

30th March, 1944

The Last Flight

Naseby

He walked as far as the hedge that signalled the end of the airfield.

The beating of the bounds. The men referred to it as his 'daily constitutional' and fretted when he didn't take it. They were superstitious. Everyone was superstitious.

Beyond the hedge there were bare fields, ploughed over last autumn. He didn't expect to see the alchemy of spring, to see the dull brown earth change to bright green and then pale gold. A man could count his life in harvests reaped. He had seen enough.

They were surrounded by flat farmland. The farmhouse itself stood square and immovable over to the left. At night a red light shone from its roof to stop them crashing into it. If they flew over it when they were coming into land they knew they had overshot and were in trouble.

From here he could see the farmer's daughter in the yard, feeding the geese. Wasn't there a nursery rhyme in there somewhere? No, he was thinking of the farmer's wife, wasn't he – cutting off tales with a carving knife. A horrid image. Poor mice, he had thought when he was a boy. Still thought the same now that he was a man. Nursery rhymes were brutal affairs.

He had never met the farmer's daughter nor did he know her name, but he was disproportionately fond of her. She always waved them off. Sometimes she was joined by her father, once or twice by her mother, but the girl's presence in the farmyard was a constant for every raid.

She caught sight of him now and waved. Rather than return the wave, he saluted her. He imagined she would like that. Of course, from this distance he was just a uniform. She had no idea who he was. Teddy was just one of the many.

He whistled for the dog.

1925

Alouette

'See!' he said, 'there – a lark. A skylark.' He glanced up at her and saw that she was looking in the wrong place. 'No, over there,' he said, pointing. She was completely hopeless.

'Oh,' she said at last. 'There, I see it! How queer – what's it doing?'

'Hovering, and then it'll go up again probably.' The skylark soared on its transcendental thread of song. The quivering flight of the bird and the beauty of its music triggered an unexpectedly deep emotion in him. 'Can you hear it?'

His aunt cupped a hand to an ear in a theatrical way. She was as out of place as a peacock, wearing an odd hat, red like a pillar-box and stuck with two large pheasant tail-feathers that bobbed around with the slightest movement of her head. He wouldn't be surprised if someone took a shot at her. 'If only,' he thought. Teddy was allowed – allowed himself – barbaric thoughts as long as they remained unvoiced. ('Good manners,' his mother, counselled, was 'the armour that one must don anew every morning.')

'Hear what?' his aunt said eventually.

'The song,' he said, mustering patience. 'The skylark's song. It's stopped now,' he added as she continued to make a show of listening.

'It might begin again.'

'No, it won't, it can't, it's gone. Flown away.' He flapped his arms to demonstrate. Despite the feathers in her hat she clearly knew nothing about birds. Or any animals for that matter. She didn't even possess a cat. She was indifferent to Trixie, their Lurcher, currently nosing her way enthusiastically through the dried-up ditch at the side of the road. Trixie was his most stalwart companion and had been by his side since she was a puppy when she had been so small that she could squeeze through the front door of his sisters' dollhouse.

Was he supposed to be educating his aunt, he wondered? Was that why they were here? 'The lark's known for its song,' he said instructively. 'It's beautiful.' It was impossible to instruct on the subject of beauty, of course. It simply was. You were either moved by it or you weren't. His sisters, Pamela and Ursula, were, his elder brother, Maurice, wasn't. His brother, Jimmy, was too young for beauty, his father possibly too old. His father, Hugh, had a gramophone recording of *The Lark Ascending* which they sometimes listened to on wet Sunday afternoons. It was lovely but not as lovely as the lark itself. 'The purpose of art,' his mother, Sylvie, said – instructed even – 'is to convey the truth of a thing, not to be the truth itself.' Her own father, Teddy's grandfather, had been a famous artist, dead long ago, a relationship that gave his mother authority on the subject of art. And beauty too, Teddy supposed. All these things – Art, Truth, Beauty – had capital letters when his mother spoke about them.

'When the skylark flies high,' he continued, rather hopelessly to Izzie, 'it means it's fine weather.'

'Well, one doesn't need a bird to tell one if it's good weather or not, one simply looks about,' Izzie said. 'And this afternoon is glorious. I adore the sun,' she added, closing her eyes and raising her painted face to the skies.

Who didn't, Teddy thought? Not his grandmother perhaps, who led a gloomy drawing-room life in Hampstead, with heavy cotton nets drawn to prevent the light entering the house. Or perhaps to stop the dark escaping.

'The Knights' Code', which he had learned by heart from *Scouting for Boys*, a book he frequently turned to in times of uncertainty, even now in his self-exile from the movement, demanded that 'Chivalry requireth that youth should be trained to perform the most laborious and humble offices with cheerfulness and grace.' He supposed entertaining Izzie was one of those occasions. It was certainly laborious.

He shaded his eyes against the sun and scanned the skies for the skylark. It failed to make a reappearance and he had to make do with the aerial manoeuvres of the swallows. He thought of Icarus and wondered what he would have looked like from the

ground. Quite big, he supposed. But Icarus was a myth, wasn't he? He was going to boarding school after the summer holidays and he really must start getting his facts in order. 'You will need to be a stoic, old chap,' his father advised. 'It will be a trial, that's the point of it really, I suppose. Best to keep your head below the parapet,' he added. 'Neither sink nor float, just sort of paddle about in the middle.'

'All the men in the family' went to the school, his Hampstead grandmother said (his only grandmother, Sylvie's mother having died long ago), as if it were a law, written down in ancient times. Teddy supposed his own son would have to go there too, although this boy existed in a future that Teddy couldn't even begin to imagine. He didn't need to, of course, for in that future he had no sons, only a daughter, Viola, something which would be a sadness for him although he never spoke of it, certainly not to Viola who would have been volubly affronted.

Teddy was taken aback when Izzie unexpectedly started to sing and – more startling – do a little dance. 'Alouette, Alouette, gentille Alouette.' He knew no French to speak of yet and thought she was singing not 'gentille' but 'jaunty', a word he rather liked. 'Do you know that song?' she asked him.

'No.'

'It's from the war. The French soldiers sang it.' The fleeting shadow of something – sorrow, perhaps – passed across her features, but then just as suddenly she said gleefully, 'The lyrics are quite horrible. All about plucking the poor swallow. Its eyes and feathers and legs and so on.'

In that inconceivable yet inevitable war still to come – Teddy's war – Alouette was the name of 425 Squadron, the French Canadians. In the February of '44, not long before his last flight, Teddy made an emergency landing at their base at Tholthorpe, two engines on fire, shot up as they crossed the Channel. The French boys gave his crew brandy, rough stuff that they were nonetheless grateful for. Their squadron badges, something Teddy hadn't known before he met them, showed a swallow above the motto *Je te plumerai* and he had thought about this day with Izzie. It was a memory that seemed to belong to someone else.

Izzie did a pirouette. 'What larks!' she said, laughing. Is this, he wondered, what his father meant when he said Izzie was 'ludicrously unstable'?

'Pardon me?'

'What larks,' Izzie repeated. 'Great Expectations. Haven't you read it?' For a surprising moment she sounded like his mother. 'But, of course, I was making a joke. Because there isn't one any longer. The lark, I mean. Flown orf. Gorn,' she said in a silly Cockney accent. 'I've eaten lark,' she added in an offhand way. 'In Italy. They're considered a delicacy over there. There's not much eating on a lark, of course. No more than a mouthful really.'

Teddy shuddered. The idea of the sublime little bird being plucked from the sky, of its exquisite song being interrupted in full flight, was horrible to him.

Many, many years later, in the early Seventies, Viola, discovered Emily Dickinson on an American Studies course that was part of her degree. In her scrawly, untamed hand she copied down the first verse of a poem she thought her father would like (too lazy to transcribe the whole of the short poem). 'Split the lark – and you'll find the Music, bulb after bulb in silver rolled'. He was surprised she had thought of him, she rarely did. He supposed literature was one of the few things they held in common even though they

rarely, if ever, discussed it. He considered sending her something in return, a poem, even a few choice lines – a means of communicating with her – ‘Hail to thee, blythe spirit! Bird though never wert’ or ‘Hark how the cheerfull birds do chaunt their lays and carol of love’s praise’ or ‘Ethereal Minstre! Pilgrim of the sky! Dost thou despise the earth where cares abound?’ (Was there a poet who hadn’t written about skylarks?) He supposed his daughter would think he was patronizing her in some way. She had an aversion to learning anything from him, possibly from everyone, and so in the end he simply wrote back, ‘Thank you, very thoughtful of you.’

Before he could stop himself – the armour of good manners falling away – he said, ‘It’s disgusting to eat a lark, Aunt Izzie.’

‘Why is it disgusting? You eat chicken and so on, don’t you? What’s the difference, after all?’ Izzie had driven an ambulance in the Great War, dead poultry could do little to ruffle her emotions.

A world of difference, Teddy thought, although he couldn’t help but wonder what a lark would taste like. Thankfully, he was distracted from this thought by Trixie barking extravagantly at something. He bent down to investigate. ‘A slow worm,’ he said appreciatively to himself, the lark temporarily forgotten. He picked it up gently in both hands and displayed it to Izzie.

‘A snake?’ she said, grimacing, snakes apparently having no charms for her.

‘No, a slow worm,’ Teddy said. ‘Not a snake. Not a worm either. It’s a lizard actually.’ Its bronze-gold lusted scales gleamed in the sun. This was beauty too. Was there anything in nature that wasn’t? Even a slug demanded a certain salutation, although not from his mother.

‘What a funny little boy you are,’ Izzie said.