CHAPTER ONE

September 1931

It was a soft autumn day, the golden air luminous with floating silken seeds and spider threads. The harvest fields were every shade of tawny from amber to flaxen; the flaming woods burned without being consumed, like Moses' bush, as if it would be autumn now for ever.

In the hedges, swollen with hips and scarlet haws, the birds stuffed themselves, too frantic with greed to fly up as the ridden horse passed. Solly sneezed in the dust raised by his rhythmic tread. A golden horse in a golden land: the chestnut's name was Roi Soleil, but the grooms could not get their tongues round it, and Polly had bowed to the inevitable. She was golden too: hatless, with the sun bright on her gilt hair, slim and flexible in the saddle, at one with her steed.

It was dinner-time when she rode into the yard at Huntsham Farm. She had not long been the owner of the Morland Place estate, but she had grown up here, so she knew it was the best time to find the farmer at home. She also knew she would be invited to 'tek a bit o' dinner', and that Yorkshire folk did not like to be refused. They did not like to be hurried, either, so she had come prepared to eat and to wait.

Over the normal farmyard odours of manure and straw she caught a sweeter whiff of boiling ham from the open kitchen door. Solly pricked his ears and let out a ripping

whinny, as was his way. He was only a youngster, in the process of finding out about life. The whinny announced her arrival and Mrs Walton appeared at the kitchen door, a cloth in her hands, frowning at the interruption. Seeing who it was, she called over her shoulder, 'It's the mistress,' and ducked back in, to be replaced a moment later by her husband, an enormous, bony man, who filled the doorway and had to lower his head under the lintel.

'Now then, Miss Polly,' he hailed her. 'Fine day.' The greeting was cordial, though his face, brown and rigid as wood from long exposure to brutal weathers, could not smile. It was frosted with grey stubble: like most of his kind, he shaved only on a Saturday night.

'It is indeed, Mr Walton. Good drying weather,' Polly offered.

'Aye,' he nodded. 'We've been turnin' this morning, and we s'l cart tomorrow. An' they're cuttin' oats over to Thickpenny.'

He made to come forward to take her rein, but she forestalled him. 'I see you're in your stockinged feet. Don't come out.'

'Ah'd nobbut just tekken me boots off for dinner. You'll coom in and tek a bit wi' us?'

'I'd be glad to,' Polly said. She slipped down from the saddle, and had run up the stirrups and loosened the girth by the time the younger Walton boy, Tom, had got his boots back on and come running out to take him.

He gave her a shy smile. 'I'll put him in the old stable for you and give him a bit o' hay.'

Inside the farmhouse kitchen – the big room that ran the width of the house, in which almost all of the Waltons' living took place – the wooden table took up the central space, flanked by wooden benches, with a high-backed chair at either end. The range under the chimney provided the hot water to the house as well as the cooking, and was never let go out. But despite the warm day outside, it was not unbearably hot in the kitchen: the stone walls were two feet thick, and the wide stone flags on the floor were laid directly on earth.

Mrs Walton – Ruth – hurried over as Polly came in. She was little and thin – farmer's wives rarely ran to fat – but gave the impression of wiry strength; her grey hair was secured out of the way in a tight bun behind and her sleeves were rolled up for action at all times, except at church on Sunday.

'Now then, Miss Polly, what a grand surprise. Sit in, won't you? Dinner's ready.'

Polly took the end place on the nearest bench. The men, who had stood for her in native politeness, sat again. Ernie and Ted, the two labourers, kept their eyes modestly to themselves. This was not just 'Miss Polly from up the Big House', which would have been overpowering enough, but the new owner, who held all their fates in her hands. And she was young and beautiful to boot – inexplicably, frighteningly beautiful. They couldn't begin to think how to address her.

Ancient Walter, the cowman, didn't hold with females, and looked away on general principle.

As Farmer Walton – Isaac – took his place in the big chair at the foot of the table, the only one to meet Polly's eye was his elder son Joe, who gave her a nod and a smile. He had lost an eye and half a leg in France in 1918, but despite his disability, he was a cheerful soul. He nipped about on his tin leg and threw himself into his work with gusto. He counted himself lucky, not only for having survived – the eldest Walton boy, Matt, had been killed at Passchendaele – but for having found a girl, May Gatson, willing to marry him, missin' bits an' all.

May was bringing bowls of steaming potatoes to the table: a red-faced, solid girl whose early beauty had flowered and set, like a wild rose turning to hip. She was the only other female in this overwhelmingly masculine household. The two children she had so far presented to Joe were boys, aged five and three. They were sitting at the end of the table, opposite Polly, where they would be bracketed between their mother and grandmother. The elder boy was too shy to look at her,

but the younger gazed in wonder, a crust clutched in his fist ready to do service as a 'pusher', his eyes round and brown under his tow-coloured hair.

Tom returned, hauled off his boots, went to his place, and Ruth Walton took the baked ham out of the oven and brought it to the table. The smell of it was glorious, and Polly, who had been up and about since first light, found her mouth running with anticipation. There were potatoes and a great dish of runner beans, which smelt heavenly too. The men's hands twitched helplessly towards the victuals, and were halted by Ruth's stern look and the words, 'Grace, Father!'

Isaac, a little red from the consciousness of who was listening, spoke the words: 'Bless this food to our use, O Lord, and us to Thy service. An' fill our hearts with grateful praise, an' keep us always mindful of others, for Christ Jesus' sake. Amen.'

And then Ruth started carving and the plates started going round, and the bowls of vegetables were passed, and the jug of gravy, and six men hunched over their plates with the desperate urgency of those who have been up since before dawn doing physical labour. The women minded their manners and made the children mind theirs, but there was no time for talking until the agonising pangs of hunger were assuaged, and Polly knew better than to try to engage anyone in social chit-chat.

Afterwards, May cleared the plates while Ruth went to the oven and brought out an enormous apple pie, baked in a tin two feet square, and fetched it to the table along with a tall enamel jug of custard. After that a vast pot of tea was brewed and brought to the table, along with – in honour of the guest – a plate of oat biscuits. Isaac and Walter filled their pipes and the younger men lit cigarettes.

'Well, now, Miss Polly,' Ruth said, signalling that the social part of the meal was to begin, 'how are you finding it, being back? I reckon it'd seem a bit strange, like, after all them years you were away.'

'I'm getting used to it slowly,' Polly said. 'It's not the place – I *was* brought up here.' She felt it did no harm to remind them. 'It's the new responsibilities.'

'Aye, it's ower much for a bit of a lass,' Isaac said.

Walter piped up in his querulous voice, like a creaky gate that always complained and wouldn't be oiled. 'If Master'd wanted th'estate to go to a lass, he wouldn't have left it to Mr James.'

Ruth thought that was plain rude. 'It's not for us to question Master's ways, God rest his soul. And you know right well it were them wicked death duties as changed everything,' she said sharply.

'That's right, Mother,' Joe said, giving Walter a quelling glare. 'If Miss Polly hadn't bought the estate from Mr James, everything'd've had to be sold to a stranger, an' likely we'd've all been out on our ears. So think on, Walter, and don't talk so far back.'

But Walter used the privilege of age to refuse to be quelled. ''At's as may be, but Mr James is the eldest son, and right's right. There he is, living up at th'Place as ever is, and you're tellin' me he's not Master? Well, Ah don't understand it, plain an' simple. If he's not Master, what's he doin' there?'

'You don't understand anything, Wally, so keep a still tongue in your head,' Isaac said. 'Folks as 'ave nowt to say should say nowt.'

But Polly thought, half humorously, that Walter had a very good question. What *was* James doing? When she had bought the estate from him, to save it from being broken up to pay the death duties, he had said he wanted to go off and travel round the world; that he loved Morland Place but didn't want the responsibility of it; that he might come back one day, but only when the gypsy urge had left him and his longing to roam had been quelled.

But since the papers had been signed and Polly had parted with a large chunk of her fortune and shouldered the work

and worry, James had seemed able to resist the urge to wander very well. He was apparently quite content to go on living at Morland Place, riding the horses, pottering about on his motor-bicycle, seeing his friends and having them over, just as he had done when Papa was alive and he was heir apparent.

Still, this was not the place to discuss the phenomenon.

'Morland Place has had a mistress instead of a master before now,' she said mildly, 'and flourished all right. And in any case, that's the way things are, so we must all get on with it as best we can.'

'True for you, Miss Polly,' Ruth said firmly. 'Pay no mind to the awd fool. We're right glad and grateful that you came home and rescued us all, and that's the truth, and there's no-one under *this* roof 'at won't give you any help you need to get job done.'

'Hear hear, Mother,' said Joe.

'Ah were on'y sayin' it were a big task, for a lass on her own,' Isaac said belatedly.

'But we're behind you all right, Miss Polly,' Joe insisted.

'I'm very glad to hear it,' Polly said, taking the opening, 'because I want to put a plan to you.'

'Oh, aye?' Isaac said warily.

'I'd like to start a bull club,' said Polly.

It didn't take much explaining – the men had heard of such things – but there was a deal of persuading needed, of which Polly was aware this visit could mark only the beginning. It had always been the habit of dairy farmers to put any male bovine they could get the use of to their cows, just to get them pregnant. They were not interested in the calves: in the nature of things, half would be useless males; the better of the females might be kept as replacements, the rest sold for what they'd fetch. It was the lactation that mattered, and scrub bulls did the work all right, so why bother with anything fancier? 'If it's got 'orns an' balls it's good enough for me,' was the saying.

The bull-club system was one whereby a number of farmers clubbed together to buy a pedigreed bull to serve all their cows, paying a fee per service to cover expenses, with the aim of improving the stock and therefore the quality and quantity of the milk. The Ministry of Agriculture would make a grant of a quarter of the cost of the bull towards this end.

'Of course,' Polly explained, 'I would put up the rest of the initial cost. You know Sir Bertie Parke has a herd of pedigreed shorthorns, and he has agreed to sell me a suitable animal.'

They knew Sir Bertie: he had run tame about Morland Place in his youth, and had married 'their' Miss Jessie – Polly's cousin who had been brought up with her like an older sister. The Parkes now bred horses at Twelvetrees, and Sir Bertie also had a farm at Bishop Winthorpe, where he kept his dairy herd.

'So the bull would belong to me,' Polly went on, 'and the idea would be that all the Morland estate farmers would belong to the club and have the use of it.'

'Ah don't doubt there'd be a sharpish charge,' Isaac said suspiciously. 'You don't get owt for nowt in this world.'

'Yes, there would be a fee – just enough to cover the running expenses. But it would improve the quality of your herd no end. What I want to see is all of you moving towards getting attested, and producing graded milk.'

Isaac scowled. 'More ministry interference,' he grunted. 'Ah don't hold wi' it. We've farmed on this land since the year dot, wi'out any ministry feller tellin' us how.'

'But Grade-A milk sells for at least a penny a gallon more. And your cows will produce more of it, too. They'll milk better, and for longer, and they'll be less susceptible to sickness. Wouldn't you like a herd free of tuberculosis?'

The latest report from the ministry had calculated that the average working life of dairy cows in England was less

than half what it should be, because of tuberculosis deaths, and that replacing the losses put an extra threepence a gallon on the cost of milk production. She tried to explain this to Isaac, though it was a tricky concept for a man of no formal education. 'True enough it costs a bit to get to an attested herd and clean milk, but it pays handsomely in the end,' she concluded.

Isaac was setting his jaw. 'Handsomely, is it? Aye, an' Ah don't doubt when Ah get this fancy-work herd all set up, you'll be putting ma rent up.'

'Yes,' said Polly, 'but only by a fair amount. That's the point – to improve all the Morland land, to get the most possible out of it. I'll be better off, certainly, but you will too. It's good for you, good for me, good for the land – good for the whole country.'

'Aye, well, Ah've enough on me hands tekkin' care of me own family. Ah've nowt to do wi' the rest o' th' country. Let it tek care of itself.'

'By all means,' Polly agreed. 'But I'd like to see my estate become a model for estates everywhere. I want to see strong, healthy cows giving rich, grade-A milk. And I've other plans.' She could see she was getting nowhere, but she expected to have to make the argument many times before it was accepted. 'Milking machines, for one thing.'

Isaac looked startled. 'Nay, Miss Polly. Them things are unnatural – downright dangerous. I heerd of a feller got his arm pulled right off wi' one.' Such stories always circulated when any new machinery was proposed.

Joe spoke up. 'I seen one once, when I were at training camp down in Devon, on the farm we were billeted at. It were always breaking down. And the cows didn't like it.'

'Downright cruel, I heard,' said Isaac.

'Those old pre-war machines were crude, but the new ones they're making now are quite different – worlds better,' Polly said. 'I've seen them used on Sir Bertie's farm. The

cows don't mind them at all. And the best thing is, the milk goes straight into a closed container, so there's less chance of contamination. And they're so quick, compared with hand-milking.' She had got carried away with her enthusiasm now. 'With one machine and six steadings, a man and a boy can handle sixty cows. Just think!'

Walter scowled. 'Aye, Ah'm thinkin', and Ah can see where that goes: machines tekkin' over men's work. What'll become of the likes o' me? Thrown out on't scrap-heap! Tha s'd be ashamed, Miss Polly, to talk of puttin' men out o' work at a time like this.' He jutted out the wispy white beard that decorated his jaw. 'An' pullin' cows to pieces wi metal fandangoes, wrenchin' their ewers about – unnatural, Ah call it! Tha'd have 'em down wi' felon in no time. And all for t'sake of a bit o' profit! It's not the way thy father would have gone, God rest his soul – the best Master we ever had, and a true gentleman. Understood the land like it were his own child.'

Polly knew it was no use going on. Like water on a stone, she must work away over time. She knew from Bertie that while good hand-milkers were worth their weight in gold, there were plenty of hard-handed, clumsy milkers (she suspected Walter was one), who wrenched the teats so roughly that mastitis – which local farmers called 'felon' – was a common occurrence. Milking machines, Bertie said, had completely eliminated traumatic mastitis from his herd.

When later she rode away again, her mood was slightly less buoyant. Solly, on the contrary, was refreshed by his rest and snack in the stable, and pranced about, shying at birds, falling leaves and sinister gateposts, so she went back a different way, and gave him a good gallop over the stubble to settle him.

The movement and pleasure of it restored her natural optimism. After all, she told herself, she had not expected it to be simple. She had been an innovator before. In New York she had set up a fashion business from scratch, had

built it up until at the end she had been a well-known figure in top society, invited everywhere. She had sold gowns to Manhattan's best families – Whitneys and Vanderbilts, Paynes and Duers, Morgans and Rothschilds. And none of that had been easy.

Of course, New York was a place that valued enterprise, and was accustomed to powerful matriarchs, so being female had been no barrier to success. Yorkshire farmers, on the other hand, didn't like change, and they liked women to know their place. She had sold her business when she had married Ren Alexander, an immensely rich and well-connected man, and dedicated herself to his political career, becoming an influential hostess. The Crash had brought that world tumbling down like a house of cards; and though Ren had seen it coming, and safeguarded most of his fortune, he had been killed in an aeroplane accident soon afterwards, leaving her a rich widow with a posthumous son to bring up.

Absorbed with her own sorrows, she had not realised that her father back in England was fading away until it was too late. Then Jessie had written in desperation, to say that death duties combined with the terrible cost of borrowing since the Crash meant the estate would have to be sold. James could not cope at all; could Polly help? So she had come home at last, to a Morland Place without Papa.

He had died without the comfort of seeing her one last time, something that still haunted her conscience. She should have come home earlier, to tell him that she loved him, to tell him she was sorry . . . She missed him every day. She had been his most precious jewel, and he had been her stay and comfort. He had been her home.

Well, she told herself, shaking away weakness, all she could do now was to be the best mistress Morland Place had ever had. From the depth of imminent destruction, the estate should rise like a phoenix to become the pattern of England. And she was not going to let any stubborn, backward-looking

farmers stand in her way. She was not Polly Morland, her father's daughter, for nothing! She was going to—

She found she had stopped, her hand checking Solly at some subconscious signal. He blew vibrato from his velvet nostrils in protest, curving his neck and fidgeting his feet, but she held him, looking about her like one waking from sleep. What? What was it?

She was looking at a dry-stone wall, neatly made, holding up the bank where the field was higher than the track. Memory flooded her, and suddenly her throat was rigid with pain. She saw him there, as he had been all those years ago, bare-headed in the sun, his sleeves rolled up to show the brown, lean strength of his arms, his hands white with stone dust, his hair bleached flaxen at the front, his eyes narrowed against the glare as he looked up at her, smiling . . .

Erich, her first love, her forbidden love – for he was a German prisoner of war, and it was her duty to hate him. But gentle, erudite, country-bred, he had taken her untried heart, as he worked about her father's land that long summer, when she was still a girl and the war seemed far away. This wall he had repaired with his skilled, unhurried hands. All around her land there were examples of his work, which had the power to ambush her with memories when she was least expecting them.

He had been taken away to be deported to his own country, and she had been told he had been killed in a riot at the docks. For so very long she had grieved for him, Erich, her lost love, unable even to admit why she was so unhappy, until years later she had met him again in New York and learned that the story had been a lie. But by then she was married to Ren; and Erich was married too, having believed he would never see her again.

She jerked her head away from contemplation of that neat wall, baking in the sun, laid her legs to Solly's sides and sent him on. She must not think of him; he belonged to

someone else, and their lives now lay apart. She had promised herself she would not think of him, though there was a hollow place inside her that could never be filled.

Solly settled into his swinging stride as she berated herself. She had enough to do without mourning over the past: a house full of cousins and orphans whom her father had taken in and who now depended on her; the farms to mould in her own way; the factories in Manchester, the shops and the rest of the estate, properties and little businesses, stocks and shares she hadn't even had time to get to the end of yet. It was a huge burden for anyone, but for a woman on her own . . .

Yes, a woman alone: it came to her in that moment that she was lonely, and it seemed an odd thing to say when Morland Place was stuffed full of relatives and servants, and when invitations came from neighbours every day to this or that social gathering. But of all that crowd, the only person who was really hers, and hers alone, was her baby, little Alec up in the nursery; and he depended on her, too. There was no-one to whom she could say, 'Hold this burden for me, just for a moment, while I take a breath.'

Her mind turned, as it so often had, to Lennie, her dear cousin and friend, whom she had left behind in America. He had always been there, ready to help; he would have shouldered the burden, given her advice, help, warmth and support, and never asked for anything in return. He loved her, not as a cousin, but in that way she could not love him, but he had never let it be a trouble to her. She wished suddenly that he were here, now, so that she could talk to him; talking to Lennie was often all she needed to solve a problem.

'When I get home, I'll write to him,' she said aloud. Solly turned back an ear; and even to Polly it sounded good. Yes, she would write to Lennie . . . And wouldn't it be a fine thing if he decided to take a vacation, and make a visit to

the old country? Her heart warmed at the idea. She wouldn't depend on it, of course – he would probably be too busy – but it was a fine thought. Anyway, she would definitely write.

It was just a routine flight – but, then, no pilot enters his cockpit believing it will be anything but routine. Not in peacetime, anyway. And Jack Compton had been flying the Imperial Airways Silver Wing service from Croydon to Paris (and the extended Croydon–Paris–Basel–Zürich route in summer) since its inception.

The Handley Page HP42 was an ungainly-looking craft – an unequal-span biplane, with an enormous three-finned tailplane, and four engines, two mounted close to the centre of the upper wing and one on each side of the fuselage on the lower wing. But despite its odd appearance, it was strong, reliable and comfortable. It was the first commercial aircraft to have the pilot's compartment enclosed inside the aircraft, for which Jack and his flight crew were grateful. There were two passenger cabins, one in front of the wings and one aft, with substantial space for baggage and mail amidships, where the engine noise was greatest. The passengers had padded armchairs and large windows from which to enjoy the view, and there was a galley for the serving of food and fine wines by a uniformed steward. It was the most modern way to travel.

Jack was not far from Croydon, with sixteen passengers on board and three crew, when the port lower engine failed. He smelt the smoke first, but had barely time to mention it when he heard the splintery crack, and felt the jar as something inside the housing broke away. A piece of debris, spun out at high speed, crossed his line of sight like a hurtling missile, making him flinch instinctively; his body knew about dodging the hazards of Archie – anti-aircraft fire – even though he tried not to remember the war.

He heard Tony, his young navigator, exclaim, 'Christ, what was that?' The debris struck the propeller of the port upper engine with a terrible screech of abused metal. At once the engine began to labour and chop, vibrating so violently that he did not even wait to see if it would even out. That sort of vibration could rip the wing in half. He shut it down, feeling sweat break out under his hair line, as the old under-fire tension gripped him.

Two engines down. 'How far are we from Croydon?' he shouted over the roar as the remaining engines laboured to keep the heavy craft aloft. With two of them out of action on the same side it was a struggle to keep her level. She pulled like a wounded whale, trying to turn, wanting to dive.

Tony answered. 'Thirty miles, sir.'

'Too far,' Jack said.

'Can we make it to Biggin Hill?'

Jack glanced at the altimeter. Between them and Biggin Hill was the western end of the North Downs. He shook his head. 'I can't get enough height. I'm going to have to put her down somewhere. Better let 'em know at home.'

He heard Guy, his engineer, radio in as he concentrated grimly on staying level, while he and Tony looked out on either side for a suitable piece of clear ground. Kent was not called the Garden of England for nothing: it was heavily cultivated for fruit and vegetables – hop country too. Empty fields were in short supply. Ahead he saw the glitter of the Medway, a silver snake in the afternoon sunshine, to his left the roofs and chimneys of Tonbridge, and beyond them the ground rising towards Sevenoaks, green and wooded hills they could not clear.

The engines laboured; the vibration passing up his arms was making his neck and jaw ache. 'Anything?' he asked Tony. 'Can't be too fussy. We're still losing height.'

'There, sir!' Tony cried, his young voice high with tension. 'What about that?'

Jack saw it. A strip of grass-greenness amid the cultivation – a field recently cleared but not yet planted, he guessed. Rough-looking green; a hedge at the end, but no tall trees; a little village beyond; scattered woods beyond that. Not as flat as he'd have liked, but wide enough and long enough. Probably.

'It'll have to do,' he said. The HP42 was known for handling well at low speeds, and with those vast wings she was a good glider, but the imbalance of the redundant engines was an incalculable factor. But the hills were coming closer. They had no choice. 'I'm going in,' he said.

The earth speeded up, came up towards them greedily, wanting them back: gravity, which had turned a blind eye to them for the past couple of hours, now glanced again in their direction, wondering what they were doing up there. *Wait*, he urged it inwardly. *Just give me a few more minutes*. Lower, lower, the aircraft feeling impossibly heavy in his hands now. They passed over a lane between lines of hedges, sending a cloud of sparrows darting frantically in every direction. For an instant he saw how uneven the ground really was, hummocks and hollows, shallow trenches where some kind of machinery had been dragged along, deep ruts with the distinctive lug marks of tractor wheels. Then it became just a blur. 'Hold on!' he shouted.

The wheels touched down, and the HP42 jolted and bounced, leaping like a flea as one wheel or another went over a hump. He throttled back, the engines whined – his arms were being wrenched out of their sockets. Tony said, 'Christ!' as they hit a bump and leaped ten feet, and Guy said, 'Ow!' They were being flung against the hard surfaces of the cabin.

The vast, long wings that had given her lift were now a handicap. As they hit another bump she tilted violently and the starboard wingtip hit the ground with a horrible splintering sound, leaving a brown gouge in the rough green.

Only her weight kept her from flipping right over. But the impact snapped off another propeller – he saw it fly like a child's rubber-band toy, up and over the wing surface, whirling end over end – and swung her hard round. With a noise like the end of the world, her tail met some unseen object and was ripped away. The craft juddered to a halt, almost flinging them through the windscreen, and from somewhere above Jack's head a gauge in a metal box tore from its housing and fell, hitting his shoulder a sharp blow.

But in his relief he did not notice the pain. He shut off the engines. For an instant the three men sat motionless, staring ahead in silence, drawing carefully those precious first breaths of life miraculously continuing. The earth had claimed them, but kindly this time. Sounds filtered in from the outside, the relentless chirping of birds, some far-off shouts of men hurrying to see what had happened, a dog barking. Smells of hot oil, bruised grass, man sweat. Jack felt his arms trembling, and a great wave of gratitude flooded him that they were safely down and there was no fire – most of all, that there was no fire.

'Better check on the passengers,' he said, and was amazed to hear his voice come out so steady.

Wonderfully, no-one was hurt. The passengers were shaken and there were some bruises and minor abrasions but they were taking it very well, chattering and laughing among themselves in the relief of peril past, insisting on shaking Jack's hand to thank him for getting them down safely. It would be something to talk about at cocktails for weeks to come. The only person making a fuss was a very fashionably dressed lady who had torn her stockings – and they were not art silk at 1*s*. 11*d* the pair from Gamages, but the real thing, she would have them know, and from Paris.

After that, it was just a matter of waiting while transport was sent from Croydon for the passengers and their luggage,

a separate van for the mail sacks, and a lorry bringing ground crew and an inspector to look at the damage. The HP could not fly, and would have to be dismantled and taken by road to Croydon to be rebuilt.

Jack discussed the incident with the inspector, Anstruther, as they walked round his poor old bus, piecing together what must have happened. It turned out to have been a tree stump that had ripped off her tail. The ground had recently been cleared of an old orchard, the trees grubbed out or felled, the stumps pulled out and dragged off with chains – except for the one the farmer had missed and Jack had not.

'You couldn't have chosen a rougher place to put her down,' Anstruther said.

'Didn't have a lot of choice, sir,' Jack said, unsure whether the inspector was admiring his skill or chastising his carelessness. The passengers and the cabin steward had gone now, but there was a crowd of onlookers from the village, including a number of small boys who were trying to edge closer in the hope of snaffling souvenirs. A hot and bothered young man had arrived from Tonbridge, representing the press, accompanied by a photographer who was trying to set up a camera and being impeded by the rough terrain and the Croydon ground crew, who would not stop their work to give him a clear view.

Guy and Tony were sitting on the grass on the side away from the crowd, smoking in philosophical silence, and a longing for a cigarette came over Jack. The sun was declining and cool shadows were easing out from the trees to join up with the smoke-blue dusk of autumn. He was suddenly very tired – reaction to the strain of the incident, he supposed. The tussocky grass dragged annoyingly at his weary feet as he tramped after Anstruther. He felt that even one more question would break his heart.

At last, another vehicle was arriving – he could see its

upper part above the hedge, trundling along the road towards the gate.

'Looks as though your limousine's here,' Anstruther said whimsically. 'You and your boys can go on back. I'll stay with the ground crew. We'll talk again later.'

Jack was glad to go, feeling that if he didn't sit down soon he might fall down. He was amused to see that the vehicle they had sent for him, Guy and Tony was an old Crossley, the transport every RAF pilot knew intimately from wartime, after the hundreds of jolting miles they had travelled in them, criss-crossing northern France from station to base and base to station. It was somehow rather comforting to see one again.

It seemed a very long time afterwards – weeks, even months – that he pulled into his own front drive. It was late, dark, and the lights of the house glowed welcomingly from behind drawn curtains. Helen came out of the front door and went to open the garage for him. The dogs, Stalky and Captain Midnight, sat on the doorstep with the lighted hall behind them. Stalky's whole mien was alert, ears pricked and stump tail switching under him, but the Captain was overcome with an enormous yawn, then hoisted a hind leg for a leisurely scratch under his chin.

Jack drove into the little timber-and-tarpaper garage they had had built last autumn, set the handbrake, turned off the engine. He climbed out, aware that stiffness had set in during the drive home, and tried hard not to limp. Changing position brought the bruise on his shoulder jangling to life. He and Helen closed the doors together, which left him standing right next to her, close enough to read everything in her face. It was an old story and he knew all the words.

'I'm sorry,' he said.

'You must be hungry.' She was trying to sound normal.

'Starving,' he agreed.

'I've kept supper warm in the oven for you.' She continued to examine his face with a searing look. 'You're not hurt?'

'Only bruises,' he said. 'And wrenched muscles.'

She relaxed a little. 'Come on, then,' she said. 'Supper first, then arnica.'

'I suppose a large whisky-and-soda doesn't feature in your programme?'

'You can get that yourself while I dish up,' she said.

The dogs stood to let them pass. Stalky went up on his hind legs just as Jack stooped his hand towards him, so that hand and hard curly head met halfway in a practised movement. Helen shut the door behind them, and the familiar warmth and smell of home closed around Jack as he headed for the dining room and the drinks tray while Helen went to the kitchen.

Helen watched him across the dining-room table as he consumed steak-and-kidney pie and whisky-and-soda, her own drink untouched before her. She would ask him no questions while he ate, but his tired mind ticked and jumped anyway over the memories of the incident, like a roulette ball bouncing from number to number on the wheel but not fully engaging with any of them. Her expression was brooding. He knew it was hard for her. All through the war she had waited, never knowing if she would see him again. But this was different, surely. It had turned out all right, after all.

He laid down his knife and fork. In the quietness the click of metal on porcelain was too loud. 'You're not going to nag me, are you? I'm too tired.'

'I'm not going to nag, but we are going to talk about it,' she said implacably.

'I wasn't hurt. Everything's all right,' he tried pointing out.

'It *isn't* all right.' She examined his face across the table, seeing him in clear and minute detail in the way that doesn't

often happen when you've been married for a long time. Jack Compton, DSO, DFC, Air Ace, hero of the war, the man she loved, father of her children; not so young and dashing now, but always her love, her dear husband. His hair was greying and receding from the temples, and he looked tired to death, but they had to have it out. She had been a flyer herself: she knew too much.

'It's always something. Last year it was the R101—'

'I wasn't even on board,' he said, trying to sound reasonable.

'But you should have been.' He had been prevented at the very last moment from taking the doomed flight. 'They burned, Jack! They burned up! Don't you think I replay that in my mind over and over? In the war, it was the thing I dreaded—'

He stopped her by putting his hand over hers across the table. 'It was what we all dreaded.' He had seen men – friends – jump to their death from thousands of feet up rather than burn. 'Today, when we came down, all I could think was, would she catch fire? But she didn't. I'm all right, darling, truly I am.'

'Well, you may be, but I'm not,' Helen said.

Under the table, Stalky, sitting pressed against Jack's legs, sensed his mistress's distress and whimpered.

'You're forty-five,' she went on. 'I know that's not so old, but flying's a young man's game. It always has been. I think it's time you took a ground job.' It had been hard for her to say it, and she tried not to see the hurt in his eyes. She knew what flying meant to him. 'You enjoy the design and engineering side too. You've so much experience and talent to contribute. And it doesn't mean you can't fly any more,' she added pleadingly. 'We can fly at the weekends, for fun. We might even buy a little two-seater of our own. Wouldn't it be better to fly for pleasure, instead of this commercial grind of back-and-forth every day?'

'You don't understand,' he said bleakly. But she did. His youth, his pride, all he valued in himself, his very identity were bound up with flying – the first and perhaps greatest love of his life. To give up flying was like an admission that the best part of his life was ended, that he was over the hill, on the downward slope towards death.

Now she took his hand. 'It's time, Jack. For me. And the children. Don't think of it as the end. There will still be fun and challenge and adventure. But not this. I can't bear to see you drive off to work one more morning, not knowing if you'll come back.'

He sighed deeply. 'I know it's hard on you,' he said. And when she drew breath to speak again he said, 'I was offered a job recently, as it happens. A ground job.'

She was surprised. 'When?'

'Last week.'

He finished his drink, and she took the hint and went to refresh his glass. Then she sat again and said, 'Tell me.'

Airships had had a chequered history in Britain, and had never been successfully developed for commercial use, but the Germans had managed to run reliable passenger services with them. Rivalry was not the only thing on the government's mind, however, when it had put the R100 and R101 schemes into action. Britain had an enormous and far-flung empire, and needed quicker means of communication than the sea. Aeroplanes hadn't the capacity: airships seemed to offer the solution.

The R100 was to be built by a private firm and the R101 by a publicly owned consortium: that way, it was thought, there would be healthy competition that would produce innovations. The Capitalist Ship and the Socialist Ship, they had been dubbed. Jack Compton had been hired by the air ministry to liaise between the two. As a reward he had been booked on the inaugural flight of the R101 in October 1930,

but had slipped from a ladder during a last-minute check of the engine-rotation mechanism and cracked his head on the concrete. He had been taken to hospital with a concussion, while the R101 took off without him to meet her fate outside Beauvais.

The loss of the airship, and particularly the death in the inferno of all but a handful on board, so shocked the nation that in December 1930 the government had cancelled the whole airship project for good. It was particularly hard on the private company, the Airship Guarantee Company of Howden in Yorkshire – a subsidiary of Vickers – whose R100 had safely carried passengers and cargo across the Atlantic to Canada and back. But airships were out of fashion. The company was closed down, and its staff faced unemployment.

Two of them, Arthur Hessell Tiltman, a designer, and Nevil Shute Norway, stress engineer, had refused to accept their fate and had started up their own aircraft-building company, using as many of the old employees as possible. They persuaded the Yorkshire banker and racehorse breeder Lord Grimthorpe, the wealthy solicitor A. E. Hewitt, and air ace Sir Alan Cobham to put up enough money to make a start. In February 1931 they rented half a bus garage in Piccadilly, York – six thousand square feet – for their works, and in March they officially set up the company as Airspeed Limited.

Jack had heard about it from his old friend Geoffrey de Havilland, who had been taking a fatherly interest in the fledgling company. Tiltman and Norway were former employees of the De Havilland Aircraft Company, which they had left to join the Airship Guarantee Company; Cobham had been one of its test pilots.

'I sent them a telegram with my good wishes on the founding of their company,' he wrote to Jack in April. 'They haven't managed to get together a great deal of money yet, so they're going to start on a glider until they're more settled.'

When they met in July at an Aero Club get-together, however, things were looking up. 'Cobham's put in an order with Airspeed for three ten-seater ferries for his National Aviation Day company,' de Havilland told Jack. 'It's an excellent start for a small concern. In fact, I rather think they might start taking on more staff. I have my doubts whether Tiltman can do everything himself. Norway's an excellent calculator and stress engineer, but he's never been much involved in engines.'

At that point he had looked at Jack rather penetratingly, but Jack had not made anything in particular of it. Interested though he was in anything aeronautical, it happened that he had domestic problems on his mind: his son Basil was in trouble, not for the first time, at his school on the Sussex Downs. At the end of the summer term, a letter had come requesting that Basil should not return to the school in the autumn. He had, in fact, been 'sacked' for persistent smoking, not only in the dorm but in the chapel vestry, which was by way of being the final straw after all his previous misdemeanours. The headmaster said he was a bad example to the younger boys. Basil seemed to find the situation amusing, and Jack was forced to take a strong line with him, which he did not at all like doing. Then there was the question of finding another school, and – more urgently – of how to keep him out of trouble over the summer.

The latter problem was solved by a fortunate invitation from the parents of a school-fellow to spend six weeks with them at their estate in the Highlands, shooting, fishing and stalking. Evidently they had not heard about the sacking.

'They can't know what they're taking on,' Helen said.

'I've hardened my heart against them,' said Jack. 'I'm accepting right away before anything happens to put them off.'

'He may not want to go. You know he's not a great one for the outdoors.'

'I shall take a firm line,' Jack said.

And he did. 'Basil, I want no argument from you. And if you do anything to get yourself sent home before the summer's over, I'll lock you in the attic on bread and water until school starts again.'

But, oddly, Basil was keen to go. 'And you needn't worry about Mr and Mrs Stokesby, Mum,' he told Helen later, when she was looking out clean linen to pack for him. 'Stoky's every bit as bad as I am. Worse. In fact, I fancy they want me to exert a calming influence on him. He's a shocking one for getting into scrapes at school.'

Helen shuddered. 'My consolation is that there can't be much you can damage in Kinlochleven.'

Basil lounged against the doorpost, hands in pockets. His mother thought how annoyingly handsome he looked, and older than his fifteen years. How could Jack and I have given birth to this charming reprobate? she wondered.

'I thought damaging things was the whole point – salmon, red deer and whatever wretched birds they pot away at up there. But don't worry, Mumsy. I intend to use the time quite virtuously, learning to shoot.'

'Why?' Helen asked, arrested with suspicion.

He grinned. 'Oh, because I've learned enough to know a man must be a good shot to get invited to the best houses, and I intend to be invited nowhere but the best when the time comes. I mean to be comfortable.'

'Well, just don't shoot anything you're not supposed to,' Helen said, laying folded shirts into the trunk with 'G. E. B. COMPTON' stencilled on the lid. Basil was his third name, but somehow he had never been called anything else. 'And don't set fire to anything.'

With Basil safely out of the way, the younger two, Barbara and Michael, were no trouble at all. Barbara, fourteen, went on bicycle rides and to picnics and tennis parties; eleven-year-old Michael disappeared into the woods with the dogs,

his village friends and a sandwich in the morning and came home grimy, tired and happy at tea-time. So Helen felt she had nothing more to worry about.

Until Jack's accident.

'What *is* this job?' she asked him.

'It's with Airspeed,' he said. 'Design engineer. They're expanding and the board asked Geoffrey de Havilland for advice and he recommended me. I had a letter from them last week. It'd be interesting work, all right, and it's always fun to be in at the beginning of something.'

'Then why didn't you tell me?' Helen asked.

'Because I wasn't going to take it,' Jack said. He looked uneasy. He had never kept secrets from her and should at least have shown her the letter. The truth was he hadn't even wanted to think about it. 'I have a job, a good one, and I'm happy with it. Why should I change?'

'Because aeroplanes crash. There are stories every week. And one day perhaps your luck will run out. Jack, this could be your chance to start a new career, one that won't keep my heart in my mouth half the time. And you love designing!'

'It isn't as straightforward as that,' he said. 'They're a new company, still finding their way, so they can't pay a great deal. I have a good salary with Imperial Airways – it would be a lot less with Airspeed.'

'How much less?' Helen demanded. He told her. It was a bit of a shock. She rallied. 'We'd manage,' she said. 'We've managed on a lot less than that in the past. We don't need a big house like this one, and we could get by with fewer servants.'

'And the other thing is, we'd have to move,' Jack said. 'Airspeed is in York.'

Helen began to laugh. 'Darling!' she protested.

'But I thought you liked this house, and the area,' he said.

'I do! But York? It's your home! We'd be near Morland Place. Best of all, we'd be near Jessie and Bertie.' Jessie had always

been Jack's favourite sibling, and now she was the only one left: Frank had been killed and Robbie had died in the war. 'And the children will be able to see their cousins. And there are good schools in Yorkshire.'

Now Jack began to smile. 'Schools where Basil is entirely unknown,' he suggested. He reached across the table for her hand. 'Would you really be willing to move, have a smaller house, live on a lot less money?'

'You know I've never cared about luxury. The thing is, would you be happy doing this job?'

'It would be fun working with the old Howden team, and getting something going from scratch,' he said, with perhaps the gleam of a light in his tired eyes. 'But I'd miss flying.'

'You could still fly. There are lots of airfields around York.' She gave a mischievous smile. '*I* might even get a job – you know, delivering aeroplanes, like I did in the war.'

They talked on, going over the pros and cons, while the dogs dozed at their feet. Helen saw Jack grow animated, despite his weariness, and knew it would be all right. It would be an upheaval to pack up and move, to find a new place and settle in, but most of that burden would fall on her shoulders. And at the end of the turbulence they would be in a good place. Though his surname was Compton, Jack's mother had been a Morland, and he was a Morland at heart. And what all Morlands really wanted was somehow to get back to Morland Place.