I

Posy Cowper, a full-time salaried District Air Raid Warden attached to Cuddwell Number Seven Post, stood at the junction of Unity Street and Tollemache Terrace scowling and casting impatient glances at her watch. The time was precisely ten minutes past ten. The air raid had been in progress for ten minutes. Three minutes after the warning had sounded a bomb had dropped on the Post Office in front of which Posy was now standing. The Post Office had been reduced to a pile of rubble; it had been fairly busy at the time of the incident and several people who, at the sound of the warning, had raced out of the building in an attempt to reach the basement air raid shelter at the further end of Tollemache Terrace had been caught by bomb blast and flying glass. An ambulance had arrived upon the scene with admirable promptitude and had removed six walking wounded. Four other persons, all seriously injured, remained lying upon the pavement awaiting help.

An ARP Heavy Rescue lorry now drove up and five members of personnel tumbled out. Their leader, in ordinary life known to Posy as her local newsagent, advanced and said, 'Morning, Pose. Any idea how many people may be trapped under the ruins? Heard any cries for help?'

'Not a sound,' responded Posy tersely.

The squad vanished to the rear of the Post Office. Posy remained in position on the street corner. The casualties lay

motionless and silent where they had fallen. Otherwise Posy had the place to herself. From a distance came sounds of shouting, whistles blowing, ambulance and fire-brigade bells shrilling and clanging. Posy, who loved to be in the thick of things, shifted her feet and muttered impatiently. On her head was her steel helmet, her respirator in its canvas bag was slung at the 'Ready' position on her chest. Completely prepared and on the alert, looking capable of coping single-handed with any number of Germans should they suddenly come round the corner, Posy glared hard at nothing.

'Excuse me, Miss Cowper, might I have a word with you please?'

The voice came from a small wispy girl in a belted raincoat who had suddenly appeared from nowhere and stood holding a notebook and pencil at the ready as she stared up at Posy with big, earnest, blue eyes. Posy rasped, 'What d'you want, Miss Duchamp?'

'If you could tell me a few details about this incident. The *Gazette* wants a big story on this . . . '

Posy cut the girl short. 'Your editor should know better than to send his reporters to take up the time of people like me in an air raid. All I'm telling you is that you, as a civilian, when an air raid alert sounds, should take the nearest available cover and remain there till you hear the all-clear.'

'But Miss Cowper, as a reporter it's my job to find out what's going on and to . . . '

'I don't care what your job is, you're a civilian and it's your duty to get under cover and keep out of danger. We've already got enough casualties to deal with without adding you to the list. So off you go, see?' Little Morwenna Duchamp, obviously realizing that further argument was pointless, folded her notebook and scuttled away up the street. Posy, with an expression of satisfaction, watched her retreating figure. Miss Duchamp, who had only recently come to

work on the *Cuddwell Gazette*, had found digs in Posy's mother's house, and, though a pleasant enough little girl, should not have attempted to take advantage of a privileged position; at least, that was how Posy saw it. Miss Duchamp wouldn't dare to ask any other member of ARP personnel for help with her newspaper story! All members of Civil Defence knew that they mustn't give the press details of enemy attacks, or anyone else come to that. It was a simple matter of national security. There was an official Information Officer and the *Cuddwell Gazette* should have approached him. Little Morwenna Duchamp needed to learn to mind her Ps and Qs.

After which, Posy Cowper once more glared at her watch. Where on earth were those ambulances for the other casualties? She herself had been on the scene of the incident within minutes of the bomb falling and had summoned assistance without delay. Since when, apart from removal of the walking wounded (who hadn't required transport) and the arrival of Heavy Rescue (who had now disappeared) absolutely nothing had happened. What a way to fight a war!

At length, unable to stand this inactivity any longer, Posy strode rapidly up Unity Street, blowing angry blasts on her whistle as she went. These blasts should have brought fellow ARP workers hastening to her; but not a soul appeared.

She turned out of Unity Street and almost at once tripped over an enormous hose-pipe. This, like a giant anaconda, squirmed along the gutter in the direction of a throng of firemen and ambulance men jostling among a viscera of hose-pipes outside Woolworths, watched by a crowd of sightseers, including Morwenna Duchamp. Posy bore down upon this assembly. She plunged among the sightseers, 'Hey you, take cover! This is an air raid, not a Punch and Judy show!'

A couple of St John's Ambulance men were in the crowd; Posy leapt upon them like a tigress. 'I'm looking for some of you lot!

There's four bad casualties lying outside the Post Office, dying for want of help!'

'Keep your hair on, duck. We know all about them; all under control. Ambulance on its way there now.'

'Under control my foot! I summoned an ambulance twenty minutes ago!'

'Out of the way, out of the way there please!' A fireman, all brass, leather and authority, pushed Posy back into the crowd; at the same time a Salvation Army officer, carrying a bawling toddler who had lost his mother, collided heavily with her, almost knocking her off her feet. 'Out of the way please!'

Posy declared, loudly, to nobody in particular, 'I wash my hands of this bedlam!' She returned to the Post Office. No wonder, she thought to herself, they were calling this a Phoney War!

It was April 1940. Posy had been one of London's air raid wardens for the past two years; she was also an instructor in first aid, holding classes not only in her home borough of Cuddwell, but in a number of other eastern suburbs into the bargain. She was recognized as a first-rate instructor; wasn't ashamed of admitting it herself.

The recruits who attended her classes saw before them a strapping, strident-voiced spinster in her mid-thirties; firm-jowled, her hair cut in a no-nonsense shingle, the glance of her sharp eyes dauntingly direct, her eyebrows heavy and well marked. There was universal astonishment when it leaked out that this brawny, boot-faced Amazon rejoiced in the name of 'Posy'.

Posy prided herself upon being a pragmatist. As early as 1936 she had decided that it was well on the cards that the rise of Hitler's Germany would result in another war and therefore she had started attending first-aid classes and lectures on fire-fighting and anti-gas precautions; in spite of the fact that at this point in

time the idea of Civil Defence had been a joke with most people, while others had condemned it as a form of active warmongering. In March 1938, after Hitler had overrun Austria, the Home Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, had broadcast an appeal for at least a million men and women to enrol in a Civil Defence service. Less than half that number had responded; among them had been Posy. Air raid wardens were officially described as 'the backbone of the Air Raid Precautions System' and the ARP system was the 'fourth arm of the nation's Services'. All this had sounded great stuff to Posy, who saw herself as blessed with a particularly strong backbone. A pity that not all her fellow citizens were similarly endowed! Take this present ARP exercise, for instance. Civil Defence had been told that it was to be taken very seriously indeed; be as 'near like the real thing as possible'. Well, if this was being serious, snorted Posy to herself, then God help the nation when the real thing truly came along.

Her head burning with these indignant ruminations, Posy found herself back outside the Post Office. The four casualties were still where she had left them. Two lay supine. Around a third a knot of people were now gathered, apparently arguing heatedly among themselves. The fourth casualty had propped himself in a sitting posture against a shop front and was smoking his pipe and placidly watching the scene before him.

Posy joined the agitated group; two young VAD nursing recruits with a first-aid kit; one Special Constable and a Red Cross auxiliary, the last being an elderly woman with purple cheeks and frizzy grey hair. She was kneeling beside the casualty prodding him and asking repeatedly, 'Do you feel any pain? Try to answer if if you can; do you feel any pain?'

'What's going on here?' demanded Posy.

'We can't get any reaction out of this one at all,' replied the auxiliary.

The casualty, a stout old man in a raincoat, who was lying with his eyes closed, at last replied, without opening his eyes, 'I can't talk.'

'What d'you mean, you can't talk?'

'I'm unconscious, aren't I? That's what it says on my label, don't it?'

'Can't see any label,' said the auxiliary.

'All the casualties are wearing labels specifying their injuries,' said Posy. 'If not, someone has slipped up badly.'

The old man, with weary resignation, put his hand in his trouser pocket and produced a tie-on luggage label. 'There you are. Says I'm unconscious, don't it?'

'But you're supposed to be wearing the label, not lying with it in your pocket!' said the auxiliary.

'It come off, duck. Go on, read it. Says I'm unconscious, don't it?'

Posy took the label and read aloud, in clarion tones, 'Unconscious. Internal blast injuries. Fractured ribs. Respiratory distress.'

'Golly!' said one of the VADs, 'There's not much we can do for him.'

'Out of the way, please,' said the Special Constable in the accents of the male of the species about to take over from the weaker sex. Thrusting the Red Cross auxiliary aside he dropped on his knees beside the old man. 'Help me turn him on his face, will you?' he snapped to no one in particular.

'On his face? What for?' enquired Posy.

'Respiratory distress requires artificial respiration,' responded the Special triumphantly. 'Come on, help me turn him over.'

The old man began to wheeze. 'Hold hard, mate. I'm not a sack of coals, you know.'

'You lot give me the shudders,' said Posy. 'Who taught you to give artificial respiration to casualties with fractured ribs?'

'Blimey!' said the Special, abashed. 'Forgot the fractured ribs.'

'You'd be more help, constable, if you went and made sure of an ambulance for these people.' Posy was icy. 'I've done all I can to get one, but they're not taking any notice of a mere warden; perhaps the arm of the law will carry a bit more weight.'

'Do my best,' said the Special. He hurried off, glad to get away.

'What a prize looney . . . Here, help this old chap up and let him get his breath back,' said Posy, glancing at the old man, whose ears had gone an alarming shade of blue. 'We don't want a real casualty on our hands.'

Leaving the VADs and the Red Cross auxiliary to deal with the victim of the Special Constable's zeal, Posy went to inspect the other casualties. 'They're not going to leave us to die out here, are they?' enquired the next unfortunate, a borough councillor of public spirit who made a point of participating in everything, and had eagerly volunteered to be a casualty, but who was clearly now regretting her enthusiasm. 'I've a feeling someone needs a good shaking up somewhere along the line,' she added ominously. 'Help me up, would you? You've no idea how hard this pavement is.' Posy helped the councillor to her feet. She said, 'I'm nipping into that café on the corner to get a cup of tea. The ambulance people can collect me there. I'm labelled a broken leg, but they'll have to make-believe a kindly passer-by carried me to food and shelter.'

And so saying the councillor vanished into the café. At the same moment somebody tapped Posy on the shoulder; she looked round, to see the man with the pipe. He said, affably, 'Well, now I've been left to bleed to death I'm going home to make sure that at least I have a decent funeral. Ta-ta!' He walked over to the other old man and the pair exchanged a witticism Posy couldn't overhear. The two men then went off together. The VADs and the

auxiliary likewise departed from the scene. Seconds later the Heavy Rescue squad emerged from behind the Post Office and clambered into their lorry. Posy strode over to them. 'Were there any casualties? Have you got 'em out?'

'All under control,' said their leader. 'All-clear's just sounded, too, so it's back to the depot to brew some char.'

'But the all-clear isn't sounding till thirteen hours!'

'Look, this whole exercise is only pretence, innit? So we're pretending the all-clear's sounded, see?' And with a volley of guffaws Heavy Rescue rumbled away. After a second or so of glaring in the direction of the vanished lorry Posy turned brusquely to the final remaining casualty; a woman lying patiently on the kerbside, staring with wooden stoicism into the gutter a few inches from her nose. Posy stooped over her. 'No sense in you lying there any more. Pretend the ambulance has taken you off to hospital. Pretend the blooming war's over, if you want!'

'Orright,' said the casualty. She scrambled to her feet and brushed down her coat with her hands. 'Well! That's it then, innit?'

'That's it.'

The final casualty departed. Posy, left alone, opened her report book and wrote a long entry. From the distance came continuing sounds of the exercise, in full swing; but as far as Posy was concerned the show, such as it had been, was over. 'A complete frost!' she exclaimed to herself, repeatedly. 'As much like the real thing as possible, my foot!'

The trouble was, of course, that so far the war itself had never shown any sign of becoming the real thing. Six months, now, since Hitler had invaded Poland, and Britain and France had declared war on him, but no attempt had been made by the Allies to attack him, and Hitler, for his part, had not attacked them. 'All quiet on the Western Front' with a vengeance! Resultantly, everyone had

become lulled in a sense of false security: people said Hitler was scared to take on France and Britain and would sue for an armistice without going into action, or, if he did try to fight, would discover that he had left it too late; had missed the bus. As for the possibility of air raids occurring, this was believed in less and less with every day that passed. With such a lack of reality permeating everything and everybody, it was no wonder that the various branches of ARP had lost an alarming number of personnel; half those needed for today's exercise were simply not available.

Nevertheless, all that said, it made no difference to how Posy saw things. She still believed Hitler meant business; she didn't trust him an inch. Idiots, people were, to think otherwise. Yet could she jolt them into realizing what lay in store? No; it was like banging her head against a brick wall.

Deeply disgruntled, Posy returned to Number Seven Warden Post. Sammy Ross, the Post warden, an old soldier who prided himself on imperturbability and savoir-faire, and whose role in today's exercise had been to remain at the Post, in touch with HQ, was seated at his desk carefully drawing up a chart. 'Here's my report to incorporate with yours,' said Posy. Sammy retorted, 'I don't need your report: I got one all finished and ready for despatch, thank you! What's known as efficiency.'

'But how did you write it without my observations? You don't know what happened at my incident.'

'What happened doesn't matter,' responded Sammy serenely. 'It's all make-believe. I reckon, from what I've already heard, that the entire thing's been a prize cock-up, but that's got nothing to do with my report. Want to read it?'

'D'you realize that, at my incident, all the walking wounded were picked up by ambulance within five minutes, while the really serious casualties never received any attention whatsoever

and to all intents and purposes were left lying in the street to die?'

'Just what I'd expect.'

'But it's not good enough! We aren't going to carry on like that when the real thing starts, are we? Good heavens, this exercise was planned to show up where we need to improve our strategy: here you are not even bothering to send in a proper, factual report. *You* need improving, for one!'

'Miss Cowper! Can't have my subordinate speakin' to me like that!' Sammy looked up from his chart with a warning frown.

'I can't help that, Mr Ross. I've never minced words in my life and I don't intend to start mincing 'em now.'

Sammy had already learned to temper his valour with discretion when it came to dealing with his redoubtable second-in-command. Accordingly he changed the subject.

'I've put you down, in the next round of the sector table-tennis championships, to have me as your partner in the mixed doubles, and that woman what's her name, telephonist with the warts from the Report Centre, as your partner in the ladies' doubles. Okey doke?'

'Suppose so. But look here, getting back to this exercise, d'you really mean to tell me that you aren't going to send in a true report of what really happened?' Posy glared at Sammy indignantly. 'I've half a mind to tell that young girl reporter on the *Gazette* what fine tricks you're up to, I really am.'

'For gawd's sake don't go telling sensational tales to the press: last thing we want is to destroy public confidence in Civil Defence. When Hitler gets here, *if* he gets here, we'll show 'im. Until then, keep your hair on. And now do me a favour and go and get some dinner and leave me to carry on with this ping-pong chart in peace. Savvy?'

Posy responded with one of her famous snorts. Sammy said,

'No use you trying to reason why and all that caper, Miss Cowper. Yours but to do and bloody die, see?'

'Along with a lot of other people if they're all left lying out in the street waiting for help that never comes, like they were today.'

Posy signed off in the duty book and departed. Officially the ARP exercise was still in progress, but who cared? Gloomily she marched home.

II

'. . . want you lot to get this absolutely straight: you've got to know the exact location of your pressure points so that you can jam your thumb down hard and pronto on any one of 'em at any time, any place, anywhere: in the dark just as well as in the light, because once Hitler starts bombing us, as bomb us he now surely will, we're as likely to be raided in the night as broad daylight.'

Tuesday the fourth of June, Posy Cowper conducting her Thursday evening Civil Defence first-aid class at Stoke Hartwell. 'Now I'm going to call each of you up here on this platform, in turn, and I'm going to blindfold you and then I'm going to lie down here on the floor as if I was a casualty and tell you one by one which artery I've had cut by flying glass and you're to stop the bleeding, see? I shall say, "temporal artery" or "femoral artery" or so on and so forth, see? And heaven help those of you what fumble about; because if you can't bother to learn your pressure points off pat then you might as well say goodbye to the idea of being in Civil Defence, for there's one thing for sure and that is when the bombing starts there's going to be arterial bleeding and if there's arterial bleeding there's no time to stop and look up pressure points in your first-aid manuals . . . '

And Posy, producing a large handkerchief with which to blindfold her pupils, suited action to the word and began calling up her

class, one by one. Odile Duchamp, seated well at the back, her moment of summons surely some ten minutes away, began reading a letter from her sister, Morwenna, which Odile had found awaiting her on her return home from work to Foxwarren Avenue, that evening.

47 Rushton Road,
Cuddwell

Mon. June 3 1940

Dearest Odo,

Just a quick line from this hard-pressed newshound to say it seems ages since I last saw you – I keep hoping I'll be able to wangle a Sunday off so that I can get home for a few hours, but, as I think I've already told you, there used to be five reporters on this rag: now, thanks to call-up, there are only three, including me, and I'm still such a cub that I'm only considered fit to be given assignments that Gilroy, our senior reporter, is above covering, or Stoppard, the other reporter, is too busy to handle. Once there would have been three juniors to do all the dog's-body stuff that I now cover single handed, so you can well understand why I work a fourteen-hour day every day and spend all day Sunday trying to catch up with writing copy! Ah well, *there's a war on!* And with that weary catchphrase I'll stop my beefing – though actually I'm not beefing really, for in spite of the gruelling hours and constant nose to the grindstone, I'm still enjoying my reporter's life enormously.

Isn't the news awful? The way Hitler is sweeping across France, everything crumbling before him! No doubt the French will successfully counter-attack at some point, but

they're leaving it late! Is there any news of Papa yet? I'm terribly worried about him over there in France. And any news of our cousins in Paris? And your Fernand, have you heard anything of him? How ghastly it all is! And happened so suddenly! Only a month ago Mr Chamberlain was still Prime Minister and had barely finished telling us that Hitler had missed the bus.

How's Mummy? Racing round like a whirling dervish with the WVS no doubt. Please give her all my love, and to Grandma too, and not forgetting Elizabeth, and say I'll do my utmost to see them soon. Any news of Pam and her bed-pan larks? Have you finished your first-aid course yet? Poor old you, I wouldn't want to be in one of Posy Cowper's classes! She's a dragon and no mistake! Takes a fiendish delight in hauling me over the coals whenever she gets a chance. Luckily we don't see much of her at Rushton Road at present; now the war has really begun properly at last, everyone is rushing back to join Civil Defence and Posy is busier than ever training them all like mad.

We see even less of her brother, Henry. He's a bit younger than Posy, and very different in personality: quiet, the sort who keeps himself to himself, though always polite and pleasant enough when he speaks to you. Works with the Gas Board. His mother says it's a job that carries a lot of responsibility. She's obviously very proud of him.

What a bore we can't have a good gossip over the blower any more; we poor civilians, now this emergency is on, as good as forbidden to telephone except when absolutely necessary, and then keep it short as possible. And having no phone here at my digs doesn't help, and of

course I can't make or receive private calls at the *Gazette* office. Still, we can always write to one another – so long as I can find time!

All for now, Odo. Have to write some copy. Kisses and hugs all round,

Morwenna

Odile folded the letter and replaced it in her handbag, thinking to herself that Morwenna, so far, had come out the lucky one in this war. Most unfair, seeing that she, a mere sixteen-year-old schoolgirl, had had far less to lose than Odile, who, three years Morwenna's senior, had been poised on the threshold of a whole new wonderful life at university in Paris; now all snatched from her!

Morwenna, when war broke out, had been evacuated with her boarding school from the east coast into the safer inland countryside. Within a fortnight she had run away and returned home. She had refused vehemently to be sent back, though her mother had protested, 'You can't ruin your education just because there's a war.' To which Morwenna had replied, 'But I don't need to be educated! You know I'm going to be a novelist.' 'You're going back on the next train, child,' 'Okay. But I'll only run away again, *AND NEXT TIME I WON'T COME HOME!*'

Odile, watching this little scene between parent and child, had seen her mother quail. Perhaps, if she had had a husband at home to back her in this crisis, she might have won the day and Morwenna would have returned to school; but Papa had already left for France with the RAMC to organize field surgical units. Odile had done her best to reinforce her mother. 'Don't be such an ass, Morwenna, of course you must go back to school! Mummy's perfectly right. Who d'you think you are, anyway? Emily Brontë?' But Morwenna had merely thrust out her jaw and

stared back in stony silence. Their grandmother, Mrs Busby, could be heard muttering, 'No discipline whatever!'

A small, slight girl, looking as if the first breath of wind would blow her away, Morwenna, since nursery days, had possessed a will of iron: a power of obstinacy so intimidating that her family, in sheer self-defence, had cultivated the art of compromise when coping with her. This pattern once more repeated itself. Terms were drawn up: Morwenna need not return to school while the war lasted, but might stay at home (Stoke Hartwell, a leafy suburb verging on Epping Forest and far removed from the centre of London was not in an expected danger zone for air raids) and do a secretarial course ('Always useful for a girl'). Papa had assured them all, before leaving for France, that once the French army got to grips with Hitler the war would be over in a matter of weeks. Morwenna would be back at school in the New Year.

But by the New Year no fighting had yet taken place. Morwenna had finished her secretarial course and, without consulting anyone and lying boldly about her age, had got herself an advertised job on the *Cuddwell Gazette*, whose editor, driven desperate by the call-up of his staff, was prepared to employ, for the first time in his life, a female reporter. Poor old Mummy had made no attempt to conceal her horror; sixteen years old and working as a newspaper reporter in Cuddwell: only twelve miles distant, geographically speaking, but as different from Stoke Hartwell as chalk from cheese! Stoke Hartwell was 'a nice place to live' (non-Stoke Hartwellians called it a 'snobby place'). Whereas Cuddwell, lying nearer London, was a lower middle-class and working-class neighbourhood: highly respectable and self-respecting but far removed from Stoke Hartwellian concepts of living.

However Morwenna could not be dissuaded and to Cuddwell she went; worse still, she insisted upon taking digs there. 'I can't come home every night, Mummy! I have to cover evening

assignments, and work through weekends because we're so short-staffed.' Odile, seeing that their wretched mother was by now on the point of nervous breakdown, had had the brilliant idea of approaching Posy Cowper, in whose first-aid class Odile was now enrolled. Miss Cowper came from Cuddwell, she was clearly the epitome of respectability, and might well know somebody, equally respectable, who could offer Morwenna lodgings. Accordingly Odile had timidly approached Posy, who had replied that her mother had just lost her lodger; a bachelor, very quiet, had been called up, and she was looking for someone else, quiet and respectable, to take his place. Morwenna seemed to fit the bill perfectly and within twenty-four hours was established at 47 Rushton Road, Cuddwell.

As for Odile, she had remained at home at Maytrees, Foxwarren Avenue, Stoke Hartwell, entirely at a loose end. Simply to have something to do she had, like Morwenna, learned shorthand and typing and, still hoping against hope that the war would be over before it had properly started, had taken a temporary job in a local estate agent's office while, as a vaguely patriotic gesture ('Doing one's bit'), for one evening a week, she had enrolled on the course in first aid.

She genuinely wished she could be more like her mother, who, at the outbreak of war, had hurled herself without reservation into the Women's Voluntary Services and devoted her entire time, nowadays, to doing this, that and the other, wherever directed, 'to help the war effort'. Perhaps it was easier, mused Odile, for people of her parents' generation. Having lived through the last war, they were better able to acclimatize themselves to the wartime conditions Odile found so frustrating and wearisome. The disruption of normal patterns of life: all one's friends scattered and abruptly lost touch with, the young chaps called up, the girls racing to volunteer for this and that or, their education cut short, taking jobs; the blackout; shortages of everything from tennis balls to lipstick; no

decent shows in the West End; no nice shopping jaunts and outings. All the fun suddenly gone out of life.

At present Ma was away from home; had been absent for over a week, on yet another WVS war effort thing. She was incurably vague and so, as usual, hadn't had the remotest idea where she was heading for, or why; had simply packed a small bag of essentials and gone off with Sybil Spurgeon who lived next door and was also in the WVS. 'Another job for us to do! Expect us when you see us!'

Whereas Odile spent her time mooning around, yearning for her lost yesterdays, and wondering despairingly if she would now ever have any kind of a decent tomorrow.

She took another letter from her handbag. It was written in French, in a masculine hand and its envelope bore a French stamp. One of the scores of letters with which Fernand had plied her since last September when, like all Frenchmen of call-up age, he had been conscripted on the outbreak of hostilities; becoming a raw recruit in the depths of provincial France, housed in barracks named after Joan of Arc.

> It's all totally soul destroying! Even the stuff they issue to polish our boots has the most repulsive smell: you wonder where they *find* such boot polish! And the senior officers! Their antedeluvian chauvinism and obsession with the spirit of Verdun is beyond belief; you long to bellow at them to drop their preoccupation with the last war and turn their attention to this present mess. Old dodderers! It would be a farce, if it weren't so desperately tragic.

She knew all his letters by heart but continued to read and re-read them; she loved to see his handwriting and touch the paper he had touched.

Are they true: the tales we hear of all those patriotic Frenchmen rushing up to the Front in 1914 praying that the war wouldn't be over before they had their chance to get to grips with the Boche? Either it's a fairy story, or our generation is remarkably different from theirs! None of us lot shows the slightest desire to pour over the Maginot Line and capture German villages!

More complaints: about rifle drill; square-bashing; starvation of the intellect; wretched food; barrack-room doldrums; off-duty hours of excruciating boredom hanging around a sleepy little town where the one and only cinema was showing Tarzan films.

I wonder what I've done to deserve such a fate! I suppose it's because I've lacked dedication. I've drifted along, enjoying life as it comes; an easy-going chap. And now here I am, trapped in this God-awful spot, with heaven knows what ghastly fate ahead of me. Well, that's what comes of failing to show a dedicated spirit.

All my friends, everyone one meets in Paris, so magnificently dedicated! To communism; to socialism; to pacifism: unlimited isms to choose between. Every individual I know is totally single-minded about one specific ideology or the other. But not I! It isn't that I'm politically apathetic; I'm not. But somehow, as a reasoning man, I can never totally commit myself. Take pacifism as a case in point. I'd love to be a pacifist: nothing nicer! The idea of being forced to take up arms to preserve our rotten imperialist system revolts me; but unfortunately I'm the sort of chap who'll instinctively punch any chap on the nose if he threatens to punch mine, which counts me out as a pacifist from the word go. Wouldn't you agree?

She and Fernand had met the previous August at Bolbec in Brittany, where the Duchamps had been spending a month, as they did each year, together with their French cousins from Paris. Fernand Legrand, a first-year law student at the Sorbonne, had been staying at the same hotel with his parents and sister.

Odile had lived in a golden trance of swimming and boating with Fernand, of wandering along the cliffs with him, of tennis singles with him on the sunny courts redolent with the scent of pine trees, of sauntering hand in hand with him round the harbour at night, with the village lamps dancingly reflected on the water and the little lighthouse at the end of the quay flashing in rhythmic harmony with the myriad other lighthouses signalling into the night all along the rocky coast of Morbihan. Always with Fernand.

Odile herself had been due to enter the Sorbonne to read history in the coming October, encouraged to do so by her father. She would live in Paris with her uncle, aunt and cousins. Everything, it seemed, would work out like a dream!

Then her bliss had come to an end, abruptly; just like that. Thanks to Hitler.

In her mind's eye she was with her family having breakfast on the sunny hotel terrace overlooking the beach. Her father had suddenly announced to her Uncle Nicolas, 'The sooner I can get Ann and the girls back to England the better. There'll be a regular stampede of English back across the Channel within the next few days and I want to be ahead of the rush. Pack our things today, leave tomorrow.'

Morwenna, her mouth full of croissant had enquired, 'But just because Hitler and Stalin have signed a non-aggression pact, why does that mean we're on the brink of war?'

Thursday, the twenty-fourth of August, and the news of the Hitler–Stalin pact had just reached the ears of a startled world.

'Because,' Uncle Nicolas had replied, 'it puts paid to a united front of France, Britain and Russia, to restrain Germany. And a united front with Russia was our last hope of preserving peace. Now Hitler can blackmail us with his bombers, and play merry hell where he chooses, secure in the knowledge that Stalin, for one, won't intervene to stop him, even if the French and British finally find the nerve to call his bluff.'

Papa said, 'Hitler isn't bluffing. I've no doubt the French army could knock him sideways, but no army, however good, can prevent bombers getting through, and that's where Hitler has us.' Then he started his usual doom and gloom about mass terror attacks by Hitler's bombers. 'The point is, will the civilian populations of Paris and London hold out long enough under that kind of annihilation, giving the field troops time to go into action; or will civilian capitulation mean that the military are obliged to come to terms with the enemy?' And so on. Ma, who was knitting herself a beach cardigan, counted stitches under her breath, desperately trying to concentrate, shutting out the talk. Aunt Madeleine, rolling her eyes piously heavenwards, murmured as she invariably murmured when Papa got on to mass terror attacks, 'One can only hope and pray that it will all blow over! It's too terrible to contemplate!'

Odile sat listening and almost choking with combined contempt and despair: contempt for these miserable elders who, having experienced one frightful war's slaughter in their youth, seemed, like sheep, to accept the impossibility of preventing the fresh doom hanging over them. All they ever did was talk, or fall back on pious hope! As for her despair, that was for her own bright dreams that war would send crashing.

'Ready to come for a walk?' Fernand's voice, as he bent over her.

'Yes!' Odile gulped down the last of her coffee and sprang to her feet.

Fernand was already running impatiently down the steps leading from the hotel terrace to the beach. Odile scurried after him.

'Where are we going?' she asked as she caught him up. 'Round the headland to the next bay, like we did yesterday?'

'No. There isn't time.'

'The tide won't be up for ages yet.'

'The tide has nothing to do with it. My family's leaving for Paris. There's my mother calling me now!'

Sure enough, from behind them came Madame Legrand's voice, 'Fernand!'

'Ignore her,' said Fernand. 'We must have a few last moments alone together.' He took Odile by the hand and, walking with rapid strides, hurried along the beach. 'My father is in a real panic about this latest crisis,' he continued. 'So, in the middle of breakfast, after one glance at the morning paper, he announces that we must go home to Paris without delay. He seems to be expecting the Germans to arrive at any moment.'

'My father's just the same,' said Odile. 'He's hauling us back to England tomorrow. I was wondering how to tell you.'

On the surface, everything was just the same as usual. The distant blue and white incoming tide glistened in the sun and the gulls fluttered and called above the breakers. On the beach in front of the hotels a group of people were lining up to do their morning exercises under the guidance of the *Maître Nageur*. Nearer at hand another group were briskly playing volley ball. An old woman, who spent all day every day on the beach under a vast sunshade, had already arranged herself and the sunshade to her satisfaction and was comfortably peeling herself a peach.

They reached a place where some big fallen rocks blocked them from the view of the hotel and Madame Legrand. Fernand stopped, took Odile in his arms and kissed her. 'You'll come back to France if there isn't a war?' he asked.

'Of course. I'm due to start at the Sorbonne in October.'

He kissed her again, then stared hard into her eyes as if searching for some oracular truth in their depths. Then, 'You won't be back. You know it. You know there's going to be a war this time, just as well as I do.'

Odile's eyes filled with tears; she couldn't speak.

'Fer-nand!' Madame Legrand's voice again.

'*Merde!*' said Fernand. 'I shall have to go.' A scallop shell lay on the sand at their feet; swiftly he stooped, picked it up and handed it to Odile, with a mock ceremonial bow. 'A little souvenir of your stay at the seaside, *mademoiselle*.'

'Thank you, *m'sieur*! I shall treasure it for ever.'

He linked his arm through hers, pressing her close to him, and in silence they retraced their steps, back to the hotel.

The German tanks had rolled towards Warsaw; the Polish High Command had ordered a general retreat of the troops into southernmost Poland, there to regroup. It was a matter of hanging on till the French were ready. They should have been showing signs of active intervention by this time! But . . .

Fernand's letters contained frustrated accounts of how the army was helping farmers gather record fruit crops. '*Mon dieu!* What a farce this all is! My career and prospects disrupted to become an orchard-cropping peasant! Millions of our chaps called to arms, and here they are playing among peaches and plums! We've declared war; for God's sake let's make war, and get it done with! France has gone senile, like her High Command. Impossibly chauvinistic – and impotent!'

Nonetheless, fruit picking wouldn't, couldn't, go on for ever. In his next letter Fernand struck a new note: even he wasn't above a little chauvinism. 'The news from Poland certainly sounds grim! However, as yet Hitler's troops have met with no real opposition;

the Poles are admittedly brave, but perfectly archaic. Whereas the French military machine is the best in the world. Just you wait till our *poilus* get their teeth into the Germans. The war will be over in no time, that's a promise! And then, we'll start to live! You and me together!'

Odile, once she had begun work at the estate agent's office, instructed Fernand to address letters to her there. It wasn't discreet to have his stream of correspondence constantly flipping through the letter box at Maytrees. Even Ma might begin to smell a rat! Odile suspected that her parents could have second thoughts about letting her go to Paris and the Sorbonne, when peace returned, if they knew that she and Fernand . . .

He kept optimistic about their future. 'I know that in this I am not being *strictly* rational, beloved Odile, but how can I possibly fail to survive this idiotic war when I know that you're there for me at the end of it all?'

His face was before her as clearly as if he were beside her; the depths of his large dark eyes under their thick, straight black eyelashes; his strongly marked eyebrows; his full mouth; the sooty little mole just below his left jawline . . .

'Miss Duchamp, let's have you next!'

Startled from her reverie by Miss Cowper's clarion call Odile jerked from her seat and began stumbling dazedly towards the platform. Next instant she was blindfolded and Miss Cowper was bawling in her ear, 'Carotid!' Odile began wondering where in hell she would find a carotid artery?

'Come on, come on! Don't forget I'm bleeding to death!' roared Miss Cowper, from where she now lay prone at Odile's feet.

Odile dropped on her knees, put out a tentative hand and took a grip on the first portion of Miss Cowper's robust frame that her fingers met. 'No go!' shouted Miss Cowper. 'Carotid, I said! I don't keep it down there!'

The class began to titter as, wildly fumbling, Odile tried squeezing at random whichever bits of Miss Cowper came to hand first, to be greeted by a bellow of 'No!' each time. The tittering turned to unabashed laughter. Finally Miss Cowper cut Odile short with, 'All right, you can stop; I'm dead. And a fat lot of help you're going to be to anyone in an emergency!'

She bounced to her feet, grabbed hold of Odile and applied a hideous grip to a point deep in the base of her throat, an excruciating jab of pain that brought tears to Odile's eyes. For a moment she feared she was going to pass out. 'That's your carotid, m'girl! Now, don't you forget it!' Odile thought she would rather die than be saved by Miss Cowper, who, slipping the blindfold from Odile's head, dismissed her from the platform with, 'Don't know why you bothered to sign on for these classes if all you intend doing is waste my time, and yours.'

The instant she sank down on her chair Odile's thoughts flew back to Fernand. How exactly his reaction to this wretched war coincided with hers! 'A farce, if it weren't so desperately tragic!'

And tragic, perhaps, was to be the final word. All very well to speak breezily of French *poilus* getting their teeth into the Germans! Hitler's tanks had invaded France three weeks ago; the French front had been pierced, news bulletin after news bulletin told calamity – and not another letter had come from Fernand.