich chestnut hair, and fair skin peppered with freckles; then Christabel, an English rose in the making, tall and athletic. Then there was Otilie, who was clearly going to be of the traditional English pear shape, with a pale round face and lovely dark round eyes set beneath a sweet dark fringe. Lastly there was Sophie, little, thin and ungainly, with uncontrollable frizzy hair, whose humour and manner of speech were already becoming quirky. Her father liked to say that she had a lopsided view of the world, and that it would stand her in good stead. Whilst it would be true to say that these girls deeply loved their difficult mother, it would also be true to say that they adored their easy-going father.

On the opposing garden wall there was no blue door, so the two boys who played in the garden beyond it would arrive simply by climbing over and leaping down. They had worn a hard, flat patch in the rose bed. The wall was seven foot high, and it was already clear that Archie Pitt and his younger brother Daniel were going to grow up into a pair of daredevils and adventurers.

On this day, just as everybody was settling down on their rugs and chairs with their plates of tongue and their cup, Archie, aged fourteen, appeared on the top of the wall in his best clothes, and stood on it, arms akimbo, with all the confidence of a Himalayan goat.

'Archie, what on earth are you doing up there?' demanded Mrs McCosh.

‘We have created a spectacle,’ announced the boy, ‘in honour of the King.’

‘In honour of the King?’ repeated Mrs McCosh, somewhat placated. ‘Well, that’s very fine of you, I’m sure.’

‘Can we put some of the cushions just down there, the other side of the path?’ asked Archie. He had a tone of command unusual in an adolescent, and those immediately below him vacated their rugs and arranged cushions as directed, their indulgent assumption being that Archie wanted a soft spot on which to land.

‘Really, one shouldn’t tolerate such things in a child,’ said Mrs McCosh.

‘Aren’t you intrigued?’ replied her husband. ‘I must say, I do admire such confidence in a boy, don’t you? And anyway, I know what’s going to happen, and I’ve already given the boys permission. We are going to start off with a feat.’

Archie’s parents were as sanguine. They stood below, arm in arm, grinning proudly. Archie’s mother, resolutely French, but Protestant nonetheless, like a sort of belated Huguenot, was always known as Mme Pitt, on her own insistence, and was twirling a parasol with her free hand. Captain Pitt, formerly of the Royal Yacht *Victoria and Albert*, was dressed in naval uniform for the great day, the gold braid glittering in the sunlight against the dark blue. Mme Pitt said, ‘*Chou-chou*, I hope this is not going to end in tears.’

‘*Maman*, we’ve been practising like billy-o. Daniel’s done it heaps of times. And it was your idea.’

‘The worst that can happen is a broken neck,’ said the Captain.

‘*Oh, chéri, tais-toi*. You shouldn’t say such things. It tempts the Devil.’

‘Let’s hope to settle for a sprained ankle, then.’

‘*Chéri! Arrêtes!*’

‘Is everybody ready?’ called Archie. ‘Come on, everybody, look!’

Gradually, a hush fell, and even the servants ceased bustling. Mr McCosh stepped forward.

‘My friends and, indeed, one or two mortal enemies, welcome to The Grampians. We are here to celebrate the beginning of a new age, perhaps. His Majesty is . . . how shall I put it? . . .

somewhat older than his dear mother was when she came to the throne . . . but by God's grace he may yet have a long life and remain our monarch for many a good year to come. We have lived well, progressively more well with each passing year under the late Queen, who has given her name to what seems in retrospect an entire age; but now a new term has been coined, and we are already describing ourselves as Edwardians, are we not? When was the nation previously so happy? I would suggest it was at the Restoration. We had in King Charles the Second a merry monarch, and now we have another monarch at least as merry as he was. May he long remain so! And may we be merry too. Our hope, the hope of any race, is in its youth, is it not? We are to begin our celebrations today with a wonderful piece of audacity by our two young neighbours, Archie and Daniel Pitt. They have been practising for days! Pray silence and attention for Archie and Daniel Pitt!

There was a small burst of applause, Archie atop the wall took a low bow, and his mother grasped the Captain's arm more tightly in her own. 'It'll be wonderful,' he reassured her proudly. 'The boys are completely fearless.'

A silence ensued, and Archie bent his knees in readiness. He raised his left hand, and let it drop, and a few seconds later a small flying boy appeared beside and above him, clutching the top of a vaulting pole. The boy released the pole as he soared above the wall, and at the same moment Archie ducked down and leapt up, circling his shins with his forearms. He somersaulted neatly down to the cushions, landing on his feet as his even more aerial brother landed beside him. Archie put his arm around his little brother's neck and they bowed together, grinning broadly.

There was a collective gasp and then a stunned hush as the partygoers took in the virtuosity and courage of this extraordinary display. In truth, most of them were quite horrified by it. But as Archie and Daniel were so gloriously pleased with themselves, it was impossible not to share in their triumph. The guests converged on them to shake their hands and pat their heads, and the Captain pressed a sovereign into each of their hands, saying, 'Well done, boys! Well done! A train set each, I think! A train set each!'

‘Such a pair of acrobats!’ said Mrs McCosh to Mme Pitt. ‘But I declare I can’t imagine how you could have let them do it.’

‘I saw them in the garden doing things like this,’ replied Mme Pitt. ‘It was my idea, the whole thing. And the Captain, he said, “Be it on your head, *chérie*,” but now it’s all *très bien*, and after all I have nothing on my head but this bonnet. But I think perhaps I won’t let them do it again. It is too much for the heart.’

‘And how are your other two boys? Are they still in South Africa?’

‘Still in South Africa. I have heard nothing for weeks. I pray. I pray, that’s all. *Que Dieu les sauve*.’

The children were having their own party in parallel to that of the adults. Daniel and Archie were the heroes of the hour, and so they affected a nonchalant swagger. ‘I think that was marvelously brave,’ said Otilie to Archie.

But Archie was hoping that Rosie might have been impressed. He watched her carefully for any sign, but saw forlornly that she was only interested in one of the new American boys from the other side of the blue door. This boy was Ashbridge Pendennis, a year older than Rosie, and already showing signs of the stocky and powerful athlete that he was to become. His hair was very fair, and his eyes were the same shade as the Channel on a winter’s day. ‘That was mighty fine,’ he said to Daniel, who was also hoping for a little admiration from Rosie. ‘I couldn’t do that, I really don’t think.’ Ashbridge pronounced the word ‘mighdy’, and Rosie thought this very charming.

‘But you’re so strong,’ said Rosie. ‘You can even lift Bouncer.’

‘Where is Bouncer?’ asked Daniel. Daniel was slim, with shining black hair and blue eyes that were particularly disconcerting in bright sunlight. It was clear that one day he would be a tall man.

‘We shut him in,’ said Rosie. ‘He makes such a fuss when there’s bags of people.’

Rosie hoped that the others would all go away, because she wanted to be left alone with Ashbridge, but Archie and Daniel kept hovering near her, and Otilie just hovered by Archie.

‘Why don’t you ask Mama and Papa if you can let him out for a bit?’ she suggested to Daniel, and shortly found her wish granted. Ashbridge put his hand into the pocket of his shorts and brought something out. ‘Here,’ he said.

‘What is it?’

He pressed it into her hand, saying, ‘Don’t let anyone see.’

She glanced down. It was small and made of brass. ‘A curtain ring!’ said Rosie.

Ashbridge blushed. ‘I’ll get you a proper one when we’re older. I’ve only got half a crown. If you keep it, it means we’re engaged.’

‘But I’m only twelve,’ she said.

‘Well, one day you sure won’t be. It’s gotta be me who gets there first. Will you keep it?’

Rosie looked into his earnest eyes, which seemed to flicker with anxiety and the fear of rejection. She saw that his courage had been very great, and was touched. Ashbridge said, ‘Since I came over . . . from the States . . . I didn’t like it too much here . . . at first . . . but you made it all fine, Rosie, you really did.’

‘I’ll keep it,’ she said.

‘Can I kiss you on the cheek?’

‘Not now.’

‘Later?’

Rosie nodded gravely. ‘Later. Only on the cheek.’

Ashbridge looked at her gratefully, and said, ‘Do you want to see me do a cartwheel? I can do five in a row without stopping.’

‘I’m engaged,’ thought Rosie to herself. ‘I’m engaged.’ How wonderful to be engaged already, at the age of twelve, to Ashbridge. ‘I’ve seen you do lots of cartwheels,’ she said, adding, ‘But I don’t mind if you want to do some more.’

For the adults the party was a great success. Towards seven o’clock, as the food and drink began to run out, it was time for the blessing. To what would such an occasion amount without a blessing from the rector?

Mr McCosh went to release this clergyman from amid the gagle of spinsters and widows that always surrounded him, and led him up the steps to the door of the conservatory so that he might overlook the lawns. He smiled with all the modesty of a man who feels himself lavishly and rightfully endowed with humility, spiritual grace and local celebrity. He raised his right hand in the classic gesture of blessing and recited:

‘O Lord our heavenly Father, high and mighty, King of kings, Lord of lords, the only Ruler of princes, who dost from Thy

throne behold all the dwellers upon earth. Most heartily we beseech thee with thy favour to behold our most gracious Sovereign Lord, King Edward, and so replenish him with all the grace of Thy Holy Spirit, that he may always incline to Thy will, and walk in Thy way. Endue him plenteously with heavenly gifts; grant him in health and wealth long to live; strengthen him that he may vanquish and overcome all his enemies; and finally, after this life, he may attain everlasting joy and felicity; through Jesus Christ our Lord.'

No sooner had the collective 'Amen' been reverently murmured than havoc broke loose.

Daniel had sneaked indoors and located Bouncer from the whines and barks coming from behind the dining-room door. No sooner had he opened it than the dog had hurtled out and bolted for the party that was going on in the garden.

Bouncer was a large, heavily built brown dog, approximately the size of a Labrador. He was one and a half years old, shiny and muscled, and very aptly named. Out on the lawn he bounced, it seemed, vertically, wagging his backside furiously as he attempted to lick anyone whose face he could reach. In vain did Mr McCosh pursue him and attempt to pin him down. The ladies shrieked as his paws raked their breasts and their delicate white dresses, and the gentlemen vainly headed him off with their canes as he hurtled from one beloved human to another.

Mrs McCosh rolled her parasol and whacked him sharply across the nose, exclaiming, 'Down, boy!' but it had no effect whatsoever. Finally, Captain Pitt managed to seize the dog, and one of the servants was despatched to fetch a lead from the hall. Bouncer was dragged, bouncing and singing tirelessly all the while, back into the house.

It was a good note to end on, and the guests, faces reddened from a glorious afternoon in the sunshine, began to make their farewells. There was much to talk about and to remember. Archie, Daniel and Ash and the dog had made it a memorable day.

In the palace the King put his feet up and smoked a cigar. It had all gone terribly well, apart from the poor old Archbishop having to retire to St Edward's Chapel, and then being unable to

get to his feet after pledging allegiance. The King began to think of who the first truly Edwardian Archbishop might be.

He felt downcast. He had lived a charmed life as Prince of Wales, a long round of house parties, shooting expeditions, theatres, horse races, actresses, mistresses. Now it was all over, and the responsibility lowered on him like thunderclouds at the end of August. He had been privately convinced for some time that the monarchy was doomed, but he knew his duty; he would keep his melancholy to himself.

Edwardians

Twelve years passed, years that would forever be remembered as golden by those who had taken part in Mr and Mrs McCosh's coronation garden party. One summer succeeded another, each, it seemed, hotter and more glorious than the one before. The roses thrived in the clay of the beds, the apples grew juicy and generous, and wasp traps made of jam and beer were set up in the boughs. In Court Road each summer evening could be heard the thud of tennis balls and the hollow clonking of croquet mallets. Out in the street the ragamuffin children of the poor came up from Mottingham and played games of hide-and-seek, knuckle bones, grandmother's footsteps and kick the can. Sometimes they knocked on the doors of kitchens and asked for drinks of water, soon learning which maids were generous with sherbet and gingerbread men. Gardeners went out armed with buckets, and fetched in the horse droppings for the roses. Gypsy women stopped ladies in the street and offered lucky white heather, with the clear implication that bad luck would ensue from refusal. Almost every day there came by the muffin man, the costermonger, the rag-and-bone man, the milkman, the cats' meat man, the fish carts drawn by enormous rangy dogs. Each tradesman had his own cry. Policemen strolled in pairs on their predictable circuits, armed only with whistles and coshes. In winter the smoke from the fires, the factories and the bonfires of leaves created yellow fog that choked the asthmatic and rolled inexorably down the street like vast waves. Once enveloped, one could see no further than the end of one's hand. People groped their way to the nearest door, knocked, and were given refuge. At eventide and dawn the gaslighter came, and when it snowed the gaslight on the pavements sparkled and danced.

In the great houses of the bourgeoisie and the commercial parvenus, the servants provided the glue that held the social classes

together, or bridged the divides. As snobbish and as rule-bound as their employers, they became families within families, with their own intrigues, honours and dishonours, *grands amours*, hatreds and loyalties. Every house had its own rules. In some the servants were treated almost like slaves, but in families such as the one in The Grampians, they were a natural part of its extended society. The one universal truth is that every family was terrified of losing its cook. Ladies lived with the perpetual anxiety of upsetting their cooks or having them poached by unprincipled dinner guests.

There were worms in the buds, however, even in Court Road. Not long after the coronation, in a glade of the New Forest, the handsome Captain Pitt was killed in a duel that was possibly the last to be fought formally on British soil. Nobody was ever to find out the identity of his antagonist. His pistol had been discharged, but there were no powder burns on his forehead where the bullet had entered his head, and in any case the bullet was not from his own gun. That is all that anyone was able to discover. His body had been found by a horseman, lying spread-eagled in a swathe of bluebells, not far from a stream and a pungent bank of ransoms. He was given a military funeral, all the more poignant for the youth of his widow and children, and sailors from the Royal Yacht fired a volley over his grave. His death left behind it the ambiguous sorrow of those who mourn the dead, but are proud that it came about as a matter of honour.

Within a few months his two eldest sons had died in the South African war, Theodore in an ambush and Jean-Pierre of enteric fever. Archie and Daniel would always remember them as jovial giants who used to hurl them across the room into the safety of a sofa piled up with cushions. Mme Pitt, grief-stricken but stubborn, inheritor of three sets of medals, decided not to return to France with her remaining sons, Archie and Daniel. Her circumstances greatly reduced, she moved to a small cottage in Sussex, where she eked out her living by teaching French in local schools and to private tutees. After many years of effort she finally learned to make the 'th' sound in English, only reverting to 'z' when she was in a state of agitation.

Archie had already left Westminster School, and Daniel had to leave early, following his brother directly into Rattray's Sikhs and

departing for India. Mme Pitt now lived alone in her little piece of paradise under the South Downs. Back in Court Road, every time they saw that part of the wall, Rosie and her sisters would think of Daniel flying over it on Coronation Day, wonder where Daniel and Archie were, and miss them. On the other side the Pendennis boys remained, and the lives of the children continued to be inextricably entwined, linked by the blue door. Everyone knew that Rosie and Ashbridge would grow up to be married, as certainly as they knew it themselves.

To all appearances the new King had brought with him a relaxed love of the good things in life. People flocked to the races because he was often there, and the whole nation rejoiced when his horse, Minoru, won the Derby in 1909. Witty, popular and shrewd though he was, in private the merry monarch still fell into deep fits of gloom. He was a peacemaker, but saw all about him disintegration and the prospect of chaos. He contemplated abdication and was growing ever more convinced that the monarchy would not survive to see his grandson on the throne. He had personally succeeded in creating the Entente Cordiale with France, repairing the diplomatic damage done by the South African war, but it was impossible to ignore the Nero-esque antics of his nephew in Germany, the 'All Highest' and 'Admiral of the Atlantic'.

Sandwiched between France and Russia, and fearful of them both, the Kaiser had long resolved to knock out France with one titanic blow, and then turn on Russia and crush her too. The easiest way to deal with France was to invade it through two neutral countries, Luxembourg and Belgium. He was convinced that Britain would not honour its treaty obligations to defend Belgium. It was, after all, a mere 'scrap of paper' and his mother was King Edward's favourite sister. Germans in the know began to make toasts to '*Der Tag*'. General von Moltke was later to remark that one's battle plans survive exactly up to that point when one makes contact with the enemy.

King Edward brought his brief and beautiful age to an end on the sixth day of May in 1910. Prostrated by bronchitis but smoking cigars to the very end that they had been hastening, he learned from the Prince of Wales that his horse Witch of the Air had won

at Kempton. 'I am very glad,' he said, and his servants put him to bed. 'I shan't give in,' he said, 'I'm going to fight it,' but he fell into a coma and died at the imminence of midnight.

Thus it was left to King George to deal with what his father had foreseen; and to Rosie, Christabel, Otilie, Sophie, Sidney, Albert, Archie, Daniel and Ashbridge.

Rosie Remembers

I loved Ash the moment we first set eyes on each other, and it was entirely mutual, even though we were only little children. When we met he was fresh from America and was very put out by being in England. He told me later that he found it rigid and archaic, but I'm certain that if he had ever gone back to America he would have found it deficient because it was too callow.

Ash was really called Ashbridge, and he was from Baltimore. He had a lovely soft American accent, with that strong 'r' after the vowels. He never lost it and you never would have mistaken him for an Englishman. His family lived on the other side of our house, and he was one of our crowd of children that spent its time larking about, making mud pies, playing sardines and hide-and-seek, and British bulldog, and tag, and kick the can. Our mothers were somewhat genteel, but we children were almost wild when we were outside. We romped and fought in our walled gardens, whilst our respective governesses and nurses gossiped together and had tea in the conservatory. In May, Beeson's men used to come and remove the windows of the conservatory. Thanks to the Luftwaffe and lack of funds, they're off permanently now. When we were older we all played tennis on the lawn, in never-ending combinations of doubles and singles. We played American tournaments, and knockout competitions, and generally you won if Ash was on your side. If Ash and Daniel were both on your side, you would definitely win. Ash was school champion at absolutely everything. I remember a doubles game where you had to run round the net as soon as you'd hit the ball. We called it American Tennis, and it was completely exhausting, but it was such hilarious fun. The problem was that there was never really a winner, because the games were not won by a pair, but by the east end or the west end. Sometimes all nine of us played at once. My mother liked to play croquet, and every year she would aspinal

the hoops, making a great ceremony of it, and then causing arguments when she wanted to play croquet and we wanted to play tennis.

Because Ashbridge was American we got into the habit of calling ourselves 'the Pals'. 'Light-hearted and glad they seemed to me, and merry comrades.' We were: Daniel and poor Archie, Ash and his brothers Sidney and Albert, and Sophie and Otilie and Christabel and me; five boys and four girls. We had battle cries of 'Long live the Pals!' and 'Pals forever!' Then Daniel and Archie moved away after the Captain was killed, and Ash and Sidney and Albert were the only boys left.

Ash grew up to be a wonderful man. By the time he was eighteen he was occasionally sporting a military moustache, but otherwise he looked as he always had. He was nicely proportioned, with blond hair and grey eyes. He used to say: 'I am built for speed and distance. If you want someone to run to Wales and fetch you something, then I'm your man.'

When I bought a copy of Rupert Brooke's *Selected Poems* later on, I was stunned when I saw the picture of the poet at the beginning, and almost fainted away. I thought for a moment it was Ash. He was so beautiful that it gave you a kind of pain from which you might never recover. When I read Brooke's love poetry I always think of Ash. I used to have lines that went round and round in my head. 'Oh! Death will find me, long before I tire of watching you.' 'Breathless, we flung us on the windy hill, laughed in the sun, and kissed the lovely grass.' Unlike most people, I valued Brooke's love poems a lot more than the famous patriotic ones.

Ash and I were real sweethearts. He was so kind, so solicitous. If I was ill, he'd call round and sit in the morning room, where we had family prayers, and he'd just wait for the servants or one of my sisters to come and give him snippets of news about how I was. Whenever I thought of Ash, I would get a lurching feeling in my chest, and my throat would feel dry. Sometimes we would just stand and look at each other as if we were paralysed. If we touched, I would get a tingle down my spine and into my legs. By the time we were about fifteen our passion was so great that we couldn't even speak, and we communicated by little notes

that went via the servants. I gave my notes to Cookie, who took them round to their cook, and then their cook would bring the replies round to Cookie. As the cooks were always borrowing things from each other, it was all terribly easy. Entering into little conspiracies with the servants, when people still had them, was one of the small joys of life. I keep Ash's notes and letters in a biscuit tin. I still read them sometimes, damaged though they are, and all the feelings come pouring back. Ash and I were engaged to be married when I was twelve and he was thirteen. Our first engagement ring was a brass curtain ring, so it was much too big to wear, and I keep that in the tin too. It was our secret, and anyone would have told us that we'd grow out of it.

We never did. On 29 May 1910, Ashbridge came round with a gramophone. He was practically the first to get one. We needed something to cheer us up after King Edward's death, and so he brought it round almost every day, to entertain us, and one day he stayed until it was 11.20. Sometimes my sisters and I rolled up the carpet and had dances. We'd suddenly realised that you didn't need to hire a pianist and violin player any more. It was when we were dancing to the gramophone that I truly had the chance to drink him in, to breathe him, to realise that I adored him so much that it would probably be impossible ever to love another. He used to look at me with his eyes so full of devotion that it made me shiver. The physical longing was almost too much to bear.

Just after war broke out in 1914, he came round to speak to my father. He had walked up the driveway singing 'I'm Gilbert the Filbert, the Knut with the Capital Kay'. It was Basil Hallam's song from the Palace Theatre that everyone had been singing before it was knocked aside by all the patriotic ones. Ash sometimes vamped it on the piano. He mostly liked to sing those sentimental plantation songs by Stephen Foster, like 'The Old Folks at Home' and 'Poor Old Joe' and 'Massa's in de Col' Col' Ground'. He had a lovely voice but the piano was always out of tune, and it even made sad songs sound comical. Father said we should get one with a metal frame, but we never got round to it. I think that poor Basil Hallam was eventually killed when he fell out of a balloon.

Ash and my father went into the dining room and shut the

door. I heard their voices, their laughter, and it was difficult to avoid the temptation to hover outside, because I knew what was going on and couldn't wait to hear the result. I went and sat in the drawing room with my mother and my sisters. They were talking about the war, but I couldn't think of anything except what Ash might be saying to my father. Bouncer was at my feet. He was an old dog by then and had completely lost his bounce. His muzzle was grey and his eyes rheumy, but he was still the same affectionate and not very clever dog, devoted above all to me and to my father.

My father was a clever Scotsman who went up to the City for three days a week, and stayed at his club. He made piles of money by thinking of things that needed to be manufactured, and buying and selling stocks and shares, and none of us ever really understood what he did or how he did it, apart from the steady stream of golf novelties that he came up with. He was regularly thrown into absolute dejection by losing all his money at once, but then he always managed to recoup his losses somehow, just in time to pay off the tradesmen. He put on an excellent show of being confident and jolly, but he was always mildly anxious and on edge. He used to say: 'I'd like to get out of this gambling business and actually make something, get into manufacturing properly. Can't think of anything that someone isn't already making, though.' At this time he was saying, 'Perhaps I can dream up something that might be useful for the war. Boots? Bridles? Bullets? Barrels? Other things beginning with B?' He did invent and sell several devices designed to improve one's golf, golf being the great passion of his life. He treated it like a patriotic duty.

When my father and Ash came into the drawing room, they were both holding a glass of whisky in one hand, and a cigar in the other. Ash never did smoke, and he was letting his go out. Father exhaled a big puff of smoke, and said, 'Wonderful news. Do you want to hear it?'

'Ooh, yes!' we all cried, except for Mother, who had a stern habit that she rarely let slip. She was the kind of mother who believed in exposing newborn babies on hillsides. Her favourite adage was 'Spare the rod and spoil the child'.

'Young Ashbridge here has requested my permission to ask for

Rosie's hand in marriage,' said Father, 'and I have given my consent.'

My sisters all squealed and applauded, my mother smiled faintly, and I believe I went pale. I could hardly prevent myself from trembling.

'I have asked him to turn Mahommedan and marry all four of you. I begged him to take you all off my hands in one big shebang, but sadly he has eyes only for Rosie. I even advised him against marriage altogether, but he is not to be deterred. What do you say, Rosie bairn?'

'But Father, he hasn't even asked me.'

'Come on, old thing,' said Ash, 'I asked you when you were twelve. You have a brass curtain ring to prove it.'

'Ask her again!' cried Sophie. 'Oh, how impeccably romantic! Come on, Ash. Ask her again!'

Sophie was my youngest sister. She was sweet, and, until we knew better, we all thought her a bit silly because she muddled up her words very dreadfully sometimes. Mother said, 'Sophie dear, I think you mean "impeccably".'

'May I speak to Rosie in private?' asked Ash, but my sisters wouldn't allow it.

'Be a sport,' said Otilie.

'Oh, go on, Ash,' said Christabel.

'What if I say "no"?' I said.

'That would be exscreamingly hard for poor Ash,' said Sophie. 'You know you wouldn't.'

'Well, Rosie,' said Ash, 'what do you say? Will you marry me?'

I was shaking so hard that I couldn't control myself. Suddenly I burst into tears and buried my face in my hands.

'I think that means "yes",' said Christabel.

Ash knelt down before me and said, 'Does it?' and I nodded. Everyone except Mother danced and capered. Mother paused in her embroidering, and said, 'My dear, I have always thought of you as a son, and now you will be!' My three sisters held hands and did an impromptu circle dance. Ash stood up and beheld the mayhem with amusement and affection in his eyes.

After the merriment had subsided a little, Ash sipped at his whisky, and said, 'There is something I do have to tell you all.'

We fell silent, realising that something ominous was about to be said. Ash cleared his throat and announced, 'I have enlisted with the Honourable Artillery Company. I feel that I have to go. To do my bit. I wanted to make sure I was really engaged to Rosie before I went.' He hesitated, and added, 'And Albert and Sidney have enlisted with me.'

My father was stunned, but my mother said, 'Good boy.' Sophie and Christabel and Otilie exchanged horrified glances. As for me, I found myself standing up and saying, 'Of course you have to go,' but then I ran from the room, startled by the horrible wailing that I knew was coming from me.

In Which Ashbridge Attempts to Comfort Rosie

I ran out after her and found her in the room at the front where the family Bible is. She had collapsed on the window seat and was weeping in tremendous sobs. I picked her up in my arms and said, 'Rosie, Rosie, Rosie.' She laid her head on my chest and put her arms round my neck. I could feel her light body trembling.

'You don't have to go,' she said.

'I sure do, darling, I sure do,' I said. 'I've done the deed. I've taken the King's shilling. I had no idea you'd be so upset.'

'I thought we'd be safe,' she said. 'You're American. You didn't have to go. Or Sidney and Albert.'

'But we love it here,' I said. 'We come from New England, and we love the old one just as much, probably even more. We've lived here most of our lives. I've always been ashamed of my countrymen for turning traitor back in 1776.'

'No you haven't. You're always gloating about how you won and we lost. You think it's brave and clever to throw perfectly nice crates of tea into the sea, and you always forget how Canada and Florida wanted to stay British! Anyway, you've got to love Scotland too,' said Rosie, smiling despite her tears. 'Father's Scottish, remember? I'm half Scottish. You can't just love England.'

'I love both halves of you,' I replied, 'including any other parts from anywhere else. I've never been there, but I love Wales and Ireland too. And the Isle of Wight. And Croydon.'

'Why do you have to go away, though? Why can't you stay and work in a hospital or something? Why can't you drive a train or go and be a fireman? So many people have . . . so many have been killed already. What about Mons? And the Marne? Have you seen the death notices in *The Times*?'

‘Don’t forget the Angels of Mons,’ I said. ‘God’s with us, not with them. We’re defending the right.’

Rosie’s weakness was God. She was always devout, even when she was a child. She was born with the kind of faith that you can’t argue with. This time she stayed silent for a moment, and then she said quietly, ‘We still had to retreat.’

‘You are going to be an officer?’ she said, and I knew what she was getting at; she was hoping there’d be a long period of training before I got sent away. I shook my head. ‘I enlisted as a private,’ I said. ‘You get there a whole lot quicker. I was hoping I might be a gunner. They’ve got two batteries of horse artillery, and two ammunition columns, and a battalion of infantry, but the darned batteries are up to complement.’

She sat down on the window seat again, and looked down at her hands. ‘I suppose I should be encouraging you,’ she said weakly. I knelt and held her hands in mine. ‘Rosie darling, it’s the adventure of a lifetime. How could I possibly stay out of it? Do you think I could bear to live the rest of my life knowing that I hadn’t done my bit? That I didn’t heed the call?’

‘Do you remember what he said, Sir John French? It’ll all be over by Christmas, he said. But it won’t be. The Boche have got Belgium. You could be away for months.’

I felt as if I was cajoling a child. I was fired up with excitement about going to war. I felt a deep happiness, a sort of elation, as if I had suddenly found my purpose in life.

I said, ‘Every man who’s never been a soldier regrets it when he gets old. I don’t want any regrets.’

When we went back into the withdrawing room, Rosie was on my arm, still weak from her fit of tears, but she was managing to smile. The family got to its feet and applauded me. The sisters each kissed me on the cheek and hung upon my arms. I was very moved and touched. It was my greatest moment of glory, really. I gave Rosie’s arm a little squeeze in mine, and she said, ‘We’ll get married as soon as the war’s over. I’m sure it won’t be long.’

‘I’m bound to get some leave,’ I said. ‘We can be married when I’m on leave, if the war goes on too long. Would it be asking too much if Albert was best man?’

I went out and bought a little etching. It was by a certain L. Rust, and it was called *Adieu*. I wanted to give it to Rosie at Christmas, but if I had already gone, I would leave it for my mother to take round to her.

Hamilton McCosh Holds Forth in the Athenaeum

I can't tell you, old laddie, how completely dismaying this all is. First of all the bank rate went up. It was the 31st of July 1914. I'll always remember that date. To tell the truth I was quite delighted initially. I've got tidy sums deposited here and there. It went from 4 per cent to 8 per cent, and then to 10 per cent, and just when I was rubbing my hands with glee, the blighters closed the Stock Exchange. I didn't get invited to the conference with the Chancellor. If I had there would have been sparks flying, let me tell you. You couldn't get credit anywhere.

How was I supposed to earn a living? I have four charming daughters and a truculent wife. You're a man of the world, old boy, you know how these things happen, and I'm sure you're no different to me when it comes down to it, but I've got two mistresses current, and one retired, and they've each got a house and children to look after. The anxiety almost kills me. I got a note only last week – 'Dear Ham, please send money, the children int got no shoes.'

It was all very well, wasn't it, sitting around and saying, 'Well, what's Serbia got to do with us?' Now we know. It means less money supply, unemployment, unsaleable securities, a dearth of necessities. That's what it's got to do with us, damn it!

What on earth are the Huns up to? What on earth was the point?

Then there's the moratorium on debts, you know, the Postponement of Payments Bill. God help us. A lot of people owe me a lot of money. When am I going to get it? I don't owe anybody anything, so what use is it to me? How am I supposed to pay the tradesmen? Let's hope it never gets implemented.

Still, it was a bright day when the state insurance of merchant vessels came in. Did wonders for confidence. Actually it saved

the bacon of my future son-in-law's father. What will he be then? A cousin-in-law? I never did understand how one is related to people. If I found out I was your second cousin three times removed, I wouldn't have a clue what it meant. He's in shipping, you know. The father. You might know him. The name's Pendennis. Anyway, thank God for that. It made everything possible again. Have you seen any of the new ten-shilling and one-pound notes yet? I just hope it doesn't undermine the currency. Coins inspire more confidence, don't you think?

The bank rate's back down to 5 per cent again now, more's the pity, but it shows what happens when the government promises to prop up the banks. I'm a businessman, it galls me, I must say, but the banks prop the rest of us up, so someone's got to prop up the banks, eh?

Have you heard what's happened in Germany? The whole damned system's collapsed. People are hoarding their small change. Runs on the savings banks. A hundred million lost overnight on the Berlin Exchange. Banks closing and refusing to hand over gold. Norddeutsche Handelsbank shut down. Can you imagine? Who would have thought it? Did you ever meet August Saal? No? A fine fellow, exceedingly clever. Went to his bank in Weimar and shot himself. What's that? Eugen Bieber? Yes, I knew him quite well. Met him in Potsdam, something to do with railways in Patagonia. We were in talks about the stocks. What? Killed his wife? And himself? Potassium cyanide? Lost thirteen thousand in two days? Oh good Lord. I hadn't heard about that.

Just goes to show, doesn't it? All you need is someone in charge who wants an empire and doesn't understand money, and the whole damn country goes to Hell in a handcart. And you can't make a mess in one country without messing up the rest. God save us from emperors, that's what I say. Makes you feel grateful for Asquith, eh? Never thought I'd hear myself say that.

Still . . . think what happened back at the end of July. Consols fell 4 per cent, Canadian Pacific fell 6½ per cent, Shell Oil fell 10 per cent, Malacca Rubber fell 17 per cent, De Beers fell 6½ per cent, and Russo-Asiatic fell 23 per cent.

I think there might be some opportunities here. I don't think I'd go for Russo-Asiatic at a time like this, and let's face it, no

one needs diamonds in wartime. But think of all the vehicles they'll need for ferrying the troops around, and they say there are going to be huge numbers of aeroplanes involved, and war being war, a lot of these will inevitably be destroyed, and furthermore I hear they're beginning to build oil-fired battleships.

I'm going to buy into Malacca Rubber and Shell Oil, and I'd advise you to do the same. One should turn catastrophe to advantage. Another dram? If there's not a shortage already, of course. Canadian Pacific's an excellent bet too. The right time to buy, definitely.

Did I tell you, I've had an idea for a new kind of golf ball? I'm hoping it won't go rock hard after a few months, like the ones we have at present.

Millicent (1)

I am Millicent, if you'll excuse me, and I came to the McCoshes when I was a little mite of fourteen. It was expected that I'd go into service and I always knew that I would, so I'm not complaining. It weren't no good with me mum and dad anyhow, and Mum never got over coming down one day and catching the rats eating my baby brother's face. You couldn't leave a kid for a second where we was, on account of them rats. The baby died thank God and I don't remember him much, but me mum went half barmy and she never recovered, and now she's always ill anyway. Dad was on the docks and he was a big strong fellow. He didn't 'alf drink, but he wasn't barmy like me mum. I can read and write a little bit and had some education from the little charity dame school, and I know I left when I was only ten, but I think I done pretty well, considerin'.

It was a few days after the war got goin', and I went into Miss Rosie's room, thinking that she weren't there, but she was. She was crying her eyes out, poor thing, and I thought, 'Oh gawd, someone's been killed already,' and I said, 'So sorry, Miss Rosie. Shall I come back and do your room later?' and she said, 'I'm sorry, Millie. I didn't mean you to catch me like this,' and I said, 'Are you all right, miss? I hope nothing bad has come about,' and she said, 'It's the Pope. He's just died,' and I looked around and she had a candle all lit in front of a little statue of the Virgin Mary, and I said, 'Have you become a Roman papist then?' and she said, 'No, but the Pope's died, and he was a very good man, and I am so very upset about it. Silly of me, I know.'

I said, 'I don't know nothing much about it, miss.'

Miss Rosie said that this dead Pope said we was to renew all things in Christ, and that the best way was through the Virgin, and she said that once he filled up the Vatican with people what had been done in by an earthquake.

I didn't know what this Vatican was. I didn't like to ask, but I suppose it was quite big. Miss Rosie said, 'Don't tell anyone about this,' and she pointed at the Virgin and the candle. 'Mother and Father might be upset, because we're Anglicans.'

I said, 'I won't say nothing, Miss Rosie. Why would I?'

Don't ask me what she was on about. Our Miss Rosie always did have God pretty badly. We all went to church with the family in a big gaggle twice every Sunday, but us lot used to sit in the back, and I used to have a little sleep if I could. I was fair worn out usually.

It was better than a lot of families what made the servants go to a different church altogether, even if it meant they had to walk for bleedin' miles, and I heard that in the posh houses they make the servants turn and face the wall when there's family passing. Well, I wouldn't've put up with that. In them days you either were a servant or you had some servants yourself, and there was big houses where the grander servants had servants themselves, and every family had its own way, and ours was all right, if you ask me.

Now God Be Thanked Who Has Matched us with His Hour

I had felt a kind of loneliness, in amongst all that joyful and righteous patriotism. There didn't seem any chance of America joining in. It wasn't our scrap. I was a Yank from Baltimore, I was twenty-five years old and I hadn't made any mark in the world since leaving school. There I'd been brilliant, especially in athletics, but afterwards I'd never managed anything much. My father was in shipping, and I was working in his office with a view to taking over when he eventually packed it in. There was no sign of that. If he lived to be a hundred he would still be in charge. I was chafing for some action.

My fondest memory of the outbreak of the war, however, was the reaction of Mrs McCosh. I came to The Grampians the morning after the ultimatum ran out, and she was in a considerable tizz. She was wringing her hands in the drawing room, exclaiming, 'We can't possibly be at war with Germany, we just can't, it's not possible. The Kaiser is the grandson of the Queen!'

Of course she meant Queen Victoria, not Alexandra or Mary. By 'the Queen' she always meant Victoria, and the other two were referred to as 'Queen Alexandra' and 'the present Queen'. She had a touching faith that royal alliances must inevitably prevent wars, unless someone along the line was mad. In retrospect I wonder if she was right; you'd have to be mad to plunge the whole of Europe into war quite deliberately. And the Kaiser was the son of the Princess Royal. He can't have had any family-feeling at all.

Like everyone else I shared in the ecstasy and euphoria when war broke out. Like everyone else, I went to Buckingham Palace and Downing Street and we cheered and sang the British national anthem until we were all hoarse. We sang 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow' to the King when he appeared on the balcony. I sang my

heart out even though I'm a Yank. He was dressed as an Admiral of the Fleet, and Queen Mary and the Prince of Wales came out too. We waved our hats and jostled each other, and men who were unacquainted shook hands and clapped each other on the back. I came over in a strange sweat of enthusiasm. The ultimatum was to expire at eleven, so we made our way to Whitehall, and I had my first taste of fighting. I got into a sort of jostling match with a protester just by Nelson's Column, who carried a placard saying 'This Is Not Our War'.

It was though. It was all very simple. The Kaiser had invaded France without even properly declaring war, and invaded Belgium. It was said that the Germans had brought in one and a half million men by rail. There wasn't any moral doubt in any of us. It was absolutely clear that Germany was in the wrong, and had broken a treaty it had signed up to a long time ago. We had to put a stop to them, and that was that. I don't think we would have been as pleased about a war that wasn't so obviously just, or against an enemy that hadn't done anything outrageous. We'd heard about the French officer they'd torn apart with horses. We'd all been insulted too, by the Kaiser saying that our offer to mediate between the Austrians and the Serbs was just 'British insolence'. It made us all want to go out and give him a bashing. It turned out that the Germans actually had a policy of terrorising the French-speakers of Belgium; it was called '*Schrecklichkeit*', but we didn't find out until much later.

No one came out of Number Ten when Big Ben struck twelve, and we all knew we were at war. We sang 'God Save the King' with heartfelt emotion, and then we dispersed, very much in a hurry to get home and share the news.

But more important to me than all this was that I was in love with Rosie, and I will always be in love with her. I was going to marry her, and I wanted her to be married to a man she could be proud of, who was worthy of her. She was the kind of British girl who could cycle for miles without losing her wind, and would have taken on the Kaiser single-handed, given the chance. We always seemed to be surrounded by young men coming back on leave from distant parts of the Empire, like Archie, who had done wonderful things such as fighting off hordes of Pathans,

armed only with a dead horse and a revolver, and here I was in my stiff collar, sorting out bills of lading, and impaling lists on a spike, when I really wanted to be an engineer, and had in fact got all the necessary qualifications. It made me feel unworthy of her, and it was no life for a fellow like me. I was created for leaping gates, winning steeplechases and repairing irreparable machines. I decided that I was going to enlist, come Hell or high water.

It was absolute chaos outside Armoury House. All the way down Finsbury Pavement there were thousands of men of all shapes and sizes and ages, all equally determined to get in and enlist. The playing fields were covered in tents and bivouacs, there were artillery pieces and gun carriages, and quite a few horses, all beautifully groomed and shining. Small detachments of men were marching in and out, because the infantry were going back and forth to guard all the public installations that the Germans might want to destroy.

We would-be recruits were almost fighting each other for the right to fight, and it was clear from the despondent faces coming out of the gates that an awful lot of people were being turned away. One older gentleman said to me, 'I gave thirty years of my life to the Honourable Artillery Company, and now they won't have me.' He was at least sixty-five years old, and he walked with a silver-topped cane. Another man came out, all ashen and haggard, and he caught my eye, and said, 'Buggered lungs.' In amongst the melee there were dozens of horses which had also been brought along in the hope of selling them to the HAC. A dejected Scottish vet in a flat cap was inspecting them near the gates, and arguing with some of the officers, who thought that most of the horses he was passing were fit only for the knackers, as indeed he himself was. To make things worse, there was a crush of wagons and carts that had been requisitioned, and arguments were going on as to what they might be suitable for. I watched an irascible wheeler-sergeant, tapping the wheels and axles with a hammer, and tut-tutting over the discouraging dings and clangs that resulted.

When I finally got in I was stood before a panel of officers, who shuffled my papers around and scrutinised my old school reports in turn. Colonel Treffry put his fingers together and said,

‘Of course, you are officer material.’ He looked at me very kindly.

I replied, ‘Am I, sir? Thank you, sir.’

‘A great many of the young men I have seen are officer material. But we are, as you know, a regiment of gentleman rankers. Our policy is to recruit all ranks from the officer class, and then to promote officers from the ranks. I expect you are aware of this. I am merely advising you that if you wish to become an officer in the more usual way, you should enlist elsewhere. In any case we need troops more than officers. A great many of our former officers have rejoined. So many that we have had to turn some of them away. They’ve been posted to other units.’ He paused. ‘Ideally you should be joining as a regular, and going to the RMC at Sandhurst. I have said the same thing to your brothers.’

He looked at me in the same way as before, and I said, ‘But I’ve set my heart on the HAC. I wouldn’t mind being a gunner. And I wouldn’t be ashamed of being a private. In fact I would be quite proud of it.’

‘Good man. I’m afraid that both the batteries are fully manned, though. We are hoping to set up some reserve batteries, but we’ll probably have to go and see Earl Kitchener to get it done. I expect you know that the batteries are affiliated to the Royal Horse Artillery, but the infantry battalions are with the Grenadier Guards. I expect you’ve noticed the badge with the grenade on it. Would you be prepared to join us as an infantry private rather than as a gunner?’

‘Infantry?’

‘Yes, as an infantryman.’

‘Would I get there sooner?’ I asked.

‘Very much sooner.’

‘What did my brothers say? I didn’t get time to ask them before I came in.’

‘They are happy to go out in the same unit as you, as infantrymen.’

‘There is just one thing,’ I said. ‘I’m afraid I’m an American citizen, and so are Sidney and Albert.’

The Colonel turned to the other members of the panel and

said, 'I didn't hear that. Did any of you gentlemen hear what Private Pendennis said? Did any of us hear the other two when they told us the same thing?'

They all shook their heads gravely, and the Colonel stood up and shook my hand. 'Welcome to the HAC, Private Pendennis. None of us has the slightest inkling that you are an American citizen. I am certain that you will be a credit to your nation, and I am certain that the King would wish me to convey his gratitude and appreciation. You will have to pass a medical, of course.'

I rendezvoused with Sidney and Albert and we shook hands, which wasn't something we had ever done before. When we left Armoury House I said, 'Race you!' and we ran from Finsbury Square to Waterloo Bridge, just to give expression to the joy we were feeling. We ran past all the long queues for the banks, and I felt a guilty pang on behalf of my poor father. None of our ships were able to put to sea because no one would insure them any more, and the government had not yet stepped in. We faced ruin, just as Rosie's father did because of the chaos on the Stock Exchange, but none of that seemed important. I was so elated that I could have flown like an angel. Suddenly there was a point to everything, and there wasn't a medical in the world that would have failed me.

Running through London with my brothers beside me, I felt I had grown angel wings.

A Letter to His Majesty

The Grampians

15 September 1914

Sir, *May It Please Your Majesty,*

I am writing to beg you most humbly to intercede in the matter of my daughter's fiancé, who has recently had the honour and privilege of joining the Honourable Artillery Company in Your Majesty's service.

He is a very fine young man, most handsome and athletic, and he and my daughter Rosie have been promised to each other for a very long time. It would be true to say that they were childhood sweethearts.

In view of the reports of terrible casualties that have already been received I have the honour to ask you if you would be so awfully kind as to ensure that he is posted somewhere quite safe once his training is completed, which I believe will be at Christmastime. The reason I ask is that I believe that my daughter's heart would be quite broken should he be killed, and she might never recover.

May I have the honour to repeat that my daughters and I would be most delighted to entertain His Majesty and Her Majesty the Queen at any time that they might be in our part of Kent.

I have the additional honour to submit myself, with profound respect, Your Majesty's most devoted subject and servant,

Mrs Hamilton McCosh, gentlewoman

A Letter from the Palace

Buckingham Palace

20 September 1914

Dear Mrs McCosh,

His Majesty asks me to express his gratitude to you for your kind letter of 15 inst. He asks me to inform you that he had the distinct pleasure of witnessing the First Battalion of the Honourable Artillery Company march past and out to war in his presence on the 12th of this month. He found them to be a fine body of men, most impressive in stature and demeanour, and he is conscious of the burdens and trials which they will imminently have to endure.

His Majesty asks me to express his pleasure in hearing from you again, thanks you for your kind invitation to tea, and asks me to remind you once more that whereas he reigns, he does not rule. That is, he has no powers other than to advise, to warn and to encourage, and is therefore unable to intervene in any executive decisions, such as the posting of individuals in time of war. This he leaves to his government and his generals. It is for the same reason that he was unable to intervene in the matter of the unreliable gas lamps in Court Road, Eltham, and in the matter of the lack of canine fastidiousness on the Esplanade at Ryde, as complained of in your two most recent letters.

His Majesty hopes most earnestly that the conflict will not be a long one, and that your daughter's fiancé (whose name you omitted to mention in your kind letter) comes through these difficult times unscathed. His Majesty has complete confidence that he will acquit himself with honour. You may be aware that even His Royal Highness Prince Albert has not been spared in the present conflict and is in service with His Majesty's Royal Navy. His Royal Highness Prince David has not been allowed to serve abroad with his battalion of the Grenadier Guards, but has gone to France nonetheless to serve as ADC

to Sir John French, and frequently puts himself in danger whilst visiting the front line.

I remain, madam, your humble and obedient servant,

Lt Col. Sir Frederick Edward Grey Ponsonby, Secretary to His Majesty