

PART ONE

The Earthquake

I

The map of France had gone from the window of the German Propaganda Bureau and a map of the British Isles had taken its place. People relaxed. There was regret that the next victim was to be their old ally, but it might, after all, have been Rumania herself.

The end of June brought a dry and dusty heat to Bucharest. The grass withered in the public parks. Up the Chaussée, the lime and chestnut leaves, fanned by a breeze like a furnace breath, curled, brown and papery, and started falling as though autumn had come. Each day began with a fierce, white light splintering in between blinds and shutters. When people ate breakfast on the balconies, there was a smell of heat in the air. By noonday, the ingot of the sun dissolved in the sky as in a vat of molten silver. The roads, oozing tarmac, shimmered with mirages. The dazzle hurt the eyes.

During the afternoon, the hot air concentrated between the cliff-faces of buildings, seemed visible and tangible in the ochre dust-fog. Deadened by it, people slept. When the offices closed for the midday meal, the tramway cars were hung with clerks fighting their way home to darkened bedrooms. At five, when the atmosphere was like felt, the offices reopened, but the rich and the workless remained inactive until evening.

It was evening when rumours of the ultimatum spread. The

streets were full of people strolling in the light of early sunset.

Passers-by, keeping an eye on the map in the German Propaganda Bureau window, were speculating on how long the British could hold out, when they learnt of the Russian demand and Britain was forgotten.

The demand had not, of course, been officially announced. The evening papers did not mention it. As usual with any cause for alarm, the authorities were trying to keep it secret, but in Bucharest nothing could be kept secret for long. The Soviet Minister had scarcely delivered the ultimatum when details of it were brought to the foreign journalists in the Athénée Palace Hotel. Russia required the return of Bessarabia and, with it, a segment of the Bukovina on which she had no real claim. The ultimatum was due to expire at midnight on the following day.

Within minutes of its reception in the hotel, the news reached the crowded streets and passed to restaurants and cafés. Apprehensions quickened at once into ferment, for panic was an incipient condition in the capital. People became possessed by an hysteria of alarm.

That evening Guy Pringle, a lecturer in English at the University, was sitting in Mavrodaphne's with his wife, Harriet. Someone, entering at one end of the large, brilliant café, shouted across the room and at once disorder spread through it like a tidal wave. People leapt to their feet and, shrill with grievance, bawled right and left, stranger protesting to stranger. The Pringles could hear them blaming the Jews, the Communists, the defeated allies, Madame Lupescu, the King and the King's hated chamberlain, Urdureanu – but blaming them for what?

Harriet, a dark, thin girl who had grown thinner during their months in this disintegrating society, was set on edge now by any unnatural stir. She said: 'It must be the Germans. We shall be trapped,' for there were always rumours of a German invasion.

Guy attempted to make an inquiry at a neighbouring table. At once, the man to whom he spoke, recognising an

Englishman, accused him in English: 'It is Sir Stafford Cripps who has done this thing.'

'What thing?'

The man said: 'He has made the Russians take our Bessarabia.'

'And,' added his female companion, 'steal our Bukovina with its beautiful beech forests.'

Guy, a large young man whose mild and guileless air was enhanced by spectacles, answered with his usual good humour, pointing out that Cripps, having arrived in Moscow only that morning, had scarcely had time to make anyone do anything; but the other turned impatiently from him.

Harriet said: 'You might suppose that no one had ever thought the Russians a danger before,' whereas, in fact, the Communists with their ungodly Marxist creed, were more dreaded here than the Nazis.

Hearing English spoken, an elderly man leapt up from a nearby table and reminded everyone that Britain had guaranteed Rumania. Now that Rumania was menaced, what were the British going to do? 'Nothing, nothing,' he screamed in rage. 'They are finished,' and he made a lunge towards the Pringles with his tussore parasol.

Harriet looked uneasily about her. When, ten months before, she had first arrived in Bucharest, the British here had been respected: now, on the losing side, they were respected no longer. She half feared actual attack – but no attack came. A certain sentiment, even affection, persisted for the once great, protecting power which was believed to be doomed.

Unwilling to show fear by taking themselves off, the Pringles sat still amid a hubbub which suddenly changed its tenor. A man had risen and, attracting attention by the reasonable quiet of his speech, asked if their fears might not be premature. It was true that the British could do nothing for Rumania, but what of Hitler? Hadn't the King recently changed his allegiance? He could now call on German aid. When the Führer heard of this ultimatum, he would force Stalin to withdraw it.

Ah! The shouting died down. People, taking up this reassurance, nodded to one another. Those who had been most fearful, became in a moment cheerful and hopeful. Those who had complained loudest were now loud with confidence. Nothing was lost yet. Hitler would protect them. For once the King was in favour. His cunning, from which the country had so long suffered, was now applauded. He had declared for the Axis at just the right moment. There was no doubt about it, he was going to prove himself the saviour of his country.

This sudden euphoria spread as rapidly as the earlier panic. The Pringles walked home through streets in which people were congratulating each other as though upon a victory. But next morning the refugee cars began to arrive from the north. Grey with dust and strapped over with baggage, they looked much as the Polish cars had looked when they drove into Bucharest ten months before.

They brought the German land-owners of Bessarabia who, warned by the German Legation, had fled, not in fear of the Russians but of the peasants who hated them. Their appearance brought a new wave of anxiety, for if anyone had been told of Hitler's intentions, they must have been told.

The Pringles' flat overlooked the main square. During the morning, people began to fill the square, standing silently and gazing towards the palace.

Prince Yakimov, an Englishman of Russian origin, whom Harriet unwillingly tolerated as a guest in the flat, came back from his haunt, the English Bar, and said: 'Everyone's very optimistic, dear girl. I'm sure a solution will be found,' and when he had eaten he retired to untroubled sleep.

Guy was supervising end-of-term examinations and did not come home to luncheon. During the afternoon, Harriet went out to the balcony and saw the crowds still standing beneath the torrid sun. The siesta was the traditional time for making love, but no one had heart now for sleep or love. There was still no official confirmation of the ultimatum, but it was known that the King had summoned the Crown Council. The

ministers were unmistakable in their white uniforms. Everyone saw them arrive.

Immediately below Harriet's balcony was a small Byzantine church with golden domes and crosses looped with beads. Its door creaked continually as people entered to pray for help in this time of crisis.

The church was surrounded by buildings left partly demolished when the war brought the King's 'improvements' to an end. Beyond these ruins was the sun-scorched square with the waiting crowds and the palace where state officials came and went. Cars were crowded within the palace railings. New arrivals had to park outside.

Harriet could smell her hair toasted by the sun. The heat was a burden on her head. Yet she stood for a while watching a peasant crossing the cobbles below her. He was a vendor of chickens. A cage of live birds hung on either side of him from a yoke across his shoulders. Every few minutes he lifted his head and squawked like a fowl. A servant shouted to him from one of the lower balconies, then appeared down in the street. Together vendor and buyer examined the chickens, stretching out their wings and poking at their breasts. In the end, one chosen, the peasant, amid a cackling and flurry of feathers, wrung its neck.

Harriet went back to the room. When she came out again, the peasant was sitting on the church step, the chicken plucked, the feathers about his feet. Before he went on his way again he pulled a piece of sacking over each cage to protect his birds from the sun.

At five o'clock there was a movement among the crowd as office workers started back to offices. A little later, when the newsboys began crying a special edition, the whole square came to life. Harriet hurried down to discover the news. People were pressing against the boys, snatching the papers and leafing frantically through them. One man, coming to the last page, shook his paper in the air, then throwing it to the ground, stamped wildly upon it.

Harriet feared this meant that Bessarabia was lost, but when

she bought a paper, the headlines stated that the Prince had passed his baccalaureate with 98.9 marks out of a possible hundred. The King, though pale and apparently anxious, had left the Council Chamber to congratulate his son. Everywhere about her she could hear the words '*bacalaureat*', '*printul*', '*regeul*' being spoken with derisive anger, but there was no news of Bessarabia.

As the sunset threw its reds and purples across the sky, the waiting crowds grew restless. Time was passing. Those in the square had been mostly men of the working classes. With evening, women appeared, their light clothes glimmering in the twilight. The first breath of cool air brought the prosperous Rumanians out for the promenade. Though they walked from habit into the Calea Victoriei and the Boulevard Carol, they were drawn back again and again to the square, the centre of tension.

When Guy returned from the University, Harriet said they must eat quickly, then go out and discover what was happening.

In the street, meeting people they knew, they learnt that the King had appealed to Hitler, who had promised to send a personal message before the ultimatum should expire. Everyone was suddenly hopeful again. Inside the palace, the King and his ministers were awaiting the message. The King was reported to have said: 'We must look to the Führer. He will not fail us in our hour of need.'

Darkness was falling. A bugle sounded in the palace yard. As though it were a call to arms, a man in the square started to sing the national anthem. Others took it up, but the voices were sparse, choked by uncertainty, and soon died away. Inside the palace the chandeliers sprang alight. Someone shouted for the King. The cry was taken up, but the King did not appear.

The moon rose, bland and big, and floated above the city. All the time there was a slamming of car doors as people came and went at the palace. One of the arrivals was a woman. Immediately the story went round that an attempt had been made on the life of Madame Lupescu, who had

fled from her villa in Alea Vulpache and had come to the King for protection.

There was a new stir at the arrival of Antonescu, a proud man, out of favour since he had supported the Iron Guard leader. It was said that, recognising the situation as desperate, the General had begged an audience with the King. The press in the square grew. Something would happen now. But nothing happened and soon the General drove away again.

The next time they approached the Athénée Palace Guy said: 'Let's go in and have a drink.' If there were any real news it would immediately be brought there.

The area outside the hotel was packed with the Bessarabian cars, many of them still loaded with trunks and suitcases, rolled carpets and small, valuable pieces of furniture. Within the hall, beneath the brilliant lights, were heaped more trunks, cases, carpets and rich possessions. As the Pringles picked their way through them, they came face to face with Baron Steinfeld, one of the Bessarabians, more often in Bucharest than on his estate. The Pringles, who had met him only once, were surprised when he accosted them. They had thought him a charming man, but he was charming no longer. His square, russet-red face was distorted, his large teeth bared; he spoke with such anguished rage, his words seemed to be shaken from him: 'I have lost everything. But everything! My estate, my house, my apple orchard, my silver, my Meissen ornaments, my Aubusson rugs. You cannot imagine, so much have I lost. You see here these things – they were all brought by the lucky ones. But I – I was in Bucharest, so I lose all. You English, what are you doing that you fight against the Germans? It is the Bolsheviks you must fight. You must join with the Germans, who are good men, and together you must fight these Russian swine who steal my everythings.'

Shocked by the change that had come over the baron, Guy did not know what to say. Harriet began: 'Bessarabia isn't lost yet . . .' but paused, confused, as the baron broke down, saying through tears: 'I have even lost my little dog.'

'I am sorry,' said Harriet, but the baron raised a hand,

rejecting pity. What he wanted was action: 'It is necessary to fight. Together we must destroy the Russians. Do not be fools. Join with us before it is too late.' On this dramatic note, he pushed out through the swing door and left the Pringles alone.

Hall and vestibule were deserted. Even the booking-clerk had gone out to watch events in the square, but a sound of English voices came from the next room.

Guy said: 'The journalists are back in the bar.'

The bar – the famous English Bar – had been, until a month before, the preserve of the British and their associates. The enemy had been kept out. Then, on the day Calais fell, a vast crowd of German businessmen, journalists and legation officials had entered in a body and taken possession. The only Englishmen present – Galpin, and his friend Screwby – had retreated before this triumphant, buffeting mob and taken themselves to the hotel garden. Now they were back again.

Galpin was one of the few journalists permanently resident in Bucharest. An agency man, living at the Athénée Palace and seldom leaving it, he employed a Rumanian to scout for news, which was brought to him at the hotel. The other journalists in the bar had flown in from neighbouring capitals to cover the Bessarabian crisis.

As the Pringles entered, Galpin seized on them and began at once to describe how he had marched into the bar at the head of the new arrivals and called to the barman: 'Vodka, *tovarish*.'

Whether this was true or not, he was now drinking whisky. He let Guy refill his glass, then, glancing towards the dispirited Germans who had been pushed into a corner, he toasted the ultimatum: 'A slap in the eye for the bloody Boche,' apparently seeing the Russian move as a British triumph.

Surely, Harriet thought, it was rather the Allies who were being flouted. They had condoned the Rumanian seizure of the Russian province in 1918 and now in 1940 it was their weakness that prompted the Russians to demand it back again.

When she started to say this, old Mortimer Tufton, staring aloofly over her head, cut her short with: 'The Paris Peace Conference never recognised the annexation of Bessarabia.'

Tufton, after whom a street in Zagreb had been named, was a noted figure in the Balkans. He was said to be able to scent the coming of events and was always on the spot before they occurred. Informed, dry, consciously intimidating, he had the manner of a man accustomed to receiving deference, but Harriet would not let herself be put down. 'You mean that Bessarabia was never really part of Greater Rumania?'

She gave a false impression of confidence and Tufton, snubbing her for her sex and impudence, answered casually: 'One could say that,' and turned away from her.

Disbelieving, but lacking knowledge with which to contend against him, she looked for support to Guy who said: 'The Soviets never recognised Bessarabia as Rumanian. They're perfectly justified in taking it,' and, elated by the sudden, unusual popularity of the country which interpreted his faith, he added: 'You wait and see. Russia will win this war for us yet.'

Tufton gave a laugh. 'She may win the war,' he said, 'but not for us.'

This was too much for the journalists, who ridiculed the idea of Russia winning any war, let alone this one. A man who had been in Helsinki spoke at length of 'the Finnish fiasco'. Galpin then said the reputed power of Soviet armour was one huge bluff and described how during the war in Spain a friend of his had run into a Soviet tank which had buckled up like cardboard.

Guy said: 'That's nonsense, an old story. Every hack journalist with nothing better to write up was putting it around.' Now that his ideals were attacked, he was on the defensive, no longer mild but ready to argue with anyone. Harriet, though the ideals were too political and disinterested to appeal to her, was prepared to take his side; but Galpin shrugged, giving the impression he thought the whole thing unimportant.

Before Guy could speak again, Mortimer Tufton, who had no patience with the conjectures of inexperienced youth, broke in with a history of Russian-Rumanian relations, proving that only Allied influences had prevented Russia from devouring the Balkans long ago. Rumania, he said, had been invaded by

Russia on eight separate occasions and had suffered a number of 'friendly occupations', none of which had ever been forgotten or forgiven. 'The fact is,' he concluded, 'the friendship of Russia has been more disastrous to Rumania than the enmity of the rest of the world.'

'That was Czarist Russia,' said Guy. 'The Soviets are a different proposition.'

'But not a different race – witness this latest piece of opportunism.'

Catching his small, vain, self-regarding eye fixed severely upon her, Harriet, deciding to win him, smiled and asked: 'To whom would *you* award Bessarabia?'

'Hmmm!' said Tufton. He looked away, appearing to swallow something astringent in his throat, but, mollified by her appeal, he gave the question thought. 'Russia, Turkey and Rumania have been squabbling over that particular province for five hundred years,' he said. 'The Russians finally got it in 1812 and held on to it until 1918. I imagine they kept it rather longer than anyone else managed to do, so, on reflection . . .' he paused, hemmed again, then impressively announced: 'I'd be inclined to let them have it.'

Harriet smiled at Guy, passing the award on to him, and Galpin nodded, confirming it.

Galpin's dark, narrow face hung in folds above his rag of a collar. Elbow on bar, sourly elated by his return to his old position, he kept staring about him for an audience, his moving eyeballs as yellow as the whisky in his hand. As he drank, his yellow wrist, the wrist-bone like half an egg, stuck out rawly from his wrinkled, shrunken, ash-dusty dark suit. A wet cigarette stub clung, forgotten, to the bulging, purple softness of his lower lip and trembled when he spoke.

'The Russkies are sticking their necks out demanding this territory just when Carol's declared for the Axis.'

Guy said: 'I imagine the declaration prompted them to do it. They're staking their claim before the Germans get too strong here.'

'Could be.' Galpin looked vague. He preferred to be the

one to theorise, ‘Still, they’re sticking their necks out.’ He looked for Tufton’s agreement and when he got it grunted, agreeing with himself, then added: ‘If the Germans ever attacked them, I wouldn’t give the Russkies ten days.’

As they were discussing the Russian war potential, in which Guy alone had faith, a small man in dilapidated grey cotton, an old trilby pressed against his chest, sidled in and nudged Galpin. This was Galpin’s scout, a shadow who lived by nosing out news, taking one version of it to the German journalists at the Minerva, and another to the English in the Athénée Palace.

When Galpin bent down, the scout whispered in his ear. Galpin listened with intent interest. Everyone waited to hear what had been said, but he was in no hurry to tell them. With a sardonic, bemused expression, he took out a bundle of dirty paper money and handed over the equivalent of sixpence, which reward was received with reverent gratitude. Then he paused, smiling around the company.

‘The eagerly awaited message has arrived,’ he said at last.

‘Well, what is it?’ Tufton impatiently asked.

‘The Führer has asked Carol to cede Bessarabia without conflict.’

‘Hah!’ Tufton gave a laugh which said he had expected as much.

Galpin’s close companion, Screwby, asked: ‘This is a directive?’

‘Directive, nothing,’ said Galpin. ‘It’s a command.’

‘So it’s settled,’ said Screwby bleakly. ‘No chance of a scrap?’

Tufton scoffed at him: ‘Rumania take on Russia single-handed? Not a chance. Their one hope was Axis backing if they stood firm. But Hitler doesn’t intend going to war with Russia – anyway, not over Bessarabia.’

The journalists finished their drinks before making for the telephones in the hall. No one showed any inclination to hurry. The news was negative. Rumania would submit without a fight.

When they left the hotel, the Pringles were surprised at the quiet outside. The Führer's command must be known to everyone now, but there was no hint of revolt. If there had been a show of anger, it was over now. The atmosphere was subdued. A few people stood outside the palace as though there might still be hope, but the majority were dispersing in silence, having recognised that there was nothing more to be done.

After the tense hours of uncertainty, acceptance of the ultimatum had probably brought as much relief as disappointment. Whatever else it might mean, it meant that life in Bucharest would go on much as before. No one would be called upon to die in a desperate cause.

Next day the papers were making the best of things. Rumania, they said, had agreed to cede Bessarabia and the northern Bukovina, but Germany had promised that after the war these provinces would be returned to her. Meanwhile, in obeying the Führer's will, she was sacrificing herself to preserve the peace of Eastern Europe. It was a moral victory and the officers withdrawing their men from the ceded territory might do so with breasts expanded and heads held high.

Flags were at half-mast. The cinemas were ordered to shut for three days of public mourning. And the rumour went round that the Rumanian officers, now pelting down south, had abandoned their units, their military equipment and even their own families, in panic flight before the advancing Russians. By the end of June, Bessarabia and the northern Bukovina had become part of the Soviet Union.

When the Pringles next visited the English Bar, Galpin said: 'Do you realise the Russian frontier is less than a hundred and twenty miles from here? The bastards could be on top of us before we'd even known they'd started.'

2

Harriet had imagined that when the term ended they would be free to go where they pleased. She longed to escape, if only for a few weeks, not only from the disquiet of the capital, but from their uncertain situation. She thought they might leave Rumania altogether. A boat went from Constanza to Istanbul, and thence to Greece. Excited by the prospect of such a journey, she appealed to Guy, who said: 'I'm afraid I can't go just now. Inchcape's asked me to organise a summer school. In any case, he feels none of us should leave the country at the moment. It would create a bad impression.'

'But no one spends the summer in Bucharest.'

'They will this year. People are afraid to leave in case something happens and they can't get back. As a matter of fact, I've already enrolled two hundred students.'

'Rumanians?'

'A few. The Jews are crowding in. They're very loyal.'

'I should say it's not just loyalty. They want to get away to English-speaking countries.'

'You can't blame them for that.'

'I don't blame them,' said Harriet but, disappointed, she was inclined to blame someone. Probably Guy himself.

Now she was coming to know Guy, she was beginning to judge him. When they had married ten months before, she had accepted him, uncritically, as a composite of virtues. She did not demur when Clarence described him as 'a saint'. She still might not demur, but she knew now that one aspect of his saintliness was composed of human weaknesses.

She said: 'I don't believe Inchcape thought of this school.'

He's lost interest in the English Department. I believe it's all your idea.'

'I discussed it with Inchcape. He agreed that one can't spend the summer lazing around while other men are fighting a war.'

'And what is Inchcape going to do? I mean, apart from sitting in the Bureau reading Henry James.'

'He's an old man,' said Guy, deflecting criticism as much from himself as from his superior. Since Inchcape, who was the professor, had become Director of Propaganda, Guy had run the English Department with the help only of three elderly ex-governesses and Dubedat, an elementary school-teacher, marooned in the Balkans by war. With uncomplaining enthusiasm, Guy did much more than was expected of him; but he was not imposed upon. He did what he wanted to do and did it, Harriet believed, to keep reality at bay.

During the days of the fall of France, he had thrown himself into a production of *Troilus and Cressida*. Now, when their Rumanian friends were beginning to avoid them, he was giving himself up to this summer school. He would not only be too busy to notice their isolation, but too busy to care about it. She wanted to accuse him of running away – but how accuse someone who was, to all appearances, steadfast on the site of danger, a candidate for martyrdom? It was she, it seemed, who wanted to run away.

She asked: 'When does the school start?'

'Next week.' He laughed at her tone of resignation, and, putting an arm round her, said: 'Don't look so glum. We'll get away before the summer ends. We'll go to Predeal.'

She smiled and said: 'All right,' but as soon as she was alone she went to the telephone, looking for comfort, and rang up the only Englishwoman she knew here who was of her generation. This was Bella Niculescu, who had very little to do and was usually only too ready to talk. That morning, however, she cut Harriet off abruptly, saying she was dressing to go out to luncheon. She suggested that Harriet come to tea that afternoon.

Harriet waited until nearly five o'clock before venturing

into the outdoor heat. At that time a little shade was stretching from the buildings, but in the Boulevard Breteanu, where Bella lived, the buildings had been demolished to make way for blocks of flats, only two or three of which had been built when war brought work to a stop. The pavements were shadeless between the white baked earth of vacant lots.

In summer this area was a dormitory for beggars and unemployed peasants, and the dust-filled air carried a curious odour, sweetish, unclean yet volatile, distilled by the sun from earth saturated with urine and ordure.

Bella's block rose sheer from the ground like a prow from water. Against its side-wall a peasant had pitched a hut for the sale of vegetables and cigarettes. Several beggars sleeping in the shade of the hut made an attempt to rouse themselves at Harriet's step and whined in a half-hearted way. One of them was well known to her. She had seen him first on her first day in Bucharest: a demanding, bad-tempered fellow who, recognising a foreigner, had thrust his ulcerated leg at her like a threat and refused to be satisfied with what she gave him. At that time she had been horrified by the beggars, especially this beggar. Having just journeyed three days to the eastern edge of Europe, she had seen him as a portent of life in the strange, half-Oriental capital to which marriage had brought her.

Guy had said she must become used to the beggars; and, in a way, she had done so. She had even become reconciled to this man, and he to her. Now she handed him the same small coins a Rumanian would have given and he accepted them, sullenly, but without protest.

The smells of the boulevard did not enter the block of flats, which was air-conditioned. In its temperate, scentless atmosphere, Harriet's head cleared, and, stimulated and cheerful, she thought of Bella to whom she could look for companionship during the empty summer ahead. She contemplated their meeting with pleasure, but as she entered the drawing-room she realised something was wrong. She felt so little welcome that she came to a stop inside the door.

‘Well, take a pew,’ Bella said crossly, as though Harriet were at fault in awaiting the invitation.

Sitting on the edge of the large blue sofa, Harriet said: ‘It’s beautifully cool in here. It seems hotter than ever outside.’

‘What do you expect? It’s July.’ Bella pulled a bell-cord, then stared impatiently at the door as though she, who chattered so easily, were now at a loss how to entertain her guest.

Two servants entered, one with the tea, the other with cakes. Bella watched, frowning in a displeased fashion, as the trays were put down. Harriet, discomfited, also found herself at a loss for conversation and looked at an early edition of the evening paper which lay beside her on the sofa. When the girls went, she made a comment on the headline: ‘I see Drucker is to be tried at last.’

Bella inclined her head, saying: ‘Personally, I’d let him rot. He made out he was pro-British, but his rate of exchange was all in favour of Germany. Lots of people say his bank was ruining the country.’ She spoke tartly, but in a refined tone reminding Harriet of their first tea-party when Bella, fearing that her guest might have pretensions to family or wealth, had overwhelmed her with gentility. Eventually set at ease, Bella had revealed a hearty appetite for gossip and a ribaldry which Harriet, in need of a friend, had come to enjoy. Now here was Bella, a great classical statue of a woman in an unnatural pose, again barricaded behind her best electro-plated tea-service. For some reason they were back where they had started from.

Harriet said: ‘I met Drucker once. His son was one of Guy’s students. He was a warm-hearted man; very good-looking.’

‘Humph!’ said Bella. ‘Seven months in prison won’t have improved his looks.’ Unable to repress superior knowledge, she took a more comfortable pose and nodded knowingly. ‘He was a womaniser, like most good-looking men. And, in a way, that’s what did for him. If Madame hadn’t thought he was fair game, she’d never have tried to get him to part with his oil holdings. When he refused her, she took it as a personal affront. She was furious. Any woman would be. So she went

to Carol, who saw a chance to get his hands on some cash and trumped up this charge of dealing in foreign currency. Drucker was arrested and his family skedaddled.'

Pleased by her own summary of the circumstances leading to Drucker's fall, Bella could not help smiling. Harriet, feeling the atmosphere between them relaxing, asked: 'What do you think they will do to him?'

'Oh, he'll be found guilty – that goes without saying. He'll have to forfeit his oil holdings, of course; but there's this fortune he's got salted away in Switzerland. Carol can't take that, so if Drucker makes it over he might get off lightly. Rumanians are quite humane, you know.'

Harriet said: 'But Drucker can't make it over. The money's in his son's name.'

'Who told you that?' Bella spoke sharply and Harriet, unable to disclose the source of it, wished she had kept her knowledge to herself.

'I heard it some time ago. Guy was fond of Sasha. He's been trying to find out what became of him.'

'Surely the boy bolted with the rest of the family?'

'No. He was taken away when they arrested his father, but apparently he's not in prison. No one knows where he is. He's just disappeared.'

'Indeed!' Used to being the authority on things Rumanian, Bella was looking bored by Harriet's talk of the Druckers, so Harriet changed to a subject which was always of interest. 'How is Nikko?' she asked.

Conscripted like the majority of Rumanian males, Bella's husband was usually on leave. It was Bella's money that bought his freedom.

'He's been recalled,' she said bleakly. 'They're all in a funk, of course, over Bessarabia.'

In the past Harriet would have heard this news on arrival and it would have kept Bella in complaints for an hour or more.

'Where is his regiment at the moment?' Harriet encouraged her.

‘The Hungarian front. That damned Carol Line, not that there’s anything anyone could call a line. A fat lot of good it would be if the Huns did march in.’

‘I expect you’ll be able to get him back?’

‘Oh, yes. I’ll have to cough up again.’

Bella had nothing more to say and Harriet, attempting to keep some sort of conversation going, spoke of the changing attitude of the Rumanians towards the English, saying: ‘They treat us like an enemy – a defeated enemy: guilty but pitiable.’

‘I can’t say I’ve noticed it,’ said Bella, her tone aloof: ‘But, of course, it’s different for me.’

There was a long silence. Harriet, exhausted by her attempts to break down Bella’s restraint, put down her teacup, saying she had shopping to do. She imagined Bella would be relieved by her departure, but, instead, Bella gave her a troubled look as though there was still something to be resolved between them.

They went together into the hall where Harriet, making a last approach, suggested they might, as they often did, meet for coffee at Mavrodaphne’s. ‘What about tomorrow morning?’ she said.

Bella put her large, white hands to her pearls and stared down at the chequered marble floor. ‘I don’t know,’ she said vaguely as she placed her white shoe exactly in the centre of a black square. ‘It’s difficult.’

Knowing that Bella had almost nothing to do, Harriet asked impatiently: ‘How, difficult? Whatever is the matter, Bella?’

‘Well . . .’ Bella paused, watching the toe of her shoe, which she turned from side to side. ‘Me being an Englishwoman married to a Rumanian, I have to go carefully. I mean, I have to think of Nikko.’

‘But, of course.’

‘Well, I think we’d better not be seen together at Mavrodaphne’s. And about ringing each other up: I think we should stop while things are as they are. My phone’s probably tapped.’

‘Surely not. The telephone company is British.’

‘But it employs Rumanians. You don’t know this country like I do. Any excuse and they’d arrest Nikko just to get a bribe to release him. It’s always being done.’

‘I don’t honestly see . . .’ Harriet began, then paused as Bella gave her a miserable glance. She said: ‘But you’ll come and see me sometimes?’

‘Yes, I will.’ Bella nodded. ‘I promise. But I’ll have to be careful. I must say, I wish I’d never appeared in *Troilus*. It was a sort of declaration.’

‘Of what? The fact you are English? Everyone knows that.’

‘I’m not so sure.’ Bella drew back her foot. ‘My Rumanian’s practically perfect. Everyone says so.’ She jerked her face up, pink with the effort of saying what she had said, and her look was defiant.

Six, even three, months ago, Harriet would have despised Bella’s fears; now she felt compassion for them. The time might soon come when the English would have to go and Bella would be left here without a compatriot. She had to protect herself against that time. Harriet touched her arm: ‘I understand how you feel. Don’t worry. You can trust me.’

Bella’s face softened. With a nervous titter, she took a hand from her pearls and put it over Harriet’s hand. ‘But I *will* drop in,’ she said; ‘I don’t expect anyone will notice me. And, after all, they can’t deprive me of my friends.’

3

That evening, on their way to the Cişmigiu Park, the Pringles met Clarence Lawson.

Clarence was not one of the organisation men. He had been seconded to the English Department by the British Council and at the outbreak of war had gone with Inchcape into the Propaganda Bureau. Bored by the work, or lack of work, there, he had taken on the administration of Polish relief and organised the escape of interned Polish soldiers.

Guy said to him: 'We're going to have a drink in the park. Why not come with us?'

Clarence, as tall as Guy but much leaner, drooped sadly as he considered this proposal and, rubbing a doubtful hand over his lean face, said: 'I don't know that I can.'

As he edged away a little, apparently feeling the pull of urgent business elsewhere, Harriet said: 'Come on, Clarence. A walk will do you good.'

Clarence gave her an oblique, suspicious glance and mumbled something about work. Harriet laughed. Aware of his eagerness to be with her, she took his arm and led him up the Calea Victoriei. As he went, he grumbled: 'Oh, all right, but I can't stay long.'

They walked through crowds that, having accepted the loss of Bessarabia, were as lively as they had ever been. Harriet was used to the rapid recovery of these people who had outworn more than a dozen conquerors and survived eight hundred years of oppression, but now she thought they looked almost complacent. She said: 'They seem to be congratulating themselves on something.'

‘They probably are,’ said Clarence. ‘The new Cabinet has repudiated the Anglo-French guarantee. The new Foreign Minister was a leader in the Iron Guard. So now they know exactly where they are. They’re really committed to Hitler and he must protect them. They think the worst is over, and –’ he pointed to the placard of the *Bukarester Tageblatt* which read: FRIEDEN IM HERBST – ‘they think the war is over, too.’

At the park gate, he paused, murmuring: ‘Well, now, I really think I . . .’ but as the Pringles went on, ignoring his vagaries, he followed them.

Passing from the fashionable street into the unfashionable park, they moved from hubbub into tranquillity. Here, as the noise of the street faded, there was nothing to be heard but the hiss of sprinklers. The air was sweet with the scent of wet earth. Only a few peasants stood about, admiring the spectacle of the *tapis vert*. The only flowers that thrived in the heat were the canna lilies, now reflecting in their reds and yellows and flame colours the flamboyance of the sunset sky.

Down by the lakeside, the vendors of sesame cake and Turkish delight stood, as they had stood all day, silent and humble beneath the chestnut trees. Beyond the trees, a little gangway led to a café which was chiefly used by shop assistants and minor clerks. It was here that Guy had arranged to meet his friend David Boyd.

As they crossed the flexing boards of the artificial island, Harriet could see David sitting by the café rail in the company of a Jewish economist called Klein.

Guy and David had met first in 1938 when they were both newcomers to Bucharest. David, a student of Balkan history and languages, had been visiting Rumania. He reappeared the following winter, having been appointed to the British Legation as an authority on Rumanian affairs. The two men, of an age and physically similar, resembled each other in outlook, both believing that a Marxist economy was the only remedy for the feudal mismanagement of Eastern Europe.

At the sight of the new arrivals Klein leapt to his feet and advanced on them with arms wide in welcome. The Pringles

had met him only twice before, but at once Guy, like a fervent bear, caught hold of the stout, little, pink-cheeked man, and the two patted each other lovingly on the back. David snuffled his amusement as he watched this embrace.

When released, Klein swung round excitedly to greet Harriet, the flush rising from his cheeks to his bald head. 'And Doamna Preen-gal!' he cried. 'But this is nice!' He wanted to include Clarence in his rapture, but Clarence hung back with an uneasy grin.

'So nice, but so *nice!*' Klein repeated as he offered Harriet his seat by the rail.

The evening was very warm. Guy had been walking with his cotton jacket over his arm and his shirt-sleeves rolled up, a state of undress which the Rumanians regarded as indecent. The café patrons, though shabby, sweaty, and only a generation or two away from the peasantry, were all tightly buttoned up in the dark suits that indicated their respectability. They looked askance at Guy, but Klein took off his jacket, revealing braces and the steel bracelets that held up the sleeves of his striped shirt. He also removed his tie from under his hard collar, laughing at himself as he said: 'In this country they do not dress for taking off the coat, but here, I ask you, what does it matter?'

Meanwhile David, who had raised himself slightly in greeting, now slumped back into his chair to indicate it was time for these pleasantries to cease and serious talk to begin again. Chairs were found. Everybody was seated at last.

David, his bulk enhanced by a linen suit that had shrunk in the wash, his large square dark face glistening with sweat, pushed his glasses up his moist nose and said to Klein: 'You were saying . . . ?'

Called to order, Klein surveyed the company and said: 'First you must know, Antonescu has been flung into jail.'

'For speaking the truth again?' David asked.

Klein grinned and nodded.

Harriet did not know what David's occupation was at the Legation, and if Guy knew he kept his knowledge to himself.

David was often away from Bucharest. He said that he went to watch the bird life of the Danube delta.

Inchcape claimed that once, in Braşov, he had recognised David under the disguise of a Greek Orthodox priest. He had said: 'Hello, what the devil are you up to?' and as the other swept by had received the reply: '*Procul, o procul este, profani.*' Whether this story, and all it implied, was true or not, David, whose subject was Balkan history, was noted for his inside knowledge of Rumanian affairs, some of which was obtained from associates like Klein.

'It is such a story!' Klein said, and ordered another bottle of wine. While the glasses were filled, he paused, but kept his brilliant glance moving from one to the other of his companions. When the waiter was gone, he asked: 'What am I? An illegal immigrant, let out of prison to advise the Cabinet. What do I know? Why should they heed me? "Klein," they say, "you are a silly Jew."'

Rather impatiently, David interrupted to ask: 'But what was the cause of Antonescu's arrest?'

'Ah, the arrest! Well – you know he went to the palace on the night of the ultimatum. He asked to see the King and was prevented. Urdureanu prevented him. The two men came to blows. You heard that, of course? Yes, to blows, inside the palace. A great scandal.'

'Was he arrested for that?'

'Not for that, no. Yesterday he received a summons from the King himself. Being fearful that from emotion he could not speak, he wrote a letter. He wrote: "Majesty, our country crumbles about us." Now, did I not say that the country would crumble? You remember, I described Rumania as a person who has inherited a great fortune. From folly, he loses it all.'

'What else did Antonescu say?' Clarence asked, his slow, deep voice causing Klein to glance round in surprise.

Delighted at hearing Clarence speak, Klein went on: 'Antonescu said: "Majesty, I cry to you to save our nation," and begged the King to rid himself of the false friends about

his throne. When he read the letter, the King instantly ordered his arrest. It is for Urdureanu a great victory.'

Klein sounded regretful and Guy asked: 'Does it matter? Urdureanu is a crook, but Antonescu is a fascist.'

Klein stuck out his lower lip and rocked his head from side to side. 'It is true,' he said. 'Antonescu supported the Iron Guard, but, in his way, he is a patriot. He wishes to end corruption. How he would act in power one cannot tell.'

'He would just be another dictator,' Guy said.

The talk turned to criticism of the King's dictatorship, out of which Clarence suddenly said: 'The King has his faults, but he's not insensitive. When he knew Bessarabia was lost, he burst into tears.'

'Crying over the oysters he's eaten – or, rather, got to cough up,' David said, sniffing and snuffing with amusement at his own wit.

'Anyone can cry,' said Harriet. 'In this country it doesn't mean much.'

Clarence gave her a pained look and, tilting his chair back from this unsympathetic company, drawled: 'I'm not so sure of that.' After a pause in which no one spoke, he added: 'He's our only friend. When he goes, we'll go – if we're lucky enough to get away.'

'That's true,' David agreed; 'and we can thank ourselves for it. If we'd protected the country against the King instead of the King against the country, the situation here would have been very different.'

Klein stretched out his short, plump, shirt-sleeved arms and beamed about him. 'Did I not tell you if you stayed it would be interesting? You have not seen a half. Already this new Cabinet arranged to ration meat and petrol.' As the others looked at him in astonishment, he threw back his head and laughed. 'This new Cabinet! Never have I laughed so much. First they repudiate the Anglo-French guarantee. That is easy, everyone feels big work is done – but then, what to do? One has an idea. "Let us," he says, "order for each of us a big desk, a swivel chair, a fine carpet!" "Good, good!" they all

agree. Then rises the new Foreign Minister. Once he was a nobody, now he is the great man. He calls to me to approach. He says, "Klein, give me a list of our poets." I bow. "You will have them in what order?" I ask. "Sometimes such a list is put in order of literary merit. How naïve! How arbitrary! Why not in order of height, of weight, of income, or the year they did their military service?" "So," says the Foreign Minister, "so we will have it: the year they did their military service. I propose now that these poets write poems to the great Iron Guard leader Codreanu, who is dead but in spirit still lives among us. Domnul Prime Minister, what opinion have you of this proposition?" "Hm, hm," mumbles the Prime Minister. What can he say? Was not Codreanu the enemy of the King? "The opinion I have . . . the opinion I have . . . oh!" He sees me and looks very stern. "Klein," he says, "what opinion have I of the proposition!" "You think it is good, Domnul Prime Minister," I tell him.'

Klein's stories went on. The others were content to let him talk.

The sunset was fading. Electric light bulbs of different colours sprang up along the café rail. A last tea-rose flush coloured the western sky, giving a glint to the olive darkness of the water. Harriet watched the trees on the other side of the lake as they drew together in the twilight, sombre and weighty as the trees in an old tapestry.

'The other day,' said Klein, 'in marched His Majesty. "I have decided," he said, "to sell to my country my summer palace in the Dobrudja. It will be like a gift to the nation, for I am asking only a million million *lei*." "But," cried the Prime Minister, "when Bulgaria takes the Dobrudja, they will take the palace as well." "What!" cried the King. "Are you a traitor? Never will Bulgaria take our Dobrudja. First will we fight till every Rumanian is dead. I will lead them myself on my white horse." And everyone leaps up and cheers, and they sing the national anthem; but when it is all over, they find they must buy the palace for a million million.'

Harriet, laughing with the rest, kept her face turned towards

the lake from which came a creak of oars and the lap of passing boats. She looked down on a creamy scum of water on which there floated sprays of elder flower, flat-faced and lacy, plucked by the boatmen and thrown away. A scent of stocks came from somewhere, materialising out of nothing, then passing and not returning. The wireless was playing 'The Swan of Tuonela', bringing to her mind some green northern country with lakes reflecting a silver sky. About them, she thought, were the constituents of peace and yet, sitting here talking and laughing, they were, all of them, on edge with the nervous city's tension.

She began to think of England and their last sight of the looped white cliffs, the washed white and blue of the sky, the sea glittering and chopped by the wind. They should have been stirred by the sight, full of regrets, but they had turned their backs on it, excited by change and their coming life together. Guy had said they would return home for Christmas. Asked how they took life, they would have said: 'Any way it comes.' Chance and uncertainty were part of it. The last thing she would have wanted for them was a settled life lived peaceably in one town. Now her attitude had changed. She had begun to long for safety.

'... and then the new Prime Minister makes a great speech.' Klein raised his hand and gazed solemnly about him. 'He says: "Now is the time for broad issues. We do not worry about trifles . . ." then, suddenly, he stops. He points to the things on his table. His eyes flash fire. "Cigarettes," he cries, "pastilles, mineral water, indigestion tablets, aspirin. Auguste," he calls, "come here at once. How many times I say to you what must be on my table? Tell me, Auguste, where is the aspirin? Ah, so! Now I speak again. This, I say, is the time for broad issues . . ."'

A gypsy flower-seller, trailing around her an old evening dress of reseda chiffon, came to the table and placed some tight little bunches of cornflowers at David's elbow. She said nothing, but held out her hand. He pushed them aside and told her to go away. She remained where she was, silent like