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Fall of Giants

Ken Follett

Billy Williams

On the day King George V was crowned at Westminster Abbey in London, Billy Williams went down the pit in Aberowen, South Wales.

The twenty-second of June, 1911, was Billy's thirteenth birthday. He was woken by his father. Da's technique for waking people was more effective than it was kind. He patted Billy's cheek, in a regular rhythm, firmly and insistently. Billy was in a deep sleep, and for a second he tried to ignore it, but the patting went on relentlessly. Momentarily he felt angry; but then he remembered that he had to get up, he even wanted to get up, and he opened his eyes and sat upright with a jerk.

"Four o'clock," Da said, then he left the room, his boots banging on the wooden staircase as he went down.

Today Billy would begin his working life by becoming an apprentice collier, as most of the men in town had done at his age. He wished he felt more like a miner. But he was determined not to make a fool of himself. David Crampton had cried on his first day down the pit, and they still called him Dai Crybaby, even though he was twenty-five and the star of the town's rugby team.

It was midsummer, and a bright early light came through the small window. Billy looked at his grandfather, lying beside him. Gramper's eyes were open. He was always awake, whenever Billy got up; he said old people did not sleep much.

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Ethel Williams

Ethel was eighteen, and Billy had no trouble seeing her as beautiful. Her mahogany-coloured hair was irrepressibly curly, and her dark eyes twinkled with mischief. Perhaps Mam had looked like this once. Ethel wore the plain black dress and white cotton cap of a housemaid, an outfit that flattered her.

Billy worshipped Ethel. As well as pretty, she was funny and clever and brave, sometimes even standing up to Da. She told Billy things no one else would explain, such as the monthly episode women called the Curse, and what was the crime of public indecency that had caused the Anglican vicar to leave town in such a hurry. She had been top of the class all the way through school, and her essay on "My Town or Village" had taken first prize in a contest run by the South Wales Echo. She had won a copy of Cassell's Atlas of the World.

She kissed Billy's cheek. "I told Mrs Jevons the housekeeper that we were running out of boot polish and I'd better get some more from the town." Ethel lived and worked at Ty Gwyn, the vast home of Earl Fitzherbert, a mile away up the mountain. She handed Billy something wrapped in a clean rag. "I stole a piece of cake for you."

"Oh, thanks, Eth!" said Billy. He loved cake.

Mam said: "Shall I put it in your snap?"

"Aye, please."

Mam got a tin box from the cupboard and put the cake inside. She cut two more slabs of bread, spread them with dripping, sprinkled salt, and put them in the tin. All the miners had a tin "snap". If they took food underground wrapped in a rag, the mice would eat it before the mid-morning break. Mam said: "When you bring me home your wages, you can have a slice of boiled bacon in your snap."

Billy's earnings would not be much, at first, but all the same they would make a difference to the family. He wondered how much Mam would allow him for pocket money, and whether he would ever be able to save enough for a bicycle, which he wanted more than anything else in the world.

Ethel sat at the table. Da said to her: "How are things at the big house?"

"Nice and quiet," she said. "The earl and princess are in town for the coronation." She looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. "They'll have to be up soon—they need to be in their seats. She won't like it—she's not used to early hours—but she can't be late for the King." The earl's wife, Bea, was a Russian princess, and very grand.

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Da said: "They'll want to get seats near the front, so they can see the show."

"Oh, no, you can't sit anywhere you like," Ethel said. "They've had six thousand mahogany chairs made special, with the names of the guests on the back in gold writing."

Gramper said: "Well, there's a waste! What will they do with them after?"

"I don't know. Perhaps everyone will take them home as souvenirs."

Da said dryly: "Tell them to send a spare one to us. There's only five of us here, and already your Mam's got to stand."

Earl Fitzherbert

Earl Fitzherbert, age 28, known to his family and friends as Fitz, was the ninth richest man in Britain.

He had done nothing to earn his huge income. He had simply inherited thousands of acres of land in Wales and Yorkshire. The farms made little money, but there was coal beneath them, and by licensing mineral rights Fitz's grandfather had become enormously wealthy.

Clearly God intended the Fitzherberts to rule over their fellow men, and to live in appropriate style, but Fitz felt he had not done much to justify God's faith in him.

His father had been different. The previous earl, a naval officer, had been made admiral after the bombardment of Alexandria in 1882, had become the British ambassador to St Petersburg, and finally had been a minister in the government of Lord Salisbury. The Conservatives lost the general election of 1906, and Fitz's father died a few weeks later—his end hastened, Fitz felt sure, by seeing irresponsible Liberals such as David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill take over His Majesty's Government.

Fitz had taken his seat in the House of Lords, the upper chamber of the British Parliament, as a Conservative peer. He spoke good French and he could get by in Russian, and he would have liked one day to be his country's Foreign Secretary. Regrettably, the Liberals had continued to win elections, so he had had no chance yet of becoming a government minister.

His military career had been equally undistinguished. He had attended the army's officer training academy at Sandhurst, and had spent three years with the Welsh Rifles, ending as a captain. On marriage he had given up full-time soldiering, but had become Honorary Colonel of the South Wales Territorials. Unfortunately an honorary colonel never won medals.

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However, he did have something to be proud of, he thought as the train steamed up through the South Wales valleys. In two weeks' time, the King was coming to stay. King George V and Fitz's father had been shipmates in their youth. Recently the King had expressed a wish to know what the younger men were thinking, and Fitz had organised a discreet house party for his Majesty to meet some of them.

Fitz cherished traditions. Nothing known to mankind was superior to the comfortable order of monarchy, aristocracy, merchant and peasant. But now, looking out of the train window, he saw a threat to the British way of life greater than any the country had faced for a hundred years. Covering the once-green hillsides, like a grey-black leaf blight on a rhododendron bush, were the terraced houses of the coal miners. In those grimy hovels there was talk of republicanism, atheism and revolt. It was only a century or so since the French nobility had been driven in carts to the guillotine, and the same would happen here if some of those muscular black-faced miners had their way.

Fitz would gladly have given up his earnings from coal, he told himself, if Britain could go back to a simpler era. The royal family was a strong bulwark against insurrection, but Fitz felt nervous about the visit, as well as proud. So much could go wrong. With the royal family, an oversight might be seen as a sign of carelessness, and therefore disrespectful. Every detail of the weekend would be reported, by the visitors' servants, to other servants and thence to those servants' employers, so that every woman in London society would quickly know if the king were given a hard pillow, a bad potato or the wrong brand of champagne.

Fitz's Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost was waiting at Aberowen railway station. With his wife, Bea, at his side he was driven a mile to Ty Gwyn, his country house. A light but persistent drizzle was falling, as it so often did in Wales.

"Ty Gwyn" was Welsh for White House, but the name had become ironic. Like everything else in this part of the world, the building was covered with a layer of coal dust, and its once-white stone blocks were now a dark grey colour that smeared the skirts of ladies who carelessly brushed against its walls.

Nevertheless it was a magnificent building, and it filled Fitz with pride as the car purred up the drive. The largest private house in Wales, Ty Gwyn had two hundred rooms. Once when he was a boy he and his sister, Maud, had counted the windows and found 523. It had been built by his grandfather, and there was a pleasing order to the three-storey design.

Lady Maud Fitzherbert

The spell was broken by the sound of wheels on the drive outside, then a familiar voice. "Peel! How delightful to see you."

Fitz looked out of the window. His expression was comical. "Oh, no," he said. "My sister!"

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"Welcome home, Lady Maud," said Peel's voice. "Though we were not expecting you."

"The earl forgot to invite me, but I came anyway."

Ethel smothered a smile. Fitz loved his feisty sister, but he found her difficult to deal with. Her political opinions were alarmingly liberal: she was a suffragette, a militant campaigner for votes for women. Ethel thought Maud was wonderful—just the kind of independent-minded woman she herself would have liked to be.

Fitz strode out of the room, and Ethel followed him into the hall, an imposing room decorated in the Gothic style beloved of Victorians such as Fitz's father: dark panelling, heavily patterned wallpaper, and carved oak chairs like medieval thrones. Maud was coming through the door. "Fitz, darling, how are you?" she said.

Maud was tall like her brother, and they looked similar, but the sculpted features that made the earl seem like the statue of a god were not so flattering on a woman, and Maud was striking rather than pretty. Contrary to the popular image of feminists as frumpy, she was fashionably dressed, wearing a hobble skirt over button boots, a navy-blue coat with an oversize belt and deep cuffs, and a hat with a tall feather pinned to its front like a regimental flag.

She was accompanied by Aunt Herm. Lady Hermia was Fitz's other aunt. Unlike her sister, who had married a rich duke, Herm had wedded a thriftless baron who died young and broke. Ten years ago, after Fitz and Maud's parents had both died within a few months, Aunt Herm had moved in to mother the thirteen-year-old Maud. She continued to act as Maud's somewhat ineffectual chaperone.

Fitz said to Maud: "What are you doing here?"

Aunt Herm murmured: "I told you he wouldn't like it, dear."

"I couldn't be absent when the King came to stay," Maud said. "It would have been disrespectful."

Fitz's tone was fondly exasperated. "I don't want you talking to the King about women's rights."

Ethel did not think he needed to worry. Despite Maud's radical politics, she knew how to flatter and flirt with powerful men, and even Fitz's Conservative friends liked her.

"Take my coat, please, Morrison," Maud said. She undid the buttons and turned to allow the footman to remove it. "Hello, Williams, how are you?" she said to Ethel.

"Welcome home, my lady," Ethel said. "Would you like the Gardenia Suite?"

"Thank you, I love that view."

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"Will you have some lunch while I'm getting the room ready?"

"Yes, please, I'm starving."

"We're serving it club style today, because guests are arriving at different times."

Club style meant that guests were served whenever they came into the dining room, as in a gentlemen's club or a restaurant, instead of all at the same time. It was a modest lunch today: hot mulligatawny soup, cold meats and smoked fish, stuffed trout, lamb cutlets, and a few desserts and cheeses.

Ethel held the door and followed Maud and Herm into the large dining room. Already at lunch were the von Ulrich cousins. Walter von Ulrich, the younger one, was handsome and charming, and seemed delighted to be at Ty Gwyn.

Princess Elizaveta

In his dressing-room Fitz took off his travelling clothes and changed into a suit of soft brown tweed. Then he went through the communicating door into Bea's rooms.

The Russian maid, Nina, was unpinning the elaborate hat Bea had worn for the journey. Fitz caught sight of Bea's face in the dressing-table mirror, and his heart skipped a beat. He was taken back four years, to the St Petersburg ballroom where he had first seen that impossibly pretty face framed by blonde curls that could not quite be tamed. Then as now she had worn a sulky look that he found strangely alluring. In a heartbeat he had decided that she of all women was the one he wanted to marry.

Nina was middle-aged and her hand was unsteady—Bea often made her servants nervous. As Fitz watched, a pin pricked Bea's scalp, and she cried out.

Nina went pale. "I'm terribly sorry, your Highness," she said in Russian.

Bea snatched up a hatpin from the dressing table. "See how you like it!" she cried, and jabbed the maid's arm.

Nina burst into tears and ran from the room.

"Let me help you," Fitz said to his wife.

"I'll do it myself."

Fitz went to the window. A dozen or so gardeners were at work trimming bushes, edging lawns, and raking gravel. Several shrubs were in flower: pink viburnum, yellow winter jasmine, witch hazel, and scented winter honeysuckle. Beyond the garden was the soft green curve of the mountainside. "Why don't you rest?" he said. "I'll see Peel and Mrs Jevons and find out how their plans are

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progressing." Peel was the butler and Mrs Jevons the housekeeper. It was Bea's job to organise the staff, but Fitz was nervous enough about the King's visit to welcome an excuse to get involved. "I'll report back to you later, when you're refreshed." He took out his cigar case.

"Don't smoke in here," she said.

He took that for assent, and went to the door. Pausing on his way out, he said: "Look, you won't behave like that in front of the King and Queen, will you? Striking the servants, I mean."

"I didn't strike her, I stuck a pin in her as a lesson."

Russians did that sort of thing. When Fitz's father had complained about the laziness of the servants at the British Embassy in St Petersburg, his Russian friends had told him he did not beat them enough.

Fitz said to Bea: "It would embarrass the monarch to have to witness such a thing. As I've told you before, it's not done in England."

"When I was a girl, I was made to watch three peasants being hanged," she said. "My mother didn't like it, but my grandfather insisted. He said: 'This is to teach you to punish your servants. If you do not slap them or flog them for small offences of carelessness and laziness, they will eventually commit larger sins and end up on the scaffold.' He taught me that indulgence to the lower classes is cruel, in the long run."

Fitz began to lose patience. Bea looked back to a childhood of limitless wealth and self-indulgence, surrounded by troops of obedient servants and thousands of happy peasants. If her ruthless, capable grandfather had still been alive that life might have continued, but the family fortune had been frittered away by Bea's father, a drunk, and her weak brother, Andrei, who was always selling the timber without replanting the woods. "Times have changed," Fitz said. "I'm asking you—I'm ordering you—not to embarrass me in front of my king. I hope I have left no room for doubt in your mind." He went out and closed the door.

He walked along the wide corridor. A tall footman polishing a doorknob straightened up and stood with his back to the wall and his eyes cast down, as Ty Gwyn servants were trained to do when the earl went by. In some great houses the staff had to face the wall, but Fitz thought that was too feudal. Fitz recognized this man, having seen him play cricket in a match between Ty Gwyn staff and Aberowen miners. He was a good left-handed batsman. "Morrison," said Fitz, remembering his name. "Tell Peel and Mrs Jevons to come to the library."

"Very good, my lord."

Fitz walked down the grand staircase. He had married Bea because he had been enchanted by her, but he had had a rational motive, too. He dreamed of founding a great Anglo-Russian dynasty that would rule vast tracts of the earth, much as the Habsburg dynasty had ruled parts of Europe for centuries.

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But for that he needed an heir. Bea's mood meant she would not welcome him to her bed tonight. He could insist, but that was never very satisfactory. It was a couple of weeks since the last time. He did not wish for a wife who was vulgarly eager about that sort of thing but, on the other hand, two weeks was a long time.

His sister, Maud, was still single at twenty-three. Besides, any child of hers would probably be brought up a rabid socialist who would fritter away the family fortune printing revolutionary tracts.

He had been married three years, and he was beginning to worry. Bea had been pregnant just once, last year, but she had suffered a miscarriage at three months. It had happened just after a quarrel. Fitz had cancelled a planned trip to St Petersburg, and Bea had become terribly emotional, crying that she wanted to go home. Fitz had put his foot down—a man could not let his wife dictate to him, after all—but then, when she miscarried, he felt guiltily sure it was his fault. If only she could get pregnant again he would make absolutely sure nothing was allowed to upset her until the baby was born.

Putting that worry to the back of his mind, he went into the library and sat down at the leather-inlaid desk to make a list.

A minute or two later, Peel came in with a housemaid. The butler was the younger son of a farmer, and there was an outdoor look about his freckled face and salt-and-pepper hair, but he had been a servant at Ty Gwyn all his working life. "Mrs Jevons have been took poorly, my lord," he said. Fitz had long ago given up trying to correct the grammar of Welsh servants. "Stomach," Peel added lugubriously.

"Spare me the details." Fitz looked at the housemaid, a pretty girl of about twenty. Her face was vaguely familiar. "Who's this?"

The girl spoke for herself. "Ethel Williams, my lord, I'm Mrs Jevons's assistant." She had the lilting accent of the South Wales valleys.

"Well, Williams, you look too young to do a housekeeper's job."

"If your lordship pleases, Mrs Jevons said you would probably bring down the housekeeper from Mayfair, but she hopes I might give satisfaction in the meantime."

Was there a twinkle in her eye when she talked of giving satisfaction? Although she spoke with appropriate deference, she had a cheeky look. "Very well," said Fitz.

Walter von Ulrich

They stood up when the ladies walked in. Maud went straight up to Walter and said: "You haven't changed since you were eighteen! Do you remember me?"

His face lit up. "I do, although you have changed since you were thirteen."

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They shook hands and then Maud kissed him on both cheeks, as if he were family. "I had the most agonising schoolgirl passion for you at that age," she said with startling candour.

Walter smiled. "I was rather taken with you, too."

"But you always acted as if I was a terrible young pest!"

"I had to hide my feelings from Fitz, who protected you like a guard dog."

Aunt Herm coughed, indicating her disapproval of this instant intimacy. Maud said: "Aunt, this is Herr Walter von Ulrich, an old school friend of Fitz's who used to come here in the holidays. Now he's a diplomat at the German embassy in London."

Walter said: "May I present my cousin, the Graf Robert von Ulrich." Graf was German for count, Ethel knew. "He is a military attaché at the Austrian embassy."

They were actually second cousins, Peel had explained gravely to Ethel: their grandfathers had been brothers, the younger of whom had married a German heiress and left Vienna for Berlin, which was how come Walter was German whereas Robert was Austrian. Peel liked to get such things right.

Everyone sat down. Ethel held a chair for Aunt Herm. "Would you like some mulligatawny soup, Lady Hermia?" she asked.

"Yes, please, Williams."

Ethel nodded to a footman who went to the sideboard where the soup was being kept hot in an urn. Seeing that the new arrivals were comfortable, Ethel quietly left to arrange to their rooms. As the door was closing behind her, she heard Walter von Ulrich say: "I remember how fond you were of music, Lady Maud. We were just discussing the Russian Ballet. What do you think of Diaghilev?"

Not many men asked a woman for her opinion. Maud would like that. As Ethel hurried down the stairs to find a couple of maids to do the rooms, she thought: That German is quite a charmer.

Grigori Peshkov

Grigori Peshkov watched his younger brother, Lev, taking money off the tall American. Lev's attractive face wore an expression of boyish eagerness, as if his main aim was to show off his skill. Grigori suffered a familiar pang of anxiety. One day, he feared, Lev's charm would not be enough to keep him out of trouble.

"This is a memory test," Lev said in English. He had learned the words by rote. "Take any card." He had to raise his voice over the racket of the factory: heavy machinery clanking, steam hissing, people yelling instructions and questions.

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The visitor's name was Gus Dewar. He wore a jacket, waistcoat and trousers all in the same fine grey woollen cloth. Grigori was especially interested in him because he came from Buffalo.

Dewar was an amiable young man. With a shrug, he took a card from Lev's pack and looked at it.

Lev said: "Put it on the bench, face down."

Dewar put the card on the rough wooden workbench.

Lev took a rouble note from his pocket and placed it on the card. "Now you put a dollar down." This could be done only with rich visitors.

Grigori knew that Lev had already switched the playing card. In his hand, concealed by the rouble note, there had been a different card. The skill—which Lev had practised for hours—lay in picking up the first card, and concealing it in the palm of the hand, immediately after putting down the rouble note and the new card.

"Are you sure you can afford to lose a dollar, Mr Dewar?" said Lev.

Dewar smiled, as the marks always did at the point. "I think so," he said.

"Do you remember your card?" Lev did not really speak English. He could say these phrases in German, French and Italian, too.

"Five of spades," said Dewar.

"Wrong."

"I'm pretty sure."

"Turn it over."

Dewar turned over the card. It was the queen of clubs.

Lev scooped up the dollar bill and his original rouble.

Grigori held his breath. This was the dangerous moment. Would the American complain that he had been robbed, and accuse Lev?

Dewar grinned ruefully and said: "You got me."

"I know another game," Lev said.

It was enough: Lev was about to push his luck. Although he was twenty years old, Grigori still had to protect him. "Don't play against my brother," Grigori said to Dewar in Russian. "He always wins."

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Dewar smiled and replied hesitantly in the same tongue. "That's good advice."

Dewar was the first of a small group of visitors touring the Putilov Machine Works. It was the largest factory in St Petersburg, employing thirty thousand men, women and children. Grigori's job was to show them his own small but important section. The factory made locomotives and other large steel artefacts. Grigori was foreman of the shop that made train wheels.

Grigori was itching to speak to Dewar about Buffalo. But before he could ask a question the supervisor of the casting section, Kanin, appeared. A qualified engineer, he was tall and thin with receding hair.

With him was a second visitor. Grigori knew from his clothes that this must be the British lord. He was dressed like a Russian nobleman, in a tail coat and a top hat. Perhaps this was the clothing worn by the ruling class all over the world.

The lord's name, Grigori had been told, was Earl Fitzherbert. He was the handsomest man Grigori had ever seen, with black hair and intense green eyes. The women in the wheel shop stared as if at a god.

Kanin spoke to Fitzherbert in Russian. "We are now producing two new locomotives every week here," he said proudly.

"Amazing," said the English lord.

Grigori understood why these foreigners were so interested. He read the newspapers, and he went to lectures and discussion groups organised by the St Petersburg Bolshevik Committee. The locomotives made here were essential to Russia's ability to defend itself. The visitors might pretend to be idly curious, but they were collecting military intelligence.

Kanin introduced Grigori. "Peshkov here is the factory's chess champion." Kanin was management, but he was all right.

Fitzherbert was charming. He spoke to Varya, a woman of about fifty with her grey hair in a headscarf. "Very kind of you to show us your workplace," he said, cheerfully speaking fluent Russian with a heavy accent.

Varya, a formidable figure, muscular and big-bosomed, giggled like a schoolgirl.

The demonstration was ready. Grigori had placed steel ingots in the hopper and fired up the furnace, and the metal was now molten. But there was one more visitor to come: the earl's wife, who was said to be Russian—hence his knowledge of the language, which was unusual in a foreigner.

Grigori wanted to question Dewar about Buffalo but, before he had a chance, the earl's wife came into the wheel shop. Her floor-length skirt was like a broom pushing a line of dirt and swarf in front of her. She wore a short coat over her dress, and she was followed by a manservant carrying a fur cloak, a maid with a bag, and one of the

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directors of the factory, Count Maklakov, a young man dressed like Fitzherbert. Maklakov was obviously very taken with his guest, smiling and talking in a low voice and taking her arm unnecessarily. She was extraordinarily pretty, with fair curls and a coquettish tilt to her head.

Grigori recognised her immediately. She was Princess Bea.

His heart lurched and he felt nauseated. He fiercely repressed the ugly memory that rose out of the distant past. Then, as in any emergency, he checked on his brother. Would Lev remember? He had been only six years old at the time. Lev was looking with curiosity at the princess, as if trying to place her. Then, as Grigori watched, Lev's face changed and he remembered. He went pale and looked ill, then suddenly he reddened with anger.

Gus Dewar

Walter was a junior diplomat, but his father was one of the Kaiser's oldest friends. Robert, too, was well connected: he was close to the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Another guest who moved in exalted circles was the tall young American now talking to the duchess. His name was Gus Dewar, and his father, a senator, was intimate advisor to U.S. President Woodrow Wilson. Fitz felt he had done well in assembling such a group of young men, the ruling elite of the future. He hoped the King was pleased.

Gus Dewar was amiable but awkward. He stooped, as if he would prefer to be shorter and less conspicuous. He seemed unsure of himself, but he was pleasantly courteous to everyone. "The American people are concerned with domestic issues more than foreign policy," he was saying to the duchess. "But President Wilson is a liberal, and as such he is bound to sympathise with democracies such as France and Britain more than with authoritarian monarchies such as Austria and Germany."

At that moment the double doors opened, the room fell silent, and the King and Queen walked in. Princess Bea curtsied, Fitz bowed, and everyone else followed suit. There followed a few moments of mildly embarrassed silence, for no one was allowed to speak until one of the royal couple had said something. At last the King said to Bea: "I stayed at this house twenty years ago, you know," and people began to relax.

The King was a neat man, Fitz reflected as the four of them made small talk. His beard and moustache were carefully barbered. His hair was receding, but he had enough left on top to comb with a parting as straight as a ruler. Close-fitting evening clothes suited his slim figure: unlike his father, Edward VII, he was not a gourmet. He relaxed with hobbies that required precision: he liked to collect postage stamps, sticking them meticulously into albums, a pastime that drew mockery from disrespectful London intellectuals.

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The Queen was a more formidable figure, with greying curls and a severe line to her mouth. She had a magnificent bosom, shown off to great advantage by the extremely low neckline that was currently de rigeur. She was the daughter of a German prince. Originally she had been engaged to George's older brother, Albert, but he had died of pneumonia before the wedding. When George became heir to the throne he also took over his brother's fiancée, an arrangement that was regarded by some people as a bit medieval.

Bea was in her element. She was enticingly dressed in pink silk, and her fair curls were perfectly arranged to look slightly disordered, as if she had suddenly broken away from an illicit kiss. She talked animatedly to the King. Sensing that mindless chatter would not charm George V, she was telling him how Peter the Great had created the Russian navy, and he was nodding interestedly.

Peel appeared in the dining room door, an expectant look on his freckled face. He caught Fitz's eye and gave an emphatic nod. Fitz said to the Queen: "Would you care to go in to dinner, Your Majesty?"

She gave him her arm. Behind them, the King stood arm-in-arm with Bea, and the rest of the party formed up in pairs according to precedence. When everyone was ready, they walked into the dining room in procession.

"How pretty," the Queen murmured when she saw the table.

"Thank you," said Fitz, and breathed a silent sigh of relief. Bea had done a wonderful job. Three chandeliers hung low over the long table. Their reflections twinkled in the crystal glasses at each place. All the cutlery was gold, as were the salt and pepper containers and even the small boxes of matches for smokers. The white tablecloth was strewn with hothouse roses and, in a final dramatic touch, Bea had trailed delicate ferns from the chandeliers down to the pyramids of grapes on golden platters.

Everyone sat down, the bishop said grace, and Fitz relaxed. A party that began well almost always continued successfully. Wine and food made people less disposed to find fault.

The menu began with hors d'oeuvres Russes, a nod to Bea's home country: little blinis with caviar and cream, triangles of toast and smoked fish, crackers with soused herring, all washed down with the Perrier-Jouët 1892 champagne, which was as mellow and delicious as Peel had promised. Fitz kept an eye on Peel, and Peel watched the King. As soon as His Majesty put down his cutlery, Peel took away his plate, and that was the signal for the footmen to clear all the rest. Any guest who happened to be still tucking into the dish had to abandon it in deference.

Soup followed, a pot-au-feu, served with a fine dry oloroso sherry from Sanlúcar de Barrameda. The fish was sole, accompanied by a mature Meursault Charmes like a mouthful of gold. With the medallions of Welsh lamb Fitz had chosen the Chateau Lafite 1875—the 1870 was still not ready to drink. The red wine continued to be

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served with the parfait of goose liver that followed, and with the final meat course, quails with grapes baked in pastry.

No one ate all this. The men took what they fancied and ignored the rest. The women picked at one or two dishes. Many plates went back to the kitchen untouched.

There was salad, a dessert, a savoury, fruit, and petit fours. Finally, Princess Bea raised a discreet eyebrow to the Queen, who replied with an almost imperceptible nod. They both got up, everyone else stood, and the ladies left the room.

The men sat down again, the footmen brought boxes of cigars, and Peel placed a decanter of Ferreira 1847 port at the King's right hand. Fitz drew thankfully on a cigar. Things had gone well. The King was famously unsociable, feeling comfortable only with old shipmates from his happy navy days. But this evening he had been charming and nothing had gone wrong. Even the oranges had arrived.

Fitz had spoken earlier with Sir Alan Tite, the King's equerry, a retired army officer with old-fashioned side-whiskers. They had agreed that tomorrow the King would have an hour or so alone with each of the men around the table, all of whom had inside knowledge of one government or another. This evening, Fitz was to break the ice with some general political conversation. He cleared his throat and addressed Walter von Ulrich. "Walter, you and I have been friends for fifteen years—we were together at Eton." He turned to Robert. "And I've known your cousin since the three of us shared an apartment in Vienna when we were students." Robert smiled and nodded. Fitz liked them both: Robert was a traditionalist, like Fitz; Walter, though not so conservative, was very clever. "Now we find the world talking about war between our countries," Fitz went on. "Is there really a chance of such a tragedy?"

Walter answered: "If talking about war can make it happen then yes, we will fight, for everyone is getting ready for it. But is there a real reason? I don't see it."

Gus Dewar raised a tentative hand. Fitz liked Dewar, despite his liberal politics. Americans were supposed to be brash, but this one was well-mannered and a bit shy. He was also startlingly well-informed. Now he said: "Britain and Germany have many reasons to quarrel."

Walter turned to him. "Would you give me an example?"

Gus blew out cigar smoke. "Naval rivalry."

Walter nodded. "My Kaiser does not believe there is a God-given law that the German navy should remain smaller than the British forever."

Fitz glanced nervously at the King. He loved the Royal Navy and might easily be offended. On the other hand, Kaiser Wilhelm was his cousin. George's father and Willy's mother had been brother and sister, both children of Queen Victoria. Fitz was relieved to see that His Majesty was smiling indulgently.

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Walter went on: "This has caused friction in the past, but for two years now we have been in agreement, informally, about the relative size of our navies."

Dewar said: "How about economic rivalry?"

"It is true that Germany is daily growing more prosperous, and may soon catch up with Britain and the United States in economic production. But why should this be a problem? Germany is one of Britain's biggest customers. The more we have to spend, the more we buy. Our economic strength is good for British manufacturers!"

Dewar tried again. "It's said that Germany wants more colonies."

Fitz glanced at the king again, wondering if he minded the conversation being dominated by these two; but His Majesty appeared fascinated.

Walter said: "There have been wars over colonies, notably in your home country, Mr Dewar. But nowadays we seem able to decide such squabbles without firing our guns. Three years ago Germany, Great Britain and France quarrelled about Morocco, but the argument was settled without war. More recently, Britain and Germany have reached agreement about the thorny issue of the Baghdad Railway. If we simply carry on as we are, we will not go to war."

Dewar said: "Would you forgive me if I used the term German militarism?"

Walter coloured, but he spoke smoothly. "I appreciate your frankness. The German Empire is dominated by Prussians, of whom I am one. We play something of the role of the English in Your Majesty's United Kingdom."

It was daring to compare Britain with Germany, and England with Prussia. Walter was on the edge of what was permissible, Fitz thought uneasily.

Walter went on: "We Prussians have a strong military tradition, but even we do not go to war for no reason."

Dewar said sceptically: "So Germany is not aggressive."

"On the contrary," said Walter. "I put it to you that Germany is the only major power on mainland Europe that is not aggressive."

There was a murmur of surprise around the table, and Fitz saw the King raise his eyebrows.

Walter's perfect manners and amiable tone took the edge off his words.

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