

A Remembrance of Death

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‘Love, like rain, cannot choose the grass on which it falls.’

African proverb

Part I

Chapter 1

September 1917

Oxford was a city of lost souls and forsaken beliefs as the Great War endured into its fourth year. The spectres of the fallen were everywhere; in the college bars, cycling down the Banbury Road, and punting on the Isis. They blended into the grey stone buildings and their deafening silence rang out. In deference to the dead, the university authorities cancelled the inter-collegiate rowing regatta, the Head of the River, for the first time since it started just over a hundred years ago.

Basil Drewe arrived into this dark milieu for the start of the Michaelmas term. He took a horse-drawn cab from the railway station to Keble College, wondering what he should say on his arrival. He was not precisely certain of the etiquette; it was something he would have discussed with his eldest brother, but Adrian had died near Ypres in July of that year. As the cab made its way through the streets of Oxford, with its ancient colleges, churches, and endless bicycles, Basil wondered whether he should have delayed coming up for a year and stayed with his parents. However, their grief was all-consuming and nothing he could say or do could relieve it.

Keble was built in polychrome brick with only two quads – Liddon and Pusey – and was considered a new college, as it was only fifty years old. Over that half-century, ivy had grown up to hide some of the Victorian gothic brickwork. The college was a stone's throw from the faculty of law, and it had concerned him that he might struggle to walk to tutorials if he were too far away. It was also next to the Ashmolean Museum where he could indulge his love of ancient history. His left leg had been broken in a fall a few years before, and he had

metal plates and bolts holding the bones together. The choice of Keble was against the wishes of his father, who favoured Christ Church, with its long tradition of moulding the prime ministers of the United Kingdom. It was the first time he could remember arguing with his father on any matter and he had been surprised when his father conceded the point.

When the cab pulled up at the lodge, Basil got out and paid the driver the precise fare plus a five per cent tip. His valise was placed in front of the porter's lodge and inside he was asked his name.

“Basil Drewe.”

The porter looked down his list. “Mr Basil Charles Drewe,” came back the confirmation, as if Basil's omission of his middle name was a singular deficiency. “Pusey, second floor,” the porter added brusquely, “and your luggage arrived this morning.” The porter looked up from his list and saw Basil leaning on a walking stick. “You could be moved?” Basil paused and looked at the grey-whiskered porter with a scar under his left eye and immediately decided that this was a man who would not appreciate the slightest amount of inconvenience.

“No, the second floor will be fine,” said Basil and he followed the underporter, who picked up his valise. On entering Pusey, the underporter called out his scout's name, Scoley, and a thin, wiry man with buckled front teeth and short black hair hurried down the stone stairs at the end of the corridor.

“One of your gentlemen,” said the underporter. “Mr. Drewe.”

“Your luggage is in your room, sir,” said Scoley, as he took the valise and climbed back up the stone stairs. “You'll need to be a bit careful in winter, sir. These steps get icy and can be hellish.”

“Thank you,” said Basil, wondering whether he would regret not taking the offer of ground-floor rooms.

“Here you are, sir, the second door on the left. The bathrooms are at the bottom of the corridor. Meals are taken in the hall and are served from seven in the morning, twelve-thirty, and seven-thirty in the evening. Gowns are to be worn except on formal nights and drinks can be taken half an hour before dinner.” Basil saw his surname on a plaque on the door as he entered the small living room. Scoley handed over an envelope. “Most things that you need to know, sir, are in here. If there is anything else just knock on my door.”

Basil looked around the room. It was spartan with a desk and chair by the window and on the adjacent wall was a fireplace with a small sofa and two matching wingback chairs placed around it. The fireplace seemed to Basil to be so small that he wondered whether he would even be able to brown toast. An empty bookcase stood near the desk, which was so tiny that it would hold only half of the books that he had shipped from home. Opposite the fireplace was a door to his bedroom, which was even smaller than the living room and equally as bare.

“The linen is changed on Tuesdays and the cleaner comes Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays,” continued Scoley. “Once you have some prints up and fill the bookcase, it will feel more like home, sir.” Basil forced a smile, as his idea of home and Scoley’s seemed to be different.

From down the corridor, a student was shouting Scoley’s name as if his life depended on it.

“That’s Mr Templeton, sir, a third year. Most demanding, unfortunately.”

Scoley handed over the room keys to Basil. “Just one last thing, sir. Your neighbour arrived this morning from India, a Mr Laxman Choudhury, who is studying for a doctorate in philosophy. I assume you will not have a problem living next to an Indian gentleman?”

“No, not at all,” replied Basil and, as Scoley left his room, he wondered why it would be an issue.

Basil looked out of his window towards the college entrance. He could just make out to his left the library and beyond that was Liddon Quad and the chapel. He thought, I’m an Oxford undergraduate, and suppressed a smile. He relished that feeling of accomplishment and success. That morning, when he had left his home at Wadhurst Hall, he had promised his father that he would come back with a first in jurisprudence and, as he watched groups of students scurrying around the quad, he wondered whether that little show of arrogance and bravado would come back to haunt him – but a gentleman’s word is his bond.

Chapter 2

While nearly every freshman would depend solely on their scout's experience in the first few weeks of university, that was not the case with Jonathan Bruton. While other freshers had to call for their scout to explain to them roll calls and chapels, Bruton seemed either to instinctively know what was needed or did not care. He knew where he should be and when. Tailors, tobacconists, and wine merchants came and set up accounts with him in the first week. He ignored most of the fresher clubs, only joining the polo club and the Oxford University Officer Training Corps. By the end of his third day at Keble, Bruton knew the names of each of the freshers in Pusey and was on nodding acquaintance with some of the less stuffy third years. As he walked into Pusey, he would shout to Scoley to arrange an innumerable number of matters, which in the first week included having flowers sent to a local girl and the booking of a room in his name at the Randolph Hotel as, he explained, his parents would be visiting from South Africa. Bruton was one of those students that Scoley would soon describe as 'most demanding, unfortunately'.

Basil first met Bruton on the last day of freshers week. As he slowly climbed down the winding stone staircase, he heard Bruton shouting for Scoley to order more wine from Loeb's.

"That wine merchant's an imbecile," Bruton shouted. "When I asked for six Bordeaux, I meant cases, not bottles."

"Good morning," said Basil.

"You must be Drewe," responded Bruton.

"Yes, Basil Drewe." Basil extended his hand.

“Jonathan Bruton,” came the reply. “And before you ask, the accent is South African. I think my room is under yours, so I better apologise for the noise.”

“Yes, I was going to come and have a quiet word about that,” said Basil.

“Sorry, but it might also be a bit rowdy this evening, as I’m having some officers over who are billeted here. We’re planning to dine together and then have a few drinks in my room. Join us and make up an eight?”

As it was a Friday and lectures were not starting until the following week, Basil agreed. “How did you know my name?”

“Scoley gave me a rundown of everyone in your corridor. Apart from you and Choudhury, I think I have met everyone, and I rather guessed by your complexion you weren’t Choudhury.”

“So, I’ll see you at seven?”

“Seven is perfect,” said Bruton, “and would you mind bringing a bottle or two? Unfortunately, I’ve been rather let down by Loeb’s.”

Basil watched as Bruton casually wandered towards the main gate and then put his head in the porter’s lodge. A few seconds later he could hear the irascible porter laughing. Basil immediately warmed to the gregarious Bruton. He, on the other hand, had been there for five days and still hardly knew anyone. Basil turned and went and got his bike. He leant down and put his bicycle clips around the bottom of his suit trousers, lifted his leg over the crossbar and rang the metal bell for good measure. He pushed himself forward with his good leg and started pedalling slowly until he heard the porter shouting at him not to cycle in the quad. After dismounting, he pushed the bike slowly towards the gate, feeling that he was being watched by every underporter and scout in Keble. Outside on the street, he again

mounted his bicycle. He hadn't ridden a bike for over six years since the accident with his leg but had decided to buy this from a third-year law student who took Basil's money, shook his hand firmly and completed the sale with the words "*Caveat emptor*".

From the college, Basil turned left and left again, heading for Jericho and then out to Port Meadow, which was the old common that stretched to the village of Wolvercote. The bicycle gave him a newfound sense of freedom that he had not felt for a long time. Someone had suggested that while at Oxford he visit Godstow Abbey and then stop at the Perch Inn for a spot of lunch and an afternoon beer. It was only three miles away and with his bicycle, it seemed possible. But after five minutes of cycling, his left leg began to ache, and he compensated by peddling harder with his right leg and letting his left leg do less.

Godstow Abbey had been built nearly eight hundred years before and was the final resting place of The Fair Rosamund, the mistress of Henry II. When he was much younger Basil had been told a story that the king had abducted Rosamund from Basil's ancestor, Drogo de Teigne. When Rosamund was poisoned, the king blamed Drogo and had him pursued across Dartmoor and chased him down with his hounds. Basil had thought the story nonsense but a distant relative of his, the rector Archibald Drew, insisted it was true. Archibald had also told him about Godstow Abbey.

"I came up to Oxford, borrowed a bicycle," Archibald said, "cycled out there and spent an afternoon searching for the grave of Rosamund. I discovered that in the sixteenth century, a German traveller had found the gravestone and written: 'Here in the tomb lies a rose of the world, not a pure rose; She who used to smell sweet, still smells – but not sweet.'" Archibald had stifled a laugh, almost embarrassed by the story that he was telling a young boy. "So," he continued, "if you decide to go to Oxford, you should take the time to visit the

old abbey. It's one of the most tranquil places I know, but you must search for the grave of Rosamund. After all, your family history and hers are tied together.”

Basil leant his bike up against the ruined church and sat on a broken-down wall. He rubbed his leg for a good ten minutes before deciding to slowly walk around the graveyard. He wondered whether he would be able to sense the presence of Rosamund, and then smiled to himself, realising the stupidity of that thought. After ten minutes of walking, he sensed nothing except the aching pain in his left leg and sat once again on the old dry-stone wall and looked across the churchyard for an hour or two. In this rich, green field the derelict abbey, with its roof long since fallen in, had become a part of the landscape. Grass grew out of the stone walls where the mortar had fallen out over time. Birds sat quietly on the topmost parts of the church viewing below them the fields, where, on occasion, voles and field mice might be caught. Across the fields and through a copse of trees was the river and Godstow Bridge. The sun, high in the heavens, reflected the colours of autumnal trees onto the river. A single mallard swam under the bridge and as the water parted between its paddling palmate feet, Basil got up, let out a deep sigh, mounted his bicycle and cycled back along the towpath in the direction of Oxford. He did not want silence and tranquillity; he had a life to live. It was why he had decided to come to Oxford and get away from his parents who were in perpetual mourning for his dead brother Adrian.

He would have loved to have come here at another time with Adrian and his other brother Christian. He would have loved to come before the war and the devastation that it wrought on his family and before his injury. He imagined that Adrian would have done something similar at Cambridge when he was a student, rowing up the river with friends and spending an afternoon lying on the banks, drinking champagne.

The Perch Inn was in the village of Binsey, which was on the opposite side of the river from Port Meadow. It was a traditional white plastered building with thatched roof, and once had a row of riverside aspens beside it. They had been cut down nearly forty years earlier, which had appalled the great poet, Gerald Manley Hopkins, so much that it forced him to write:

'My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,

Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,

All felled, felled, are all felled;

Of a fresh and following folded rank

Not spared, not one...'

Basil had been taught the poem when he was at school, but it now seemed more profound with the fallen lights of Oxford's student soldiers. Outside, in the garden of the inn, were benches and tables, where on clement days dons, masters and students alike would walk down the weed-winding bank of the river to lunch. However, the garden was almost empty. Basil placed his bicycle beside one of the empty tables and went in and ordered a glass of wine and poached salmon.

As Basil cycled along the footpath later that afternoon, he could make out, across the river, a polo match taking place. He pulled on his brake as hard as he could to stop and watched the two teams of four charging backwards and forwards between the goals. Basil knew that with the metal plates in his left leg, he would never be able to ride a horse again, and his heart ached. Of all the things that he loved, before his accident, it was horse riding that he missed the most. A battered bicycle with bad brakes was hardly any substitute.

“Were you watching our polo practice from across the river?” asked Bruton later that evening as the waiting staff poured coffee.

“Yes,” said Basil.

“Do you ride?” asked Bruton.

“Not anymore, not since my accident.”

“Tell me to mind my own business,” said Bruton, who was tapped on his shoulder by the person sitting on his other side and at once passed the port to his left. “But what happened to your leg?”

Basil looked up at the vaulted roof of the dining room and said, almost inaudibly, “Well that’s a story.” He brought his eyes downwards. On the walls were portraits of deans of the college, long since dead, who stared back at Basil with paternal concern. In a time when hundreds of students had lost their lives in the war, it seemed to Basil churlish to complain about an accident that had happened years ago.

“I fell from a cliff face,” he finally said. “A long time ago now.”

A sub-lieutenant in the Officer Training Corps looked over and said, “Lucky you’re not a polo pony – they would have put you down.”

Basil forced a smile and said, “Yes, I suppose that was lucky.”

“Actually,” said Bruton, “in South Africa we don’t put down nearly as many horses as you do in England. We treat a lot of fractures and breaks, and they heal remarkably well.”

The port had made its way around to Basil, and he eagerly filled his glass before passing it on to Bruton. The six officers at the table had spent most of the evening talking about the war and the third battle of Ypres. It was just outside of Ypres that Adrian had been

killed, and Basil desperately hoped the conversation would move on as it brought back too many painful memories.

“What are you reading?” Basil asked Bruton.

“Classics,” said Bruton. “I have an interest in Roman military history. And you?”

“Jurisprudence,” said Basil. “Although classics would have been my second choice.”

Bruton was initially surprised by Basil’s knowledge of Roman history, although as Basil explained, Latin was a prerequisite for studying law. Basil had a hundred questions for Bruton about the course, and they discussed Marcus Aurelius and Pliny.

“I have a copy,” said Bruton, “of Aurelius’s *Meditations* somewhere. Do borrow it if you want.”

“I will,” said Basil, who looked down at his near-empty port glass and tapped the shoulder of the person to his right.

When they got back to Bruton’s rooms, Basil and the six officers were four sheets to the wind. More wine was demanded by the officers. Bruton brought out two bottles and opened them. As he came to Basil to pour out a glass, he quietly asked whether Basil had remembered to buy a bottle or two. Basil excused himself for a moment and went up to his room. He reappeared a few minutes later with a case of wine and gave it to Bruton.

“I asked Loeb’s to send me two burgundies,” said Basil. “And instead of getting two bottles, I got two cases.”

“You have an account with them?” asked Bruton, who seemed surprised that Basil managed to do what he could not.

“I charged it to my father’s account,” said Basil.

“Well, we’ll try not to drink the second case this evening,” said Bruton, who patted Basil on the back, “for your father’s sake.”

Chapter 3

Basil did not recall how he managed to get back to his rooms. When he awoke, he still had his trousers on. He had no idea what time it was, though he knew he'd missed breakfast. Fortunately, on a Saturday there were no lectures, and no one would come to clean his rooms. By the side of his bed was a large glass of water and an empty bucket. He could not remember putting either there and wondered whether Bruton had helped him up the stairs and put him to bed. He drank the water. His mouth was clammy and there was a sharp pain behind his eyes. He swivelled his legs over the side of the bed and sat up, at once regretting it, and buried his head in his hands. He went through the process of trying to piece together the evening's events.

Basil recalled that they had played a drinking game. They had gone down to Pusey quad with his bicycle and each of them, one at a time, had cycled around the quad with their hands off the handlebars while drinking a glass of wine. If any of the wine spilt, the cyclist would have to drink another glass as a forfeit. If the cyclist succeeded, everyone else would have to drink a glass of wine. The noise had brought people to their windows and out onto the quad. At eleven o'clock the dean had come out and put a stop to the revelries. However, by this time they were all blind drunk except Jonathan Bruton, who did not spill a single drop of wine.

"Get behind me," Bruton had said, as he walked back towards his room. "And all of you shout '*memento mori*'."

"Why?" Basil had asked.

“Because when a Roman general paraded through Rome after a great victory, he would have someone walking behind him shouting that. It would remind him that death was inevitable,” said Bruton.

Once they had returned to Bruton’s warm room, Basil had little recollection of what happened afterwards. He assumed that he must have fallen asleep in a chair and later in the evening made his way to his room. He thought he would feel better after a bath, so put on a shirt and went down the hallway towards the bathroom. He returned twenty minutes later to find Scoley by his door.

“Mr Bruton left this for you, sir,” said Scoley.

“What is it, Scoley?”

“Mr Bruton didn’t say. When he went out this morning, he asked me to put it under your door an hour or two before luncheon.” Basil took the envelope.

“I trust we didn’t make too much noise last night,” he said.

“Enough to wake the dead,” said Scoley. “However, everyone enjoyed your little cycling game. Even the dean waited nearly half ’n hour before putting a stop to it.”

“Thank you, Scoley.”

“Don’t thank me,” said Scoley. “If there is anyone you should thank it is our Mr Choudhury. It was he who found you slumped against your door at midnight, and it was he who got you in your rooms and put you to bed. A proper gentleman is our Mr Choudhury.”

When Basil opened the envelope, it was an invitation to lunch at the Randolph Hotel at one-thirty. Basil looked in his wardrobe for clothes suitable for luncheon at Oxford’s most elegant hotel. He asked himself what Adrian would have chosen if he had gone to a similar

place in Cambridge, and picked a pair of dove grey flannel trousers, a blue striped shirt, a grey tie, and a blue blazer from Turnbull & Asser.

It was a short walk from the college to the Randolph Hotel, and he arrived precisely on time. He was shown into the restaurant where Bruton sat with a local girl called Enid, who on occasion worked as a barmaid at the Old Bookbinders Ale House and was said to be keen on Bruton.

“I’m afraid,” said Basil, when lunch had finished and Bruton was suggesting they have a bottle of port, “that I have a tutorial to prepare for on Wednesday.” However, if truth be told, Basil was getting the distinct impression that if he did not leave soon, he would start feeling like a maiden aunt chaperoning Bruton and the girl he had invited.

Basil excused himself, walked out of the hotel to the feel of a coolish autumnal wind and then crossed the road and went into the Ashmolean Museum. He wondered how Bruton could be so carefree, nothing seemed to bother him. Basil knew that he couldn’t be like that. He felt that unless he applied himself, he would never succeed in becoming a great lawyer. His brother Adrian had excelled in everything he had done, and he thought that if his parents could be equally proud of him it might somehow lessen their grief. He decided to walk through the museum but after a few minutes of looking at the exhibits, Basil felt a familiar twinge in his leg. He knew that if he walked any further the pain would increase, and he sat down beside a statue of the Buddha. As he thought about his brother, he found himself welling up, overwhelmed by feelings of loss. He still could not believe that Adrian had been killed. If there was anyone who should have survived the war unscathed it was Adrian, who embodied everything that a gentleman should be – strong, honourable and dutiful. Everyone seemed to love him – especially his parents. Perhaps, thought Basil, he should have remained with Bruton and spent the afternoon drinking. Bruton would have made him laugh and he

remembered that the previous evening, when one of the officers had ridden his bike into a wall buckling the wheel, Bruton had refilled his glass, smiled, and said, as he looked at the broken bicycle, “Fortunately, a small injustice to one’s feelings can be cured by wine.”

Chapter 4

Basil walked into the Junior Common Room, which was almost pitch black except for the faintly glowing embers in the fireplace. However, as his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he saw a figure sitting in a chair by the window cradling a cup. Basil wandered over and sat down opposite him.

“Scoley said I might find you here,” said Basil. “I seem to keep on missing you. You’re usually gone by the time I surface, and I haven’t seen you dining once.”

“They don’t cater for vegetarians,” said Laxman Choudhury. “With breakfast, I can always have porridge or an omelette but for the evening meal there is usually nothing for me to eat.”

“Well,” continued Basil shyly, “I just wanted to thank you for helping me into my room during my first week.”

“Actually,” said Laxman, who took a sip of his tea, “I have helped you into your room on three occasions in the last month. You seem to be able to perfectly negotiate the stairs but then you give up when you need to put your key in the lock and fall asleep in the corridor.”

“Ah,” said Basil, who felt himself blushing. “Three times did you say?” Laxman nodded. “Well in that case,” continued Basil, “just a thank you seems a little bit churlish. Can we dine out one evening? I will arrange dinner and make sure there is something suitable for you.”

“It would be a pleasure, Drewe,” said Laxman. “However, just so you know, it is not just animal meats that I don’t eat. My religion also forbids the eating of animal fats.”

“But eggs are fine?” said Basil, remembering that Laxman had said he sometimes ate an omelette for breakfast.

“And cheese,” added Laxman.

“And cheese,” Basil repeated and wondered where on earth they could go.

During the next few days, Basil contacted every restaurant, hotel and pub in Oxford to ascertain the extent of their vegetarian options. The responses ranged from the imbecilic to incredulity. One hotel manager suggested bacon as an option as he considered it was not a proper meat. The Randolph Hotel would do a vegetarian alternative; however, the grandest hotel in Oxford hardly seemed a suitable venue for a quiet, informal dinner. In the end and out of despair, Basil sent a cable to his mother who replied the next day saying that she had been able to speak with her distant cousin Emily Lutyens, who was a vegetarian, and that a guesthouse on the Botley Road had a nice dining room and did good vegetarian food. Basil contacted the guesthouse and although it usually only catered for paying guests, it was prepared on this occasion to make an exception.

The landlady of the guesthouse had previously lived in India until her husband died in a railway accident when two trains collided at Barara station in 1908. When she heard that Basil wanted to bring an Indian student from Oxford for dinner, she agreed and spent the next day roasting and grinding dry spices.

“Choudhury,” the landlady said, after Laxman and Basil had introduced themselves, “isn’t that a Bangladeshi name?”

“It is,” said Laxman, “although my family lives in Assam, to the northeast of Bangladesh.”

“My late husband and I,” said the landlady, “lived in the north of India for many years. He worked as a manager for the railway company until he passed away.” She sat Basil and Laxman down at a table that could easily have fitted four people. “I hope you don’t mind but when Mr Drewe told me he was dining with the first Indian PhD student at Oxford, I took the liberty of preparing some of my favourite Indian food.”

“I could smell the spices when we walked in,” said Laxman. “It reminded me of home.”

The dining room of the guesthouse was homely, with flock wallpaper and a small chandelier. There were six tables, where guests would have breakfast and those who wished for an evening meal could eat. The floors were covered with almost threadbare rugs. When the landlady returned from the kitchen, she brought two plates.

“It’s aloo ki tikki,” she said as she placed the plates before Basil and Laxman. Basil looked at her perplexed. “Potatoes with peas and spices,” she explained. “Just cut each potato cake and dip it in the mango chutney.”

“It smells wonderful,” said Laxman. “I didn’t think I would ever be eating Indian food in Oxford.”

A biryani, with okra, carrots and beans, was served, accompanied by dahl cooked in coconut milk with a temper of cumin, mustard seeds, and chilli. There was a masala bell pepper curry and a tomato soup with paneer, yoghurt and coriander. A dessert of gulab jamun came afterwards with its small, sweet doughnuts swimming in a sticky syrup.

Basil was initially unsure what to make of the food. The spiciness of the masala bell pepper curry made him hiccup, and he remained uncertain about the texture of the dahl. However, the gulab jamun made up for any reservations that he had, as did the sweet lassi, which he slurped down with the meal.

“We would have a meal like this every weekend when I was growing up,” said Laxman wistfully. “My aunts would come to our house and all the children would be thrown out so that they could be in the kitchen without being disturbed. Most of the boys went to the playing fields to play cricket or we would go to Padham Pukhuri, which is a small island in the middle of a lake in our town. I was the eldest child and have four younger brothers and a sister.”

“I had two elder brothers, Adrian and Christian,” said Basil, “and no sisters.”

“Sisters can be tricky,” said Laxman, who stuck his fork into the last gulab jamun and swirled it around the sweet syrup before swallowing it in one go. “My sister is called Majda. She was supposed to play with the other girls but whenever we played cricket, she would demand to join us and then embarrass most of the boys by her ability to hit a ball out of the ground.”

“She sounds incredibly strong,” said Basil.

“She’s as skinny as a rake,” said Laxman, “but she has this wonderful eye and could hit a ball as sweetly as a nut.”

“I used to play cricket,” said Basil, “but that stopped when I had my accident as I couldn’t run anymore.”

“But you can still bowl and bat,” said Laxman.

“Not really,” said Basil. “I was a medium-paced bowler and because I cannot run, I can’t bowl with any speed.”

“Have you thought about learning to be something different?” asked Laxman. “The best spin bowler in our village is a cousin of mine who had polio as a child. He can hardly walk, let alone run, but he can spin a cricket ball that most people can only swing blindly at.”

“I don’t know,” said Basil. “What would be the point? I would never be very good at it.”

“That you will never know,” said Laxman, “until you try.”

Basil paid the bill, which was a paltry sum and much less than it would have cost him if he had gone to eat at a restaurant. Laxman charmed the landlady and asked whether she would be prepared to cook for him and a small group of Indian students he knew. She agreed.

“They are a terrible group of people,” said Laxman apologetically to the landlady. “All of them to a man have been spoilt by their mothers and normally I would not impose them on anyone, but none of them like the bland English food we have in halls.”

Basil limped as he and Laxman made their way back to college along Botley Road. He pushed his bicycle with its new front wheel, holding onto the handlebars to give him some support.

“Why don’t you cycle?” said Laxman. “You would be back at halls in less than five minutes.”

“Then we would not be able to talk,” said Basil.

“But this is causing you discomfort,” answered Laxman.

“You get used to it,” replied Basil, who hoped that one day it might prove to be true.

“I’m sorry,” said Laxman, “however, it is pleasant for me to walk with you. We Indians tend to wrap ourselves up from the cold and hurry with our heads down from one place to the next. When I walk with you, I see things from a different perspective.”

“What do you mean?” asked Basil.

“I have time to look up, to appreciate the beauty of this city and the clear night sky. I can also see that every journey you take requires a certain amount of determination. I simply go from one place to the next but for you it takes effort. I respect that.”

Basil thought about what his thoughtful companion had said and realised that it was probably true, but he would give anything not to have the pain that went with every journey.

“I’ll tell you a secret,” continued Laxman. “All my Indian friends would have left me where we had dinner and cycled back to their halls. However, if an Englishman says he will walk beside you, then he will do exactly that, irrespective of how arduous the journey is. We Indians laugh at that, telling each other it is naivety, but really in our hearts, we admire that determination. It is perhaps why your country rules half the world and why my country is still ruled.”

“Does that upset you?” asked Basil.

“Yes,” said Laxman. “More than anything, however, independence is coming to India. People are saying that there will soon be a new Act of Parliament where more powers will be given to Indians to rule themselves. However, for many Indians, the real question is not whether independence will be given to us, it is when it will be given.”

Basil looked at his watch. On a Friday evening, he knew that Bruton and his officer friends would be drinking at the Old Bookbinders Ale House next to the canal. He was about to suggest that they go, Laxman could always have a lemonade; however, as quickly as the idea came into his head it disappeared. Bruton’s chums were almost sure to rag him for being Indian, and then there could be an awful scene if Laxman didn’t take the ragging well.

“Can I ask you something,” said Laxman, “and I don’t mean to pry.”

“Of course,” said Basil.

“Who is Adrian? The other night when I woke you up in the corridor, you mentioned his name. I think you said, ‘I can manage, Adrian.’” Basil had no recollection of having said it and, for a moment, he felt that it was impertinent of Laxman to have mentioned it. However, he had wanted to talk about Adrian to someone for a long time, to share his loss with a friend. Laxman was thoughtful and empathic, unlike Bruton or any of his other friends.

“Adrian was my eldest brother. It was just a few months ago that he was killed near Ypres, saving someone else. I think about him a lot.”

“I could not imagine losing one of my brothers in the war,” said Laxman. “There would be nothing so sad as not saying goodbye to him.”

“It hit my parents the hardest, especially after what had happened to Christian.” Laxman looked over at Basil but said nothing. “Christian was wounded on the Somme in 1916,” continued Basil. “He led a company of men across no man’s land and was blinded in the attack. He never regained his vision and lives alone, rarely going out. That was the first thing that hurt my parents and when Adrian died, I think it was just too much for them to bear. My father had a heart attack when they delivered the news, and my mother has been overcome with grief. I sometimes think that when they look at me, they wish Adrian had lived and I had died. He was always their favourite. He was everyone’s favourite.”

Laxman stopped and turned to Basil. “I can tell you, even though I have never met your parents, that that is not true.”

“Perhaps,” replied Basil. “But sometimes I feel it.”

“It is strange,” said Laxman, “that in my religion we do not dwell on guilt. If a person does a wrongful act, they might feel regret or remorse, but they should then deal with the consequences of the act. A very wise person once said to me after I argued with my father that ‘I need to forgive myself’. I was so angry with him because he would not let me come to

England to study, as he thought it too expensive and unnecessary for the son of a civil servant. I was told that if I did not forgive myself, I would build a wall around me which would prevent me from being able to communicate and I needed to communicate if I was to change his mind. I calmed myself down and a day or two later I set out every reason why I should study at Oxford and after he listened to me, he relented and agreed that I could study here.”

“Who was the wise person?” asked Basil.

“My younger sister, Majda.”

Despite the cricket season having finished a few weeks earlier at the end of September, Laxman was able to round up a few Indian undergraduates who were prepared to spend an afternoon at the cricket nets with the assurance that he would feed them with the best Indian food in Oxford. When they saw Basil cycle towards them, they looked at Laxman and asked why he had invited him.

“Two reasons,” said Laxman. “First, he found the place where I am going to take you to dine, which was no mean feat, and second, I like him.”

“Why do you like him? You are always complaining about the students in your halls and their drunken parties, behaving like animals and vomiting everywhere. Why is he different?”

“Because he is the politest drunk I have ever met. If I tried to help one of his friends I would be sworn at and told to get my black hands off, but Drewe will just say ‘Thank you and I’m so sorry to have inconvenienced you’. I sometimes think that there is a lot of truth in that saying *in vino veritas*.”

Despite their initial misgivings, the group of Indian undergraduates got on with Basil, and when Basil suggested that two of them, who were also studying law, join his study group, the walls between them fell.

However, the focus of the afternoon, and subsequent ones, was on bowling and teaching Basil how to spin a ball. He practised finger spin, but it was wrist spin that he seemed to excel at and by the end of term he felt he would soon be good enough to play for the college team. He could field on the boundary and bat with a runner. In turn, the Indians invited him to their now-weekly dinner at the guesthouse on Botley Road, and by the time the Christmas break arrived, he would nonchalantly pile spoonfuls of vegetable jalfrezi onto his plate.

Chapter 5

It had been months since Basil had been home to Wadhurst Hall and he was picked up at the station by the chauffeur Poley. It was a chilly December afternoon and there was still frost on the ground. Despite the cold, he wore no coat but a thick Arran jumper and a wool jacket. Laxman, on the other hand, was wrapped from head to toe with the addition of a scarf and gloves to ward off the cold.

“And this is Mr Laxman Choudhury,” said Basil, as he passed the bags to Poley.

“Laxman is doing a doctorate in philosophy and has been helping me with my off spin.”

“You’ve been playing cricket?” asked Poley.

“A little,” said Basil.

“Is he any good, Mr Choudhury?” said Poley. “And please don’t spare his blushes.”

“With a little more practice,” said Laxman, “he will be good enough to play for one of the college teams. He has a cricketer’s brain.”

“A cricketer’s brain,” replied Poley, laughing at the phrase. “Whatever do you mean by that, sir?”

“He might bowl three balls the same line and length and then he will bowl something just a little different and that’s when he can get into a batsman’s head. Unless they are watching attentively, they won’t know whether the ball will turn just a little, or a lot, or go straight on. It’s when you can put that kind of doubt in someone’s mind that you know that they will be walking back to the pavilion shortly afterwards.”

“Master Basil gets that from his father,” said Poley as he loaded the last bag into the boot of the car.

“And how are my parents, Poley?” asked Basil.

“Unchanged, I’m sorry to say.”

Wadhurst Hall was more than Laxman had hoped. He knew that Basil’s family were rich, having grown up in Assam where tea plantations are two a penny and where the name of the Home and Colonial Stores was still said with some reverence. For decades they had been the biggest buyer of tea in India. Even now their name carried great weight, although many new general stores were starting up that were, little by little, eating into the market share.

Laxman was given a room near Basil’s in the main part of the house and was amazed that there were two panes of glass to stop the cold from getting in. Fires were lit every morning and replenished in the afternoons and evenings and there were times over the next four weeks when Laxman was able to walk around the inside of Wadhurst Hall in his shirt sleeves and a jumper.

Basil noticed the differences; the little ones and those of larger import. Christmas decorations were not put up, except in the main living room, and the New Year’s Eve ball was cancelled – the first time in Basil’s memory. He did not see much of his parents. His father locked himself away in his study for most of the day and his mother stayed in her rooms, often in bed. When she got up each day, she still wore black as she had done since Adrian’s death. Only at mealtimes would they appear, and these were now almost silent affairs. His other brother Christian had come up from Drewsteignton where he lived, but he also hid away in his rooms. Basil decided that he should take Laxman out each day to show him the estate, a little at a time. On each short walk, he would stop and introduce Laxman to

the estate workers. Basil would lean on his walking stick and catch up with the gossip. Afterwards, they would go to the library and study and when they were bored try and complete the *Times* crossword. Basil also organised trips out to house parties in the evening or to the theatre in Brighton, where Laxman saw his first pantomime.

Although she said little, Laxman liked Basil's mother, Lady Frances, and noticed the similarities between her and Basil. She knew everyone's first name, irrespective of how long they had worked on the estate, and did not possess airs and graces. However, Laxman could see the sadness that she carried with her, as if some part of her had been cut away. Sir Julius spent his days in his office working until the early hours. He was brusque with everyone and made it clear he did not want to be disturbed. He acted as if he was just carrying on with things, but Laxman could see the pretence. Their grief gave them no time for either Basil or Christian and Laxman understood why Basil had wanted to leave them and go to Oxford.

It was, however, Christian for whom Laxman felt the greatest pity. When Basil had said that Christian had been blinded in the war, he had not said that he had also been horrifically burnt. Laxman noticed how Christian silently moved around the house like Banquo's ghost, unbidden and scarred. Laxman saw how Christian would hide himself away for most of the day and at mealtimes remain silent to avoid becoming the centre of attention. He seemed to be ignored by his parents and it was therefore with some surprise that one morning, after breakfast, Christian came into the library, tapping his way with his cane, and sat down opposite Laxman.

"You must think we are all terribly rude," said Christian, "especially me. You've been here for nearly two weeks, and I've hardly said more than three words to you."

"Not at all," said Laxman, putting down his book. "I can understand how difficult it must be for you."

“I’m not sure you can,” replied Christian.

“You’re right. I have no idea about the life you lead.”

“I thought coming up here might help my parents, but I think that seeing me just emphasises what they have lost. That’s why I’ve been hiding away. Nothing has changed since the day they heard that Adrian had died. In the last few days, I’ve been thinking of going back home but I wanted to speak to you first to see how Basil is.”

“He’s coping,” said Laxman. “He drinks, I think too much on occasion but then I don’t drink at all. You know that academically he excels? My Indian friends who study jurisprudence say that he is certain to finish top of the year, which is no small achievement.”

“I’m pleased,” responded Christian. “He always had a streak of determination.”

“But why go home?” asked Laxman. “What will you do there?”

“Nothing,” said Christian. “Absolutely nothing. That’s the problem. I live in the smallest village in the quietest county in England. No one knows what to do with me and what can a blind man do?”

“Almost everything,” said Laxman. “There’s music.”

“I’m an artist... was an artist.”

“There is a Chinese saying that ‘even a blind man can appreciate the beauty of pottery’.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Christian responded.

“The beauty of a pot is not just what it looks like but how it feels. In India, some blind men earn a living making ceramics and the most skilled can make beautiful sculptures.”

Christian sat quietly for a moment. He had been so angry following his injury on the Somme that he had not even contemplated that he could make a new life. He didn't have to work, and so he had sat doing nothing and slowly the self-pity had taken hold. He suddenly thought back to Celia Lutyens, who had cared for him after his injury and who had left for America six months ago. He wondered how she was. The last thing she had said to him was 'You need to move on with your life'. He realised he hadn't, and he realised that that had to change.

"And what about you, Laxman? What are you going to do when you leave Oxford?"

Laxman thought about his answer. He looked at the fireplace for a moment and then his gaze went to the windows, and he stared out onto the moorlands that were so different to his home in Assam.

"Is it such a difficult question?" asked Christian.

"I want to go into politics and work for the independence of my country."

When news circulated that Mr Basil Drewe wanted a potter's wheel and enough clay to make a terracotta army, there was a look of bemusement on the faces of the estate workers, but Poley's son, George, took the Rolls-Royce and headed to the lanes of Brighton, returning that evening with everything that was required. A makeshift studio was created in the stable room where once a model of Castle Drogo had taken centre stage. The following day a woman from the Wedgwood factory turned up to give her first lesson to three young men about how to cast a bowl and, as she sat behind Christian, holding his fingers at the bottom of the clay and then slowly bringing them up, as the inertia of the wheel pulled the form outwards, Christian realised that this was something he could do.

Three bowls, which had been fired and painted, were exchanged on Christmas Day. Christian's bowl, which had been painted by their tutor Daisy Makeig-Jones, was given to Laxman. Basil's bowl was given to Christian and Laxman's bowl to Basil. Both Laxman and Basil acknowledged that their attempts at pottery were no better than a child's; however, the bowl that Christian had produced was almost perfectly shaped and smooth and the painting by Daisy was an exquisite scene of fairies and knights in armour going to war.

Laxman watched on as Christian spent hour after hour practising. Long after Daisy had gone home each day, he would continue to work on lumps of clay in the cold stable until his fingers became too cold. His hands would instinctively caress the outside of the clay raising the sides of the pots. Sometimes they would collapse, and he would throw up his arms in frustration. On other occasions, he would throw the greenware pot on the floor, when he felt the imperfections in its casting. At other times he would smile to himself as he ran his fingers down the lip and curve of a vase.

"It's a beginning," said Daisy two weeks later, as she examined one of Christian's vases. "However, there is so much more that you can do, such as carving the clay exterior or cutting it to produce geometric shapes. We've just taken a small first step."

Two weeks into the new year Basil and Laxman packed up their belongings for their return to Oxford. Christian decided that he would go home the following day with the potter's wheel, clay and kiln following. He wished his brother well and shook Laxman's hand firmly as they stood outside Wadhurst Hall and then he heard his mother and father.

"I'm sorry to see you go," said Sir Julius to Laxman. "However, you are more than welcome to return whenever you like and please do not hesitate to contact me if there is anything that I can do for you."

"That is very kind of you, sir," replied Laxman.

“I am serious, Mr Choudhury.” Sir Julius looked at his two sons. “Your stay has been most welcome.”

Lady Frances kissed Basil on the cheek, as Poley put the final pieces of luggage into the Rolls-Royce and wished him a safe journey, then, for no reason that Laxman could explain, she kissed him on the cheek as well.

Chapter 6

29 May 1918

Basil felt that he had not seen the sunlight for an eternity. His first-year examinations had finished, and, as he returned to his rooms, he was quietly confident that he had done well. He opened his door to find a note from Bruton inviting him to a polo match at the weekend; however, he thought, tonight he would kick up his heels. No doubt Laxman would disapprove if he was found sleeping in the corridor again, but it was now an exceptional occurrence.

He put on his gown and went down the stairs and towards the dining hall. He heard a noise coming from the hall as he strolled in, walking stick in hand. Students were huddled around copies of the evening papers, talking about the Battle of Cantigny – America’s first major battle in the war. It was a victory, although, as one student remarked, a large amount of help had to be given by the French.

“Drewe, join me,” Bruton shouted from across the room and Basil made his way over. “Where have you been hiding?”

“Exams,” said Basil.

“You should have heeded my advice when we first met,” continued Bruton. “Studying can always wait.”

“You do know that they can send you down if you don’t do anything at all?” replied Basil.

“It doesn’t matter now,” replied Bruton. “Some chums from the Officer Training Corps have decided to enlist with me at the end of term. Now America has joined in it’s all likely to be over in a few months and we’ve decided we want to do our part.”

“I would come with you if I could,” added Basil.

“We’re meeting later for a few beers at the Old Bookbinders Ale House. Will you join us?”

Basil readily agreed and he thought it was just what he needed. The dinner gong was sounded, the doors of the hall were closed and bolted, and a tasteless meal of celery soup, boiled fish with mashed potato and dead man’s leg was laboriously consumed.

“Promise me something, Bruton,” said Basil as they got up from the table. “Don’t get yourself shot. Seriously, it was hard enough to lose my brother. I would hate to lose a friend as well.”

“I’ll do my best, but I can’t promise you anything,” said Bruton, as they walked towards the door. “However, I’ll ask you to make me a promise.” He stopped as they got to the door of the dining room and looked keenly at Basil.

“If I can,” said Basil uncertainly.

“If I don’t come back, don’t spend one moment feeling sorry for me or yourself. Raise a glass of wine and drink to all the good times we’ve had.”

“I’m not sure I can make that promise,” said Basil.

“I would appreciate it if you could,” said Bruton. “I know if you make a promise, then neither hell nor high water will make you break your word, and I would be happier knowing that you would be celebrating my life rather than mourning it.”

“You have my word then,” said Basil and they turned, walked out of the door, down the stone steps and into the quad.

“Do you know,” continued Bruton, “that I had a similar conversation with a girl that my parents are keen for me to marry.” The bells tolled from the clock tower.

“You’ve not mentioned her before,” said Basil.

“Her name’s Margaret, Margaret Ellis. I asked her not to cry for me if I didn’t come back from the war. Do you know what she said?”

“I’ve no idea,” answered Basil.

“She said, ‘Don’t worry, Poppet, I’m not the crying type.’”

“She sounds absolutely heartless!” said Basil.

“Actually,” said Bruton, “it was at that moment that I thought I might be in love with her.”

“And she called you Poppet?” Basil chuckled to himself as he said it.

“If you mention that to anyone, Drewe, I promise you will be limping on both legs from now on. Now come on and the first bottle of claret is on you.”

The Old Bookbinders Ale House got its name from the rich publishing history within the Jericho area of Oxford. But the strangest thing about the pub was the model railway inside, which had been stuck to the ceiling. It always made Basil smile when he saw it, and he thought he would have liked a train set as a child, but toys were something his father had disapproved of.

As Basil and Bruton approached, they could hear cheering. Initially, Basil thought it was something to do with the Americans’ victory at Cantigny, however, as they got closer it was mixed with laughter.

“It looks like they started drinking early,” said Bruton.

Suddenly, the two wooden doors of the pub were flung open, and eight cadet officers came tumbling out, carrying above their heads a student. The rest of the pub followed laughing and everywhere there were shouts of “throw him in”.

“What’s going on?” shouted Bruton to one of the officers he knew.

“A wog came in with a local girl,” shouted the officer back at him. “We thought we’d teach him a lesson in manners.”

Bruton laughed in response.

Sometimes there is an event where the reality of the situation is too sudden to fully take in. Basil felt disassociated as he watched what happened with everything slowing to a dreamlike pace. He stared at what was happening, noticing everything to the minutest detail, frame by frame – and the noise of the crowd also slowed, so that nothing was comprehensible. Basil stood with an open mouth as he realised that they were carrying Laxman above their heads.

The crowd crossed the road and followed the officers as they headed towards the canal. Basil followed as quickly as he could and arrived to see Laxman being tossed into the middle of the filthy stream. There was a splash as he went under, and a few moments later he surfaced. The officers, who now had had their fun, returned to the pub, except for one, perhaps the most drunk of all of them, who shouted, “Leave him, Drewe! He’s just a wog.”

“Piss off,” said Basil.

“We can throw you in as well,” replied the officer, who looked around for his friends.

“Yeah, I suppose if they come back there’ll be enough of you to take on a cripple as well.”

The officer decided there was no point arguing and, anyway, everyone else had gone. He turned and staggered back towards the pub. Basil looked at Laxman who had managed to get himself to the side of the canal and then at the officer. He thought he saw Bruton at the end of the road but, if he were there, he had gone in an instant.

Two weeks passed more quickly than Basil could imagine. There were no lectures or tutorials as they moved towards the long summer vacation. Laxman had been irritable since the evening at the Bookbinders. He was rarely seen in halls and mixed only with his Indian friends. On the times that Basil did see him, he was polite but curt. It was therefore no surprise to Basil that Laxman decided to go up to London for a few weeks before returning to Assam. Keble College was feeling quieter than Basil had ever known it. If Bruton was out, Basil would eat solitary meals in the dining hall. However, the weather was generally warm and balmy, and Basil spent his days touring the Oxfordshire countryside on a new five-gear bicycle that he had received from his parents as a birthday present.

“Hills are the only problem,” he said to Bruton one morning over breakfast, “as I must stand up to peddle and that puts too much pressure on my leg. However, on the flat, I have no problem. I went out as far as Blenheim Palace a few days ago.”

“Don’t you find the countryside a bit of a bore?” said Bruton. “It’s green and very pretty but after you’ve cycled through it once, every journey’s the same.” Basil looked at him and decided to let the comment pass. “Talking about your leg,” Bruton continued, “I have something for you.”

“What is it?” asked Basil.

“A liniment. It smells a bit, but I’m told by one of the stable boys who looks after the polo ponies that it does miracles for muscle pain. He said you rub it into your leg in the area

where it hurts.” Bruton held out a small flask. “They use something similar on the polo ponies if they have hurt their legs.”

Basil removed the cork stopper from the glass vial. There was an overpowering smell of camphor, which reminded him of mothballs and vapour rub. Underneath there was an acrid smell, which he thought was like burnt rubber. Basil did not even want to guess what was in it and quickly replaced the stopper, thinking about pouring it away at the first opportunity.

“If I were you,” said Bruton, who could tell from the look on Basil’s face that there was only a remote possibility it would be applied, “I would use it. Scoley might complain to high heaven about the smell, but the stable boys promised it would help. He also gave me a list of ingredients just in case you wanted to make some more. Some of the ingredients might be tricky to get but I would have thought with your father’s contacts you should not have a problem.”

“So, what are your plans this weekend?” asked Basil.

“I’m going up to town,” said Bruton, “to meet someone my father introduced to me – Philip Kerr. He’s Lloyd George’s private secretary and something of a rising star. Why don’t you join me?”

Basil shrugged and thought why not – he had nothing better to do.

Basil had bought a bottle of wine and was staring at an envelope that he placed in the middle of the table. He felt a profound sense of disappointment, having only been awarded third place in the Martin Wronker Award for Jurisprudence. Other law students, who had also come to the pub, were congratulating him on his success.

“Great achievement,” someone said and patted him on the back.

“Thank you,” Basil replied, as he forced a smile. A prize for third place was about the worst thing he could have been awarded. What would he say to his father – he had come third and won a £5 book voucher? It would have been better not to have won anything. He worried that his father would be disappointed and despite every effort to the contrary, he felt sorry for himself and gulped down a glass of wine and then poured himself another.

An hour later, Bruton arrived and sat opposite Basil.

“Did you win an award?” asked Bruton.

“Third prize in jurisprudence,” said Basil. “I wrote an essay on inchoate offences, about where you wilfully close your eyes to a likely event.”

“I’m not sure I follow you, Drewe,” said Bruton.

“Say one of your fellow officer cadets tells you he wants to borrow your pistol for target practice. You lend it to him, and he robs a bank. Are you guilty of aiding and abetting him?”

“No,” said Bruton emphatically.

“But if he said he would rob a bank, then what?” asked Basil.

“Obviously, I would be guilty,” answered Bruton.

“The grey area is when you suspect he might do something but do not know. For example, he has robbed a bank before.”

“I wouldn’t be so damned stupid as to lend him my gun,” answered Bruton.

“But if you did,” said Basil, “and, for example, you knew he had money problems. My essay was about when a person does not know what is going to happen but closes his eyes to an obvious risk – when a person is wilfully blind to what he should see.”

Chapter 7

December 1918

The ground was covered in frost and a clear blue sky lit up the day. Sir Julius stood in front of the granite stone walls of Castle Drogo with his two sons. From where he stood, he could see miles into the distance where oak, ash and beech trees seemed bleached in the cold morning. In the Teign Valley below them, that stretched from Dunsford to Chudleigh, the meandering Teign River continued its course as it had done since time immemorial.

“I cannot remember the last time I was here with both of you,” said Sir Julius.

“It was before the war,” said Basil. “It must have been seven years ago, the stone-laying ceremony to mark your fifty-second birthday.”

“That long ago?” replied Sir Julius.

“Actually,” replied Christian, “we’ve never all been here together.” He paused. “It was that day when Basil fell coming up the escarpment. He never reached this point. Adrian and I have been here with you, but never with Basil.”

They stood silently for a few moments as the icy wind blew up the Teign gorge. Basil looked down the sharp sloping escarpment and his stomach knotted. Sir Julius pulled up the astrakhan collar of his coat and then turned his face away from the wind.

“I wanted to speak to you about the future,” said Sir Julius. “I wanted to know what your plans were. I need to make some decisions about my companies and wondered whether either of you had any interest in joining them.”

Basil looked at his brother. As the eldest surviving son, it seemed that it was a question for Christian; but as he looked at his brother, he knew what the answer would be.

“No, sir,” said Christian. “Even if I wasn’t blind, I don’t think I would want to manage a company, and being blind creates an impediment I don’t believe I can overcome.”

Sir Julius said nothing but turned his head towards Basil.

“If I am being honest,” said Basil, thinking about what he would say next, “it is not something I have ever considered. I had always assumed that Adrian... but you know.”

“I do know,” said Sir Julius, “which is why we are having this conversation. If my boy had not been killed in battle, we would not be here... but he was, and we are. Your mother and I have grieved for him for over a year; however, I must draw a line as it’s been eating away at our lives all that time, and so I have started thinking about selling most of my interests in the Home and Colonial Stores and then spending some time travelling with your mother.”

“Yes, sir,” said Basil.

“I would remain the chairman of the company, but my involvement would be less. However, if you were interested in joining the company I would delay my retirement until you were ready to step into my shoes.”

“But that would be years away, sir. I have another eighteen months at Oxford and then I thought about spending a year or two abroad in India working as a clerk to a judge. I don’t want to disappoint you, sir...”

“It would only disappoint me, Basil,” said Sir Julius interrupting, “if you did something to which you were not committed.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Would you like some time to think about it?” asked Sir Julius. Basil nodded his head. “So shall we say that you will give me an answer at Easter?” Again, Basil nodded.

“That’s settled then,” said Sir Julius. “Now let’s find Lutyens as I am freezing out here. He should be around here somewhere, and I need to talk to him about the design of this castle.”

They started slowly walking around the stone walls. Christian put his left arm on Basil’s shoulder and tapped ahead as they walked.

“Tell me what the castle is looking like,” said Christian.

“The walls are being constructed and at some places, they are more than twenty feet high. There are granite blocks everywhere but I am guessing that this is only about a quarter of the castle.”

“Is it just the walls that are being built?”

“Yes,” replied Basil. “However, every granite block is a different size. Some are small and others must weigh more than a tonne.” Basil stopped and directed Christian’s hand to the wall. “Can you feel the different sizes and textures of the granite blocks?”

“Yes,” said Christian. “And what colour are they?”

“Primarily grey, but there are areas of white and orange and even black in some places. Behind the granite walls, there are bricks, which I suppose are the internal walls.”

Edwin Lutyens stood talking to the site foreman, wrapped up warmly in a thick wool trench coat. He held the bowl of his pipe in his left hand, as he explained where the foundations for the next section of the walls should go. When he saw Sir Julius walking briskly in his direction, he patted the foreman on the shoulder and held out his hand to Sir Julius.

Basil had not seen Lutyens for seven years and he seemed much older than he remembered. Lutyens’s hair had thinned and was all but white, as was his moustache. Despite

being barely fifty, Basil thought he looked as old as his father who was ten years his senior. His round-rimmed glasses gave him the air of an elderly Latin teacher who would attempt to befriend their students with terrible Latin jokes. Basil smiled as he was greeted by Lutyens. He had forgotten how genuinely warm and welcoming Lutyens was, and he could not help himself saying how well Lutyens was looking.

The cold was biting into Sir Julius's bones, and he quickly wanted to finish the meeting and get back to the Rolls-Royce, and so he interrupted the introductions and asked for an update on the works.

"They are progressing well," said Lutyens, "but as the weather has now turned, work on the walls will stop as we can't mix cement in these conditions. It's the water in the cement," explained Lutyens. "If the water expands then the cement will be useless. What we can do is continue to dig more foundations unless the ground freezes and we'll continue to lay aggregates for the driveway."

"And when will the work on the walls start again?" asked Sir Julius brusquely.

"March probably. February, if we're lucky."

"I will then make my final decision on whether you should omit the other wing at Easter. Thank you," he added, shook Lutyens's hand and then turned and walked towards his car. Lutyens followed beside Christian and Basil.

"I'm pleased to see both of you," said Lutyens, "and I was so sorry to hear about your brother, Adrian. My deepest condolences. When we read about his death both Celia and I were heartbroken."

"Thank you," said Christian. "I saw her just before she left for America."

“I can’t recall the last time I saw her,” said Basil, “but I do remember she used to love the stories that you used to tell.”

“I still tell a tale or two on occasion,” replied Lutyens. “My wife and children came back from America only last week. I don’t know if you recall, but my youngest daughter Mary is only twelve and, although she pretends that she is far too grown up to hear stories, she still demands that I tell one before she goes to bed. Fortunately, I was recently given a book of fables when I was in India, so I have a stock of new tales to tell.”

“Can you remember any of them?” asked Christian.

“A few,” said Lutyens, who took his pipe out of his mouth. “There was a fable I heard about a blind man and a cripple, but I am not sure that you would want to hear it.”

“I think I would,” said Christian, as he walked slowly towards the car, with his hand on his brother’s shoulder.

“Once upon a time,” began Lutyens, “in a small village there lived two brothers who fought like cat and dog. One of the brothers was blind and the other had been crippled in an accident and could not walk a single step. Whenever they spoke to each other they would argue ferociously. What one did would upset the other, and vice versa. For years this enmity raged until one day they swore never to speak to one another again. As fate would have it, a fire broke out one hot and dry summer day and began quickly consuming everything in its path. Everyone from their village ran away in fear for their lives as there was no way to stop this raging inferno. In the villagers’ panic, the blind man and his brother were forgotten. The two brothers now had a problem. The blind man could not tell which way to go to escape the fire, and the crippled brother, who could see the path to safety, could not take that path. So, both were stuck, but the desire to live was greater than their hatred for each other, so they decided to work together to save their lives. The blind man put his brother on his shoulders,

who then directed him on which way to go to escape, and working together they became not only brothers but true friends.”

Lutyens shook their hands and said his goodbyes as they reached the vehicle and, as he turned, Christian asked whether he would pass on his best wishes to his daughter Celia.

“Celia,” said Lutyens, “is still in America.”

“She didn’t come back with your wife?” responded Christian.

“I am sorry to say,” said Lutyens quietly, “that we have lost touch with her.”

“Nothing has happened to her, has it, sir?” asked Christian.

“No, nothing like that. It was an affair of the heart,” answered Lutyens and put his pipe in his mouth.

“Get in the car and shut the door,” shouted Sir Julius to Christian, “or I’ll catch my death of cold.”

