

Mars

Blue Flowers

René Jean-Paul Dewil

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‘Blue Flowers’ is a work of fiction. Therefore, all the names and the figures of the novel are purely the product of the author’s imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, or to places of interest, is completely coincidental. The background of the novel, the story of what happened in the first days of the Second World War, remained as faithful to history as possible, but the characters and what happened to them, are fictional.

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Introduction

Un doux parfum qu'on respire
C'est fleur bleue
Un regard qui vous attire
C'est fleur bleue
Des mots difficiles à dire
C'est fleur bleue
C'est fleur bleue
Une chanson qu'on fredonne
C'est fleur bleue
Un jeune amour qui se donne
Deux grands yeux qui s'abandonnent
C'est fleur bleue

A sweet perfume inhaled
That's blue flower
A glance drawing you in
That's blue flower
Words difficult to say
That's blue flower
That's blue flower
A song hummed
That's blue flower
A young love offered
Two large eyes that give in
That's blue flower

Charles Trenet – Fleur bleue (refrain) – 1937

Mars: the Roman god of war

Cast of Characters

The Trioteignes family:

Claire de Trioteignes - de Danloy: mother of Charles de Trioteignes, her husband Paul de Trioteignes is deceased. She lives in the Trioteignes castle with her son and daughter-in-law. Age: 85.

Charles de Trioteignes: head of the Trioteignes family, owner of the Trioteignes Castle, married in second wedding to Anne de Brioges. Father of Jean-André by his first, deceased wife, Marie Lesage. He is the father of Bastien and Rosine by his second wife, Anne de Brioges. Age: 60.

Anne de Trioteignes - de Brioges: wife of Charles. Age: 56.

Jean-André de Trioteignes: son of Charles from a first wedding. A banker, he works in Brussels, where he lives with his wife. His two children Paul and Virginie live with their grandfather. Age: 35.

Amélie de Trioteignes - Bissen: wife of Jean-André de Trioteignes, mother of Paul and Virginie. Age: 33.

Bastien de Trioteignes: son of Charles and Anne, younger half-brother of Jean-André. A Flight-Lieutenant fighter pilot in the Belgian Air Force. He flies on Fairey-Battle bomber aeroplanes. Age: 25.

Rosine de Trioteignes: daughter of Charles and Anne. Age: 23.

Violaine Vresele ter Hoven: a friend of Rosine de Trioteignes, invited by Rosine and betrothed to Georges Trahty. Age: 23.

Paul and Virginie de Trioteignes: children of Jean-André de Trioteignes. Paul is 13 and Virginie is 12.

Jean Wastier: the village priest and family friend. Age: 62.

The Trahty family:

Léon-Alexandre de Trahty: a Brussels banker and financier, friend of Charles de Trioteignes. He remains currently unmarried. Age: 58.

Amandine de Brioges: sister of Anne de Trioteignes-de Brioges. A widow, she is the companion and lover of Léon-Alexandre de Trahty. Age: 54.

Georges de Trahty: son of Léon-Alexandre de Trahty, Flight-Lieutenant on Fiat CR.42 fighter aeroplanes in the Belgian Air Force. Age: 25.

Arlette de Trahty: daughter of Léon-Alexandre de Trahty, sister to Georges de Trahty. She is a medical doctor. Age: 26.

The Pilot Officers

Thomas Drandin: Flight-Lieutenant on observer aeroplanes Renard R.31 in the Belgian Air Force. Age: 23.

Joseph (Jef) Asten, also Carter Ash, Flight-Lieutenant in the Belgian Army. Age: 28.

Jan Sinnagel: Flight Captain on Fairey-Battle bombers in the Belgian Air Force. Age: 34.

Richard Bousanges d'Exenaerde: Flight-Lieutenant on observer aeroplanes Renard R.31. Age: 30.

Max Vinck: Flight-Lieutenant on Fairey-Battle bombers, friend of Bastien Trioteignes. Age: 25.

The Castle servants

André Degambe: the butler. Age: 45.

Jeanne Frameur: the cook. Age: 40.

Annette Beckx: a maidservant for the castle. Age: 25.

Mireille Lémont: a maidservant for the castle. Age: 23.

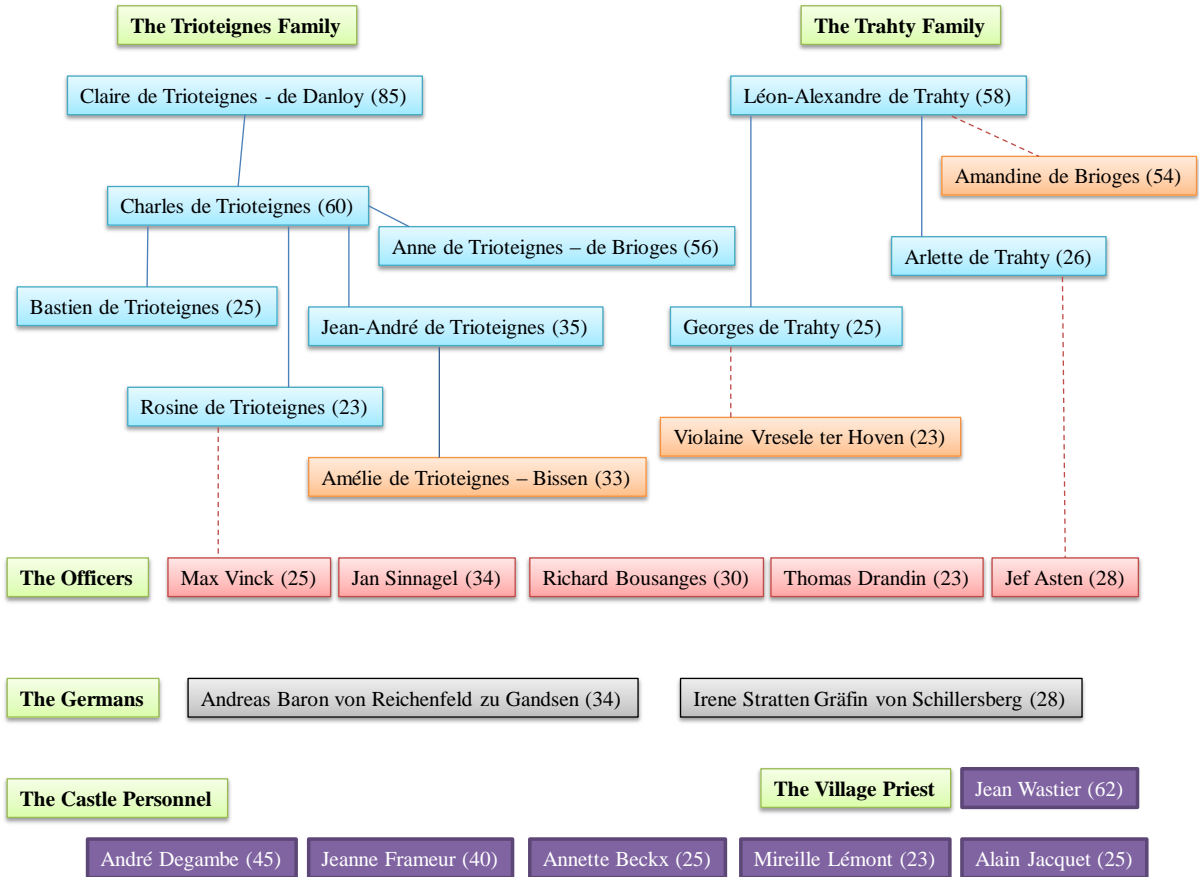
Alain Jacquet: the servant in the stables. Age: 25.

The Germans

Andreas Baron von Reichenfeld zu Ganden: attaché at the German embassy in Brussels. His father is a friend of Charles de Trioteignes. Age: 34.

Irene Stratten Gräfin von Schillersberg: she accompanies Andreas Reichenfeld, and she is the widow of Johannes Graf von Schillersberg. Age: 28.

The Families and Characters



Chapter 1. Christmas

Trioteignes Castle

I am a seasoned, old and hardened man as I write these lines. The world has drawn me into more than a few rather dismal and cruel situations.

I have suffered the burden of the vagaries of life as strongly as any other, but no events shaped my views of mankind as much as what happened during the five months starting from the Christmas Eve after my thirteenth birthday.

In those memorable days from late December to the end of May of the next year, in fact until my birthday of June, 1, the whirlwind of incidents and the upsetting emotions they caused hauled me suddenly out of childhood to being a grown-up man. At fourteen I was truly propelled head-on into an entirely different form of life, so harshly dissimilar from everything I had known before, into five horrendous, dark years. Before that period, my life had flowed peacefully by in prosperity and euphoria, in joy and insouciance, so that I felt the contrast all the more poignantly.

My story tells about the five remarkable months that followed that Christmas, but first I should present myself.

My name is Paul de Trioteignes. I am the offspring of a glorious line of distinguished Belgian noblemen. Our line extends far in the past, as far as the creation of the Frankish Kingdoms in our parts of the European continent, to long before the tenth century of our era. You will not find the Trioteignes name in the list of Princes, Dukes, Generals or famous statesmen, for the Trioteignes seem to have minded their own business during our thousand-year history, but we nevertheless proudly carry the title of Counts. My sister and I could find records only reaching back to the fifteenth century, but five hundred years of carefully written-down names and places of which we were the admiring result proved sufficient to crush us with reverence and with an overwhelming sense of responsibility. We read the records in the genealogy books our grandfather showed us when we were old enough to understand the weight of what he deliberately instilled in us, the expectation for great deeds that surely all those dead forebears expected from us. The Trioteignes did not die. They merely changed figures. The family concept was eternal. Of course, our family was not a rare exception in our ancient country. Although we took pride in our ancestry, our region counted innumerable such families of nobility. The title and the money fought for, gathered, earned or stolen and saved, are the privileges we inherited. Notwithstanding the weight of the ages, my sister and I were not educated as merely numbers in the line, but as persons of whom the uniqueness of character was respected and enforced. And unique we were!

I was thirteen years old at that Christmas when my story begins, and my sister was twelve, a year younger than I, but girls at that age are several years more mature than the numbers may indicate, so it was naturally and usually I who followed her, not the other way round, and she was a lot more mischievous than I was, even at that age! My sister's name is Virginie, a name that may startle you. It made us often seem ridiculous in the eyes of our school-friends when they learnt where the names came from. My father, Jean-André and my not less noble mother Amélie de Bissen had read together in a particular bout of romantic fever one of the small, leather-bound volumes of my cosy grandfather's library in our castle, and they decided that same evening to name their children after the heroes of an eighteenth-century novel of the same name, Paul and Virginie that was, written by the venerable Jacques-Henri Bernardin de

Saint-Pierre. Childs of nature we certainly were, but our parents could in the end not rescue us from the corruption of a sophisticated and cruel world, not more so than the Paul and Virginie of the novel were saved from it.

My father was the family banker and a finance consultant for several private investment companies. The Trioteignes always could count on at least one squirrel gathering nuts for winter per generation, and as well my grandfather, my father as I have been such men. My sister Virginie proved to be rather of the predatory sort of animal, but she possessed the fine wisdom to squander only the fortunes of her husbands, cracking the nuts they had gathered, so that we did not suffer from her extravagant spending sprees. The Trioteignes were never a breed of wild raiders but rather of patient gatherers. The instinct for the tribe and the sense of home, family and property counted more forcefully for us than the desire for conquest. Our father Jean-André worked in Brussels and my mother lived with him in a large apartment of the Avenue Louise, but having decided early on that the large city was not a fine place to bring up their two children in, or preferring to enjoy the feasts, receptions, theatre plays and concerts of the capital alone, they shipped us off at a small age to the countryside, to the family Castle of Trioteignes, to the very willing care of our paternal grandparents, who seemed enchanted by us more than by their own son. They consequently, quite logically, spoiled us to the bone. Our grandparents, Count Charles and his wife Anne de Brioges, as well as our Great-grandmother Claire de Danloy, cherished us as their most precious treasure, much more so even than their stern son and grandson Jean-André, who strove in Brussels to manage and augment the considerable family fortune, as well as other fortunes of the wealthy and aristocratic families that were acquaintances of ours. From this activity my father steadily built up his own fabulously growing fortune, despite the feasts and other temptations of what we called 'the big city'. Virginie and I had of course no notion of all this, money was so plenty we never had to worry or even think about it. We took our good fortune for granted. We lived with our grandparents in the Castle of Trioteignes, filled it with our laughter and shouts, and we enjoyed every second of our childhood.

I wish you could just see Trioteignes once! Ours was not one of those utterly ugly, characterless, austere nineteenth industrialist castles erected in the pompous, unimaginative no-classical style of the palaces that litter our country, built by the parvenu rich men of that dirty age, the palaces surrounded by wide lawns and neat French gardens. No, our castle was the real thing, a fourteenth-century medieval ghost-trapped affair set in a wild forest! Go back, dear reader, to your history books, to the pictures of Crusader knights entirely clad in shining steel armour, sword in hand, hoisting siege-towers against crenelated monsters of dark-grey, massive stone walls and towers. Such was Trioteignes, and such has it remained!

Trioteignes Castle lay in a vast and dense forest of leaf trees, next to the village of the same name. The village had been built because of the castle. In early times, only the servants of the castle lived in our village, but those times were long gone. The surrounding forest had once been a dirty, slimy swamp, and the castle had been built in the plains of the end of the fertile Hesbaye land in that boggy marsh to deter large armies from reaching its gates. Our plains are indeed of the Hesbaye land, the most fertile agriculture region of Belgium, a land in which no hill is higher than what a vigorous mole can dig up from the earth. The only place really where defendable castles could be built in those plains to receive at least some protection from the features of the land, were the marshlands lying along shallow rivers. The swamp is now more or less dried out, and large trees thrive in the rich soil, but the swamp is still there in the form of a wide and deep moat that runs all around the castle walls.

When one approached the castle from the south, coming from a broad but winding lane cut out of the forest, one remarked first the huge mass of immensely thick, crenelated walls, protected by strong, high, round barbican towers, and the sombre, slate-blue roofs on top of them. Only on rare occasions, on very sunny days, did the building not seem to rise out of the ever-during fog which preserved plants and men so well. The castle stood hidden among the trees as if it were a secret, fairy-tale dwelling in which lived ghosts, spirits and out-worldly creatures. Well, maybe we resembled those!

One arrived at a bridge thrown over the moat. The stone structure was overgrown with thorn-bushes in places, green from the rain-sodden lichen that covered the rocks, and many kinds of weeds sprouted out from between the large stones. My grandfather might easily have cleaned up these bushes, but he obsessively refused to alter the rustic and mysterious ancient look of the stones, which lent the castle its romantic, sometimes threatening view. He merely cut away the winding plants and the thistles that hid the uneven cobbles on which we had to walk. Needless to say, my grandfather admitted no automobile car inside the castle.

Under the bridge flowed no water. The deep moat got now only once in every while flooded with brown, brackish water from a source we had as yet not discovered. The ditch showed a tapestry of green grasses, also overgrown with ferns and bushes, small trees and wild plants, which in spring blossomed with a myriad of little flowers to form a tapestry of garish colours. Only rarely did my Grandfather Charles and his farmers descend into that moat to cut down the larger trees that threatened to weaken the foundations of the walls. Grandfather Charles took a great private delight from the savage plants in his moat. He rebuked his wife from wanting to turn the banks into a neat lawn.

The stone bridge ended on to a small cobbled space flanked by two massive round towers, the largest by far of the castle. The towers were topped by pointed, coned roofs covered by the same small, blue slate panes one found on all the castle roofs. The towers were the vanguards of the gatehouse, standing so huge and impressive that one remarked nothing else but them at first. All the pictures of our castle showed that gatehouse and the towers! Beyond the two towers, right behind them, stood two more such towers, these imbedded in the castle walls, quite similar to the front towers, and between the four towers ran a short corridor, at the end of which one could see an immense wooden gate, which seemed to blend with the massive walls. During the day the oak panels of the gate stood invitingly wide open, but my grandfather invariably closed them in the late evening so that we could sleep well, feeling satisfied and safe.

When one walked in between the four towers and looked up, one remarked that the four towers were interconnected high above by a stone ceiling, so that one could reach the outermost towers from inside the castle. The stone ceiling hung above the corridor of the gatehouse and there were openings in that vaulted canopy, through which boiling oil might have been poured in medieval times onto the massing attackers at the gate. In fact, Castle Trioteignes had been assaulted several times in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but it was never captured.

The entry towers marked the beginning of very high, thick walls made of hard, bevelled stones, not of soft bricks, and on top of the walls that enclosed the castle inner grounds, stood the crenelated embattlements. When one passed the wooden gate, one had to continue to look upwards, guided by yet other sky-reaching stone walls. The castle looked always ominous, threatening, even from the inside. One expected ghosts and sorcerers any second to fly out of its towers, instead of the black crows that lurked on the roofs.

The castle was entirely surrounded and closed by walls of which three more, smaller towers served as barbicans. Beyond the gate lay a large, open courtyard, the floor of which was paved with the same stones as one could distinguish on the walls. On the side opposite the gate and also on the entire left side, against the defence walls, stood a large house recognisable only by the door and windows pierced in its walls. The house huddled against the old defence walls of the ancient castle, probably replacing the keep that must have been demolished a long time ago. The house filled the lengths of two walls, between the three smaller towers, but higher up one could still see the crenellations of the original walls. Windows had been cut in the outer walls too, so that from the house, in certain rooms of the lower floor and in most of the rooms of the higher floors, one had a wide view over the forest, and through special openings in that forest, cut out by one of my ancestors, the view opened also on the far, extensive landscape of the grain fields and the pastures and the low-sloping green hills of Hesbaye. Rain has always been the main richness of our region, and we received plenty of that as a gift of the gods.

The long, double-winged house was built partly in the old stones, partly in red bricks, and that in a strange mixture of ancient medieval, renaissance and renewed gothic styles, dating from about all centuries up to our present era. It seemed every ancestor had tinkered with that façade. It looked therefore rather ugly, but nevertheless interesting. It showed a savage character, like a chiselled face overgrown with wrinkles, grooves and angular features. The main entry, another sturdy oak double door, stood in the middle tower.

To the right of the gatehouse stood a small chapel beside a lean church tower, above which throned a brass cross and the traditional copper Gallic cockerel. The central dwelling looked like an odd assembly remnant of every possible style of the last six centuries or so, not particularly charming, but that was where our living quarters were. The inside was cosy, the entrance hall small, and the rooms were not too large, the ceilings not too high, so that the place always reminded me of the Tudor manors that can be found in large numbers in the English countryside. The rooms had a modern aspect, the walls were plastered and painted in bright colours, and our grandparents had placed comfortable sofas, wide chairs, tapestries, tables and other furniture of recent acquisition. Against the surfaces of the walls stood or hung, arranged frugally, their antiques, portraits, vases, paintings, ancient lamp stands, and other items preserved and found in the castle. We could read our books in an oak-panelled library, use a billiard room, sit and gather in large parlour to hear music and talk, and we ate in a vast dining room in which stood the two only knight armours salvaged from medieval times. Our armours were the real stuff, armours used to fight in, not the finely chiselled and engraved parade sheathings. We called them affectionately Victor and Henry. We were quite disappointed not to have found skeletons in them.

Upstairs, on the two upper floors, lay an uncountable number of rooms, which were used as suites, sleeping rooms, restrooms and bathrooms. The castle offered every modern comfort one might wish, and the central heating was modern and efficient. Virginie and I slept in two separate rooms to the left of the courtyard entry. We had windows in our rooms that presented us a view of the forest in front of the castle and to the left side of the gatehouse, from which we could see the cars and people arrive at the castle. The shape of the courtyard was of a pentagon rather than of a rectangle. All the rooms on the upper floors gave on a corridor that ran in the house along this courtyard.

The place where we were most attracted to lay on the right side of the entrance tower of the house, and that was of course the vast kitchen, where Jeanne, our cook, reigned, helped by the two cook-maids and servants, Annette and Mireille. Jeanne was a middle-aged, stout woman with short, brown hair, always dressed in a pristine white robe and with a flower-coloured,

large apron knotted around her imposing rump. We had always something to receive from Jeanne Frameur, and she never refused us a sweet, a chocolate or an apple, despite the scolding of my grandmother. I can still smell the scent of that apron of hers where I hid in tears when one of my grandparents chased us for some mischief. Jeanne hid us and protected us always. The two light-headed maids, the one blond and the other auburn, were in their early twenties, scarcely more intelligent than Virginie and I were already, so that we made fools of them day-long. Still, in that kitchen we were adored as nowhere else. The girls were hard-working, lively and efficient under the guidance of Jeanne.

When we were children, the charm of Trioteignes Castle lay not so much in its wonderful outer appearance as in the numerous furnished and also not furnished and unused rooms. The house was connected to the barbican towers and to the towers of the gatehouse. Vast cellars had been dug out under the castle and under part of the courtyard. One could even reach the hall under the chapel, the ancient crypt, on the other side of the courtyard, by a tunnel in the cellars. When we roamed in this labyrinth, running stairs up and stairs down, the spirit of the western European discoverers took possession of us. There was much to explore in the castle, especially in the attics and cellars and in the tower rooms, which were left unoccupied except for one tower in which our father and grandfather had installed their offices. The unoccupied rooms were unheated and undecorated, left to the mice and spiders. We found an old dungeon, pits and iron-barred cellars and tunnels. We expected a tunnel to lead us to outside the castle, to the moat or beyond, but we never dared to venture in those dark abysses. We imagined having discovered places even our grandparents didn't know of, forgetting that also our grandfather and father had once been children and no doubt inspired with the same curiosity.

The guests

Our honourable guests were to arrive in the afternoon of Christmas Eve. My sister and I were assigned to the task of welcoming them and showing them in. We even knew the rooms allotted to each of them, for we received a map from our grandmother, so we could bring each person to the places they were to be lodged in for the next days.

The first to arrive were the Trahties as we called them, the members of the de Trahty family, the head of which, Baron Léon-Alexandre, was the closest friend of my grandfather. Léon, as we called him affectionately, was a frequent guest at Trioteignes. He was equally a banker and financier of Brussels, closely related in business to our father Jean-André. Léon had served as teacher in finances for Jean-André, and since Léon took it easy since quite a while with his work, we suspected our father handled also many matters for Léon. The arrangement suited everybody. We used to call Léon our 'uncle', because Grandfather Charles and Léon were very close friends, in fact practically the only one who got frequently invited.

We spotted the incoming cars from out of our windows, rushed downstairs shouting, 'they have arrived! They have arrived!' when the monster of the Trahty Minerva car slid on to the bridge. All cars had to stop there, for our grandfather did not admit cars in his courtyard. We ran out of the gate seeing the Trahties unload their bags and trunks. Léon-Alexandre drove on towards the stables to park the car, and his family stretched their legs and admired once more our behemoth of stone.

First to stand at the bridge, already stamping her feet from the biting, humid cold, was our real one and only Great-aunt Amandine de Brioges. Amandine was the sister of our grandmother, but two years younger than Anne, a lot livelier, spicy and sassy, a gorgeous matron with

ample forms but still a tiny corseted waist, huge chest, and flaunting her saucy curves. Amandine had once been blonde. Now she was greying, but she wore her age with style and authority. Her soft, alluring, striking figure relegated her sister to the background in any room, just as Baron de Trahty could fill a room with his presence. We were very much attracted to and perplexed by their very image of true Brussels bourgeois charm and style. We loved our quiet, humorous, pragmatic and always forgiving Grandmother Anne all the more.

At Trioteignes, Amandine tried to boss Anne about, to which Anne invariable would answer with a meek 'yes, dear, of course,' and then anyway and anyhow do as she pleased, for Anne was as headstrong as the bull of the farm, which then Amandine graciously chose to ignore or esteemed it under her status to notice. The two women got on well on these terms. They were the Queens of the castle.

Amandine was tugging at her hair, pushing the golden pins further in her hair to tug the many curls of her high bun in place, probably cursing the devilish speed at which her Léon-Alexandre had driven. 'Her' Léon, yes, for Amandine was something of a wicked woman, though she awaited better with growing impatience, a merry widow and the secret, arduous lover of uncle Léon. We all knew of the scandal of course, so it was not a secret anymore by a long time, for Léon and Amandine had been a couple since ever. Nobody minded, except my father who might have given lessons in righteousness and puritanism to Cincinnatus and Saint Paul, and of course to Amandine herself, who tried desperately to drag Léon to the altar but had not succeeded in that yet.

Virginie once said to me Amandine was a femme fatale. Virginie read a lot more novels than I, also the wicked novels written by those decadent French writers of which Grandfather Charles possessed a fair number of shelves. I asked Arlette de Trahty, the most intelligent and considerate woman I had access to, what a femme fatale was, but she only burst out in laughter and answered I was far too young to be saddled with knowledge of femmes fatales. That left me in a quandary until much later, when I too had my share of such fleeting joys of the eternal universe. The attraction of evil, adventure and sin piqued our interest all the more, so we ran up to Amandine first to help her carry her many bags, which she accepted with natural grace as if we were the poor children from the farmers of the village, out to earn a quick penny. We had to work hard for that penny, for we were only awarded with a smacking, wet kiss of her red lips.

With Amandine came Georges, Léon-Alexandre's son, who did not begrudge his father the pleasures of Amandine, who he seemed to like. Georges's sister Arlette stepped put at the other side. Georges kept shuffling about bag after bag, ordering them according to the persons of his family. Tall and lean, very handsome of face and members, blond with striking ocean-blue sapphire eyes, Georges was very popular with my sister Virginie, who later confessed to me he had remained for her the absolutely divine Apollonian ideal. I had no idea what she might have meant that Christmas, but Georges de Trahty remained the slim, finely muscled athlete Virginie seems to have sought in her husbands throughout her life and never found a replica for. Georges must indeed have been such a beauty of a man, also generous, warm-feeling, irresistible to all women, slightly sarcastically smiling all the time, the kind of man all females of Brussels must have fallen on their knees for. Charm came natural to him. He lighted a cigarette while we welcomed him, having refrained from doing so earlier, and saw him relieved to indulge in his only vice.

Arlette de Trahty was two years younger than her brother Georges, and a completely different kind of human. Arlette walked around already, letting Georges do all the work, which she seemed to believe was the normal duty of males. When she stood near Georges, I remarked

she looked almost as tall as her brother, but she was a lot slimmer than he, leaner, a thin almost skeletal girl, very nervous, a bundle of tight nerves constantly, and always ready to jump at something. She was equally blonde, and she let her hair wave down in a natural movement around her head and shoulders. Her piercing eyes shone with the brightest grey we ever saw, as if a flaming brilliance was lit inside her head, for the colours of her irises changed with the ambient light. I thought of Arlette as of a skeleton trying to live, yet she too had something of that devilish, cold elegance and attraction of the modern beauty on her that wanted to be possessed by all men. We had met Arlette several times and stood in awe before her, for she had a superior, high-strung intellect. I bowed in front of her, which I had not done to the other Trahties. Arlette was the reincarnation of all the schoolteachers I had suffered under. We considered her the most erudite, wittiest and by far the most intelligent of the pack that would eat the turkey this evening. We feared her sarcasm, her caustic rebuffs, even when we found grace in her remarkable eyes. Arlette was a man of her own, yet her face stroke us always as nice and gentle. That face looked to us as if it were moulded of the finest Chinese kaolin porcelain, white and thin-skinned, her cheeks only a touch red now from the crispy frost. She too blew in her hands to warm them up. We believed no blood flowed in Arlette's arteries, but a cryogen liquid instead, for she was always cold, and if blood it was that made her move, she was the only character of the families we surmised to have blue blood, for we saw her minuscule very blue arteries surface on her hands and face. Arlette had worn a hat in the car, not a flimsy Parisian affair, but a brown Russian fur hat twice as thick as her own face. Arlette had studied to become a medicinal doctor at the University of Leuven, and she had followed courses at Oxford in Great-Britain. She spoke at least four languages fluently, French, Dutch, English and German, and she knew Latin and Greek from school. Later, we kept at a reasonable distance of Arlette, although she was the only one in the Trahty family to greet us with chocolates. She saw our hesitation and sprang to us with open arms, hugged us and pushed her tiny, extremely cold lips briefly on our cheeks. We quickly struggled out of her embrace to run to Uncle Léon-Alexandre, who walked back the path from the stables to the castle entrance. He came with wide open arms.

We jumped in Uncle Léon's arms, and he heaved us up from the ground, each in one arm despite the weight, and held us up so that our feet did not touch the ground anymore. 'I can still do that, you scoundrels,' Léon bellowed, hugging us as if he wanted to crush us both. 'But next year I won't be able to do that anymore! By God, you have grown!' Léon-Alexandre had grown too, especially in the paunch. Maybe it was time he married Amandine. Léon-Alexandre was a very jovial man who loved a laugh and a joke as long as the joke was not on him. His face glittered very red. We suspected he had kept for himself all the warm blood he should have given to his daughter. Léon mocked Arlette often for her cold arteries, shouting she had been born a marble statue, not a living person. Uncle Léon was closing on to sixty and showed abundant grey hair above his head and also beneath his chin, in a beard that had once resembled the beard of King Leopold the Second, but which was now clipped more closely. He wore thick glasses over a bumpy reddish nose, and he had to tug constantly at his glasses because he hated to feel the curves of their metal around his ears. He forced the legs quite straight, but could not avoid his glasses to possess a life of their own and slide once more down his nose.

Léon-Alexandre de Trahty was our grandfather's best friend, yet so very different in character from him. One of the reasons why grandfather liked him was that, despite Léon's volubility and status of financier and businessman, his friend was the only truly honest man he had ever met, and so they said of each other. It was because of Léon-Alexandre that my Grandfather Charles had let himself grow a white beard under a neatly cut moustache. My grandfather's

hair, though fading, was still black in most places, and he towered at least a head taller than Léon-Alexandre. Laurel and Hardy, decided my sister, but that comparison did not work if only not because Laurel and Hardy were clean-shaven. Charles and Léon-Alexandre could also be a lot more dangerous and ruthless when pressed than Laurel and Hardy. Both had destroyed adversaries in business and in finance, and when they went in together against the hardscrabble of the shark financiers of the capital, nothing could resist them in Brussels. They were towering examples for us, men we admired, and they were everything but cantankerous, old men. Trioteignes was never a scruffy place of tired old people when Grandfather Charles and Uncle Léon animated it.

We showed the Trahties their rooms, though they had the ones they were used to and knew quite well already.

A little later another car rode silently by, a black Ford, the car of Trioteignes Castle, driven by our grandfather, who had picked up the rest of the Trioteignes clan that had travelled by train to the railway station of Namur. Charles brought his younger son, our uncle Bastien, his daughter Rosine, a friend of Rosine's called Violaine Vresele, who we had met a few times previously, and my mother. My father would arrive still later by car from Brussels. My father, Jean-André, was a son of Grandfather Charles by his first wife, Marie Lesage, my real paternal grandmother, who I and Virginie had never known because she had died young. Bastien and Rosine were like true brother and sister to my father, however, and real aunt and uncle to us. They adored us as much as we worshipped them.

Bastien was not very tall, a lively young man who liked to jog and to train his muscles. A laugh stood always in his thick, square face. His brown eyes were set deep under thick and black hair. Bastien boxed, which meant I often hung around him, until he taught me a few punches. We exercised together. Bastien normally lived in the castle, so he had no bags with him. He helped everybody with the luggage.

Rosine had inherited the same black hair, which hung in long but straggly, protesting curls around her head. She did not succeed in taming those curls. I found them quite charming. She was a well-formed girl, not heavy, tall, a flamboyant girl with a nice, round face. Rosine was pretty if not beautiful, and she was quite pretty from her ankles to the curves of her long, black eyelashes. Rosine was always happy and optimistic, and this was her main quality of character, for her intelligence did not reach far though she had a very mature look on life and especially on the men who flattered her. We were quite wrong about her intelligence, as she would prove afterwards. She was bright enough for the things that really mattered in life; she just did not care for books and learning. She could have made any man lucky and happy. She sent naughty looks around her, would prod her admirers into action, and she launched questions which often held double meanings too difficult for me to decipher. Rosine was nice to us.

It was not the first time Violaine Vresele was invited at the castle. We knew little of her, but we had heard of her as a somewhat effaced nymph, a petite, slim, tranquil girl of about the same age as Rosine, in her early twenties. She said little, and then only things that mattered. She had money, and with time I came to like Violaine a lot, because she had a very finely chiselled face with lips as no other girl, a tiny straight nose as no other, green eyes as no other, and very heavy, light auburn hair that aureoled around her head. She allowed me to let my fingers play in her hair one quiet evening, and I swear it was as of the softest wool I had ever touched, pure cashmere. We remained friends all our lives despite the difference in age, or maybe because of that. She used to claim we became friends because I had the same colour of

eyes as she. I guess however I loved her because she had the same colour of hair and eyes as my mother Amélie, the same smile and the same smell. They did use the same perfumes. Violaine was Flemish, and therefore somewhat exotic to us. She acted without hesitation when action was needed. She was a no-nonsense girl. She never dodged decisions. I found her charming and smart. Violaine Vresele was betrothed to Georges, though there was little talk of marriage.

We kissed our mother furtively and helped all these people in, drew the bags behind us with the same enthusiasm as the boat-towers of the Volga, and led everybody to their rooms. The ever so majestically quiet Castle of Trioteignes filled with frantic welcoming, everybody kissing everybody, with chatter and laughter and whispers of the most interesting stories we, the children, were not supposed to hear and of course caught incessantly.

Darkness fell when two other cars arrived, another old Minerva and an Opel, almost together, and in these rode the friends of Bastien. They were four, all vigorous young men in their twenties or early thirties, men who were presented to us as being Thomas, Jan, Richard and Max. We shouted, running to them over the bridge, they would not sleep in the castle but in the Orangerie.

The grand Castle Trioteignes was not the only building looming in the forest of our domain. A little further to the left of the bridge as seen from the castle, hidden beyond several lines of trees, stood an Orangerie. The Orangerie was only a vast hall in which pots of flowers and decorative trees, originally orange trees, were stored during the winter to protect them from the biting frost of Wallony. A few such huge pots indeed still stood in the castle courtyard during spring and summer, but our grandparents had no green hands. We had no lawn, no kitchen-garden around our castle!

Above the hall, a staircase led to a long corridor lined with more rooms. In earlier times the servants had slept here, but the current maids and men lived in the village with their families, but for Alain Jacquet, the somewhat mysterious, very taciturn stable servant. The rooms above the Orangerie could be used, central heating had been installed, and rest rooms and bathrooms, and once in every while guests and friends for whom we had not enough decent place in the castle occupied a room there. For the last months only one other man lived in that place, a man called Joseph or Jef Asten, of whom we almost knew nothing. He ate his breakfast in the castle kitchen, but he disappeared from early till late. He seemed to know my grandfather quite well. We had not been curious enough about Jef Asten, but that would change. Virginie and I had decided to spy on this Jef, but so far not much had come of that vow.

My grandfather kept horses in the large stables which stood still further away in the woods, and he accepted other horses from the village dwellers, so that quite a few people were allowed to enter our domain and ride on horses in the forest. We might offer pension to as many as twenty horses in that place, and the stables held boxes for at least double that number. Jean Jacquet, the mop-headed but gregarious stable-boy looked after the horses for us. Many paths winded through the forest and into the surrounding pastures, for wonderful trips on horse-back could be made in our domain. One could wander off to the village of Trioteignes, to the farms and fields beyond, as far as the next town, without ever having to leave the paths were no cars were allowed.

Virginie and I ran in front of the two automobiles, in the headlights, and showed the way to the young men. We told them to bring their bags upstairs and to pick a room by themselves,

whichever they wanted. When they ran up they encountered Jef and he welcomed them. They obviously knew him. We left them to settle and hurried back to the castle where more action was expected.

The next car that would drive into the lane through the wood would be a very silent car, one with a motor engine of many cylinders, and thus one that would sail noiselessly to our gate like the Flying Dutchman. We had seen that car arrive several times before, though infrequently, and it brought our foreign guests, no Dutchmen or Frenchmen, but Germans. The heavy Mercedes-Benz black sedan Type 260D, with the D for Diesel, brought the young but dashing Baron Andreas von Reichenfeld zu Ganden. We called him 'the young Baron,' because there existed a much older namesake who was the German business friend of our grandfather. The namesake came even more seldom to our castle, and Andreas was the son of our grandfather's family friend in Germany. Young Baron Andreas was in his early thirties and, more exciting, he had telephoned to ask whether he was allowed to bring a female friend for the Christmas party. We took turns at our windows and in the corridors of the castle, remaining on the lookout. One of us had to remain on hand around the guest rooms, for our guests still needed many things, one more towel, more soap, a sheepskin to sleep warmer, asking whether indeed the central heating worked, and at the same time we kept an eye on the lane, for we would not hear the German car approach. I guess the Baron drove in our forest on half a cylinder.

When the black, majestic Mercedes finally did appear, Virginie shouted once more her, 'they have arrived, I saw them coming!' and she ran downstairs to beat me to the welcoming of the Baron and his friend. She won, and she stood already bowing in front of an extremely beautiful lady dressed to the extravagant latest Parisian fashion. The woman was tall and slim as most of the ladies who were upstairs, but this one had a very boyish though handsome face, a little nose and full red lips, deep blue eyes and very light, blond hair that was rather cut short, not in the Belgian mode, which underscored her somewhat masculine, sports womanish elegance. She smiled in a warm, sincere way, however, and repeated her name painstakingly in very good French to Virginie, while Andreas drove the car further on to the stables. The lady's name was Irene Stratten Gräfin von Schillersberg, and when Virginie asked her bluntly whether she was the Baron's girlfriend, something the Countess certainly was not accustomed to being asked so directly, she let go of a pearling laugh, threw her head in her long neck and assured only she was a friend. Virginie then dared to grab Irene by the hand and she showed her into the courtyard as if she had been friends with the jaunty German Countess since ever, leaving me miserably to the bags. I could not but think that such an oddly attractive woman would dazzle all the bright young men I had just helped to the Orangerie. Irene Stratten was the kind of woman men would fight for. Our Christmas feast would be interesting to observe! The Countess exclaimed in expected surprise at the towers, the courtyard, the manor, even though she must have been used to such medieval castles everywhere in her own country. She was being polite and flattering Virginie, I knew. I followed wearing two heavy bags, three more bags would be for the second and third course. We wanted to call her ever as 'Countess Irene', but she insisted on 'just Irene'. We brought her to her rooms and I hurried back downstairs to fetch the rest of the luggage for her. She did not travel light.

I encountered Baron Andreas outside, welcomed him formally by bowing like my father had taught me, for the Baron was a rather stiff, straight-backed, aristocratic, somewhat supercilious old-school gentleman, always meticulously and immaculately dressed up. I took one lighter trunk and left the other two to him, and then we walked together to the left wing of the castle where his usual quarters were, and where we had also brought Irene to. We thought

of him as of a man of somewhat stultifying etiquette. Much about him exuded pretence. The Baron's face was long, sometimes arrogantly drawn in thin lips, slightly closed eyes and angular nose, but Andreas remained always courteous and nice to us. He addressed Virginie as if she were a princess, so we had no reason to fear or to feel less at ease than normal. His eyes shone light grey, his hair was blond but thin. He had a habit of greeting an unknown woman or man by standing stiff like a frozen eel, flat-stomached, click his heels, and offer his full name in guise of introduction, after which he would kiss the lady's hand very slightly by brushing his lips over her glove or flesh, a habit even my father and grandfather were abandoning. Andreas Reichenfeld worked at the German embassy of Brussels, and a small, iron tri-coloured pennant stood usually at one side of the car, though not this time. The Baron had driven inconspicuously, in the darkness of a winter afternoon. Andreas talked to me with obvious pleasure. I accompanied him to the door of the left wing. We joked and I told him he could use his usual quarters there, then I ran on to Countess Irene, to who also belonged the trunk I was wearing. I found her and Virginie opening the bags. Irene was showing her clothes and cosmetics to Virginie, so they waved me out. Female things were not suited for male eyes. Women could be so fussy!

While I entered the main wing, somebody shouted my name from behind me and I saw my father, the last guest, striding in the courtyard, wearing an attaché-case. My father was in everything the opposite of the Baron. He was not a tall man, he didn't care for leanness and muscles, so he had taken on weight lately, and his eyes were coloured brown, dark brown, under dark brown hair. His face showed soft, somewhat tired features, wrinkles drew early on his face, especially around the eyes, and I remarked how pale and fluffy he seemed, for my father was rather much a bookworm, the archetype of the accountant and careful businessman, quite the contrary of most of the younger men I had shown the way a few moments ago. These too all laughed much, except the Baron. They shouted quite boisterously, they joked all the time and seemed very lively lads. The stern mark of long columns of figures lay in my father's eyes, but though he regularly scorned Virginie and me, he never laid a hand on us. He knew his sternness served him nothing on us, which he had accepted since long with a weary smile. We had therefore given up teasing him, and an easy peace of respect lay between us.

We met our grandmother on the stairs, who kissed her son and then told me to announce to everybody the guests were expected in the parlour around seven o'clock. That set me running again, first to Virginie, then she throughout the castle rooms to warn the more dignified guests, and me to the Orangerie to warn the chaps.

Christmas Eve

Grandfather Charles sounded the bell of supper, but we would spend a little time in the grand parlour first. Quite before seven o'clock Virginie and I stood ready at the door of the parlour. Grandfather opened the panels between the parlour and the dining room, to present an imposing view to the people who entered a deep view of the two vast halls, one decorated now with a huge Christmas tree in the left corner, the other with a grandly dressed table for twenty, on which lay our best Christmas linen and the silver cutlery around the white porcelain plates crested with the Trioteignes badge of three golden ducks on a field of azure. You may wonder why ducks. So did we! Maybe the first part of the name, 'trio', stood for three, and 'teigne' might have meant duck in an old, since long extinguished language. We refused to accept that our 'teigne' had something to do with ringworms, as the real translation

of the French word seemed to indicate. Maybe we had always been problems for our enemies! Maybe we had ducks because our family has always been very good at ducking during the upheavals and revolutions that racked the times. At least thus, we retained our good fortune. No rampant lions or fire-spitting dragons for us! The useful, succulent ducks sufficed for Trioteignes.

Our grandfather and grandmother had helped us the previous days hanging multi-coloured balls and little figures on the Christmas tree. We had hung blue and white silvery and gilded garlands on the ceilings. We had put our hands on a few branches of mistletoe with the benevolent aid of Alain Jacquet, and hung those over the parlour doors. The Advent calendar stood on the chimney-sill and branches of pine trees with dried pine-cones hung at the walls. We were now allowed to light the candles, which we had placed very carefully under the supervision of our grandfather so that the flames did not reach any upper branch of the fir tree. None of us desired the castle to go up in flames this evening! Grandfather had made the butler place two full buckets of water in the corridor, just in case. Even more exciting than the decoration was, of course, the large heap of parcels under the tree. There lay the gifts for and of everybody, though most of the parcels would be ours.

We knew there was no such man or ghost as a Christmas Santa, but we still reminded us affectionately of the years when my father played that part and we had let him believe we had not spied upon him and seen him dressing as Father Christmas. Nevertheless, right at seven o'clock, while the other guests streamed into the parlour greeting each other effusively, also a Christmas Santa and a Father Whip entered the hall. We puffed, for Santa Claus was not accompanied by a black-faced Father Whip, Saint Nicolas was, never Father Christmas! Nevertheless, we held our decency because we thought of the presents.

Virginie inspected the men dressed in red and white closely, and she soon whispered to me, 'Father Christmas is Richard Bousanges, Father Whip I don't know, but he must be another of the Orangerie men.'

Richard Bousanges was not an infrequent guest and a good friend of Uncle Bastien, and I recognised the man with the blackened face as Max Vinck.

'Don't you dare come near to me, young scoundrels,' Max shouted, imitating cracking thunder. 'Have you been obedient chaps this year? I bet not! Should I lay my whip on you two? Have you been a wicked fellow and chick? I'll eat you raw! Tell me where the dungeons are, you whip-flesh! I'll warm up a place for you there. Beware of my wrath, by jingo!'

We did not laugh at his face, but pretended to be afraid. Virginie hid behind the skirts of great-grandmother, which made me bow double for laughter until also Virginie began to chide Father Whip, which made the poor man lose countenance until Grandfather Charles saved him from us. Father Whip then raised his lash and ran after us with angry eyes.

'Paul and Virginie, stop harassing Father Whip, I tell you!' Grandmother Anne sounded. 'Be a good boy and girl now, for if Father Whip doesn't know yet where the dungeons are, I can tell him! You'll be on bread and water for the next few days if you don't behave this evening, and receive no presents at all. Keep quiet, sit on a chair and let our guests arrive in peace!' Father Whip looked still at us with eyes of scorn while we went to sit on a chair.

There would be no bread and water for us, we knew, but we jumped on two chairs in the doorway from the parlour to the dining room, from where we had a good view of the guests. We consoled ourselves with a tactical retreat, a position we had rehearsed many times before. If we were not allowed to do as we liked, we feigned to sulk quietly in a corner to better study the people around us and prepare our next mischief. Spiders weave webs to catch flies, don't they? We wished to satisfy our ghoulish curiosity, so we wanted to stay on. We looked for

inspiration at the interesting things that would always happen during our family gatherings, to discover ideas for new action. In other words, the little devils sat as statues of virtue for the rest of the evening, as shining angels of noble respectability, as well-bred as the characters of Madame de Sévigné's heroes and heroines.

Our great-grandmother and grandmother sat in the large sofa near the open fire. Grandfather Charles stood next to the sofa. We wondered whether we would force couples to kiss under the mistletoe, but Virginie shook her head for no, later. Now it was time for observation. Our grandparents were very formally dressed in their best evening clothes, and they looked truly grand and imposing. Grandfather went to stand next to the Christmas tree and he said good evening to the people who walked in, most bringing additional parcels in their arms. My father and mother entered first, accompanied by Uncle Léon-Alexandre and Aunt Amandine. Behind them followed Georges and Arlette de Trahty. After these, Aunt Rosine pushed her head through the door, and she and her friend Violaine came in, hips swaying, their long robes trailing. They were wonderfully dressed in clinging silk of various, harsh colours. Grandmother and great-grandmother wore dark blue robes, mother stood in lighter blue, Rosine wore dashing pink, and Violaine outrageous deep purple. Amandine towered in a long dark green dress, which suited her blond hair finely to her advantage, and even better her ample, cream-coloured bosom. The men were dressed up in black evening suits and butterfly ties.

Baron Andreas and Countess Irene entered then, created a sensation, the Countess that is, much less the Baron, and they were followed by the happy gang of the young men from the Orangerie, led by Bastien. Thomas Drandin and Jan Sinnagel came in rather shyly, but Grandfather Charles introduced them and put them at ease in his usual good-natured manner. That took quite some time. Santa or Father Christmas and Father Whip mixed with them. Father Christmas had to drop his beard each time he presented his name, so that Virginie and I sat with eyes pointing to the ceiling at such obvious, vulgar lack of professionalism. Charles offered a glass of Champagne first to Countess Irene, much taken in by her fine grace and wonderful long figure, her never-ending legs showing through a long slit in her bright-red dress, which made Grandmother Anne throw scornful eyes, whereupon grandfather directed his attention to his other guests. Father Whip lost his dignity entirely when he stood with a glass of Champagne in his hands, now served by Annette and Mireille, the maids for the evening.

At that moment entered also Joseph or 'Jef' Asten.

Jef Asten was not a tall but a well-built young man with a pleasant face, eyebrows irregularly arched over mild eyes in which shone audacity and cunning. A tempting smile always opened a little the left corner of his mouth and a dimple in his upper lip left a touch of arrogance that disappeared in the warmth of his glance. We found his blue, roguish eyes piercing under the black, very close cropped hair. He exuded confidence. He might have been a boxer or an athlete, cocksure and buoyant, a man who played hardball! He formed a trim, nonchalantly dressed figure.

Jef greeted the men at the entrance, took a glass of Champagne from the tray Annette presented him, cheerfully addressed the young men with a happy note, a wide grin on his mouth. When he stepped around the group of Orangerie men to wish a good evening to everybody and greet the older people, he stopped abruptly in his track. He turned very pale in the face and we actually saw his legs trembling as if in a clutch of panic. His smile disappeared to a determined thin line, but formed again to its former fullness a fraction of a second later. Nobody in the parlour had remarked his temporary discomfiture, but Virginie and I. We sat straight as stone Florentine Marzoccoes at the doors, nodded at each other

knowingly, with the instant recognition of something interesting that had happened. Then, we watched Jef to find out what the object of his discomfiture might be.

Jef glanced with burning eyes, devouring another creature in the hall. She sat in the far corner of an armchair next to the sofa. Jef stared and stared from between the group of men, who continued chatting and joking, minding Jef not. He apparently stood there, trying to bring his heart and shocked nerves back to normal, knees still trembling. The women looked at the Christmas tree, not in Jef's direction. The creature Jef seemed to know or had instantly fallen for was nobody else but Arlette de Trahty.

Arlette sat indeed as one of the two most striking figures of the evening, long and slim legs crossed, dressed in a shiny white and blue silk jersey robe of which the blue colours were merely shades that faded into the creamy white of other parts of her dress and of her skin, left and right part of the robe merely crossed over her chest, leaving to the experienced eye a deep décolleté between her nicely shaped breasts. A loop of gold braid girdled her gown at the waist. Her sleeveless dress was also cut so very low at her back as to be daring and challenging. She glowed on her dark orange armchair as much as the Christmas fir in its corner and she attracted all eyes.

Arlette looked straight at Jef too, and they were the only woman and man to do so, as if both had been attracted by some mysterious magnet to each other at the same time. We saw her eyes soften and gleam, her Champagne flute quiver in her hands, but also only for a second or so before she regained her composure. She had made up her hair so that it sat entirely at the back and above her head, so that it left her face and long neck very pale. This evening she had laid on a very thin, wispy layer of white powder, so that her very full, scarlet-red lips stood out in her cameo-like face like a thin streak of blood in the snow. There was not a tickle of rouge on her cheeks, and in her grey eyes twinkled the dancing lights of the flames of the candles that reflected on the multi-coloured balls of glass hanging in the Christmas tree. A fire burned on frosty snow in those eyes, that evening. Her waist seemed so thin, and yet Arlette had a nice chest and comparably wide hips, so that I and Virginie had already surmised the two halves of her might one day brusquely separate. Later, I knew of one only other such wasp-like waist in the figure of the actress Vera Ellen. Of course we admired Arlette. I suppose Virginie, who was all but slim at the waist, always regarded her with some degree of jealousy. Jef remained yet a few moments transfixed while he kept staring at Arlette, but then the magic that passed between them broke, and Arlette looked angrily away. The eyes of Jef and Arlette, we remarked later, reached regularly back to each other and diverted only when they were found out by the other. Jef stepped forward and presented himself to the Trahties. Bastien came to his rescue and gave the name of Joseph Asten.

When Jef offered a hand also to Arlette, over the sofa where the other women sat, Bastien introduced, 'Arlette de Trahty, daughter of Léon-Alexandre. Please meet Joseph Asten.' Arlette first said nothing, remained icy, then she looked from top to bottom at Jef, and later only whispered, barely audible, 'Joseph Asten, he? Well, well, glad to meet you!' A hard, sarcastic grin appeared on her face, and we glimpsed a touch of disdain and even hate. Virginie and I looked again in surprise at each other. Had Jef only been tempted by the low-cut dress of Arlette when he bowed, by the creamy, gentle swelling of Arlette's breasts, by the mottled flush on her cheeks maybe caused by his appearance, and had Arlette remarked that and scorned it, or was something much more dramatic taking place? We sensed that these two, Arlette and Jef, might know each other from before, but we could not decide on whether there lay affection or loathing between them. We then smiled too, for we felt a very interesting incident had occurred here, a drama about which we would have to discover all the details.

We would not lose those two out of our sight for the rest of the evening and the following days!

A little later in the evening, Santa and Whip eclipsed for a few moments to change clothes and the two men who had played their roles arrived in evening dress among the guests. We had changed the buckets of water a bit outside the doors, of course, so that Max Vinck stumbled over them when he came back in. He had his head already full of Rosine, you see. We heard a nice, loud curse and nodded to each other. He stood now with shoes filled with water so that they sucked when he walked, and his lower pants were all wet. Max, or rather, 'Pinky', as he was called, looked at us quite angrily, wondering how the buckets had changed places. We would enjoy Pinky very much in the future!

Max drew us a nasty face a little later and whispered, 'be nice children or the Yamma-Yamma man will come to get you!'

We laughed in his face. Virginie was afraid of nothing. She never showed fear for the powers of the spirit.

The other interesting event of the evening was the reaction of the Orangerie men to the German Baron and Countess. Grandfather Charles tried desperate attempts to isolate the foreign guests from the Orangerie men. His eyes darted nervously around when the young men neared, and he then drew Andreas towards him, and placed himself between the Baron and the group of Bastien, Georges, Thomas, Jan and Jef, Richard and Max. In that group stood and laughed also Rosine and Violaine. Charles, Jean-André and Léon Trahty conversed with the Baron, but Irene escaped our grandfather's vigilance to walk up to the group of young men, where she pushed herself adroitly into their circle, in between Bastien and Jef. When she did that and touched Jef's shoulder, Arlette's glance slashed ice-cold to Irene and then fiery to Jef, as if she would soon be wielding Jupiter's lightning rod. Arlette remained seated languorously in her arm-chair, however, and she addressed only the older women. Anne and Amélie were engaged in a passionate conversation with Aunt Amandine, who shook her head to show off her wavy, glossy hair and deep cleft in her voluminous bosom. Arlette mixed absently in that talk, eyes once every while glancing over to Jef.

Grandfather Charles broke up all groups by announcing that the Christmas presents were to be distributed. He went up to the tree, read out the names written on the labels of the parcels and handed them over. Soon, all conversations stopped, then little cries of surprise rose, followed by a chaos of people tearing away the brightly coloured packaging paper, throwing the papers with Christmas drawings on them everywhere on the ground of the parlour, where they were eagerly being picked up by Annette. Everyone received at least one parcel. The women seemed happy with diamond bracelets, pearl necklaces and brooches studded with opals and rubies. The men received Cognac and Champagne bottles, tobacco, and little things such as men's perfume. We obtained enough games and toys to last till summer.

When the shouts of wonder and pleasure abated, Grandfather Charles urged everybody to the table in the adjoining hall. The Champagne glasses were left in the parlour. Grandfather went immediately to the head of the table, and he drew Léon-Alexandre at his left and Baron Andreas to his right. Name-signs had been placed next to each dish, so we did not have to fight for a place. The table was organised girl-boy-girl next to Léon-Alexandre and Andreas, until at the other end the gang of younger men sat all together. This became of course the liveliest end, and Virginie and I were lucky to sit in front of each other at the hinge between the serious and the hilarious part. We formed the buffer zone between the Trioteignes and Trahties on one side with Bastien and Georges, and with to the other side the Orangerie chaps.

The talk went cheerful from then on, happy and open. Spells of laughter shook the merrier end. We were happy. We clang our glasses for toasts.

For supper we first had a mushroom soup, followed by several sorts of home-made paté with the last green and red autumn salad that could be found in the village. In between these dishes and the main course a 'trou normand' was served, a little glass of brandy to mark a pause. Jeanne Frameur, our cook, brought the turkey straight from the oven to the table. She had cooked several turkeys for this evening, she only brought the first to show how nicely crusted the animal was. The butler, André, had to help her, for each turkey was way too heavy for her alone. She wanted everybody to admire her art, and she was cheered with applause for the chef of the best Brussels restaurant would not have been able to cook better. Having turkey at Christmas was as sacred with the Trioteignes as their devotion to the Lord.

Before the main dish, Grandfather Charles patted his mouth with his white linen napkin. He rose from his chair and proposed a toast. A crystal glass of white wine in hand, he said a few words.

'We are gathered here to feast the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is a good moment to remind us one more of our values, which are Christian, values of peacefulness, love and courtesy to all people, not values of vengeance, of hatred and of violence. We have cherished these values in our families, with the Trioteignes, the Trahties and the Brioges, and we pledge each year at Christmas Eve by this toast to uphold them in the future. Our families are linked in many ways. Let us wish we may live in health and in good fortune for many years to come. In adverse times we must support one another. The future belongs to our young people, so I drink to them and wish them long, happy lives. To long life!'

Everybody drank. We expected one more toast of Grandfather Charles, and after the first hurrahs, he brought indeed and again his glass to the height of his shoulder and shouted, 'to the King!'

This time, all men stood and repeated strongly, 'to the King!'

The solemn moment passed quickly, the guests engaged soon in more joyful conversation on the latest gossips of the capital.

The main dish was served with mashed potatoes and cranberries. Grandfather Charles placed his best red wines on the table, and the white Chardonnays for who preferred those.

Grandma served her famous sorbet ice creams afterwards, but held the Christmas cake for later. Coffee would be served in the parlour, and around eleven o'clock we left the table in a hurry for the adjoining hall, for we were late. The men were allowed a cigarette.

At eleven thirty we all went together on foot in the biting cold to the village. We would not attend a mass in the castle chapel, but in the village church, which lay very close to the outer gates of Castle Trioteignes, at the end of our entry lane. The weather had remained dry, and we did not have a White Christmas that year. We walked in small groups to mass. The women huddled together, holding each other's arms to keep warm, all dressed in furs and large hats. The men followed, still joking, some of the younger ones quite inebriated from the wines and the good company.

The church of Trioteignes was small, intimate and very old, dating from the thirteenth century. It took pride in its stone tower, in which hung one large bronze bell, which pealed now for the gathering in the dark night. Our little church possessed a few fine works of art, a large Sedes Sapientiae Madonna in wood from the twelfth century stood at the altar, and a huge painting of the Assumption of the Virgin made by Luca Giordano in the seventeenth century hung behind. The interior of the church had been altered drastically for Christmas. In the choir

stood an elaborate wooden structure which reached very high to the ceiling, entirely covered by green fir and pine branches. It seemed the forest of Trioteignes had invaded the church choir, and the fine fir perfumes filled the space. We knew wooden stairs and small platforms were hidden by the green branches, so that people could walk to several places in the green, held in shadows. The Nativity tale of Trioteignes would be performed in still lives in that structure. Before mass began, organ music welcomed the village people. Places in the first rows had been reserved for us. The church was filled entirely with men, women and children when the mass began. Not only people of the village of Trioteignes had come, but also of a few neighbouring villages, and even men and women from the nearby town, people who appreciated the last rests of countryside Christmas folklore. Trioteignes was the last village to honour the ancient Christmas Plays. It was very cold in the church, even though the priest and his helpers had tried to bring some warmth by setting fire in two stoves. Uncle Léon-Alexandre took the arm of Amandine and tried to warm her hands. By some mysterious miracle Arlette de Trahty came to sit right next to Jef Asten, Bastien close to Irene Stratten and Georges de Trahty of course next to Violaine. Somehow, Max Vinck had pushed himself up to Rosine, who did not seem to mind that at all, and sat smiling angelically at Max. Her wonderful eyes would have caught a tiger in their web. How limpid adults were! The glances Virginie and I exchanged said it all. We drew up our eyebrows to each other. We would have a very interesting time the next few weeks! How could we use all this to our advantage? Were we to repeat the 'Midsummer's Night Dream'? How could we stalk all?

Bastien Trioteignes stepped forward to in the choir. He took a paper from a stand and began to read the Nativity story from the Gospel of Saint Luke, an old Trioteignes text embellished with images from the apocrypha and from the medieval 'Golden Legend'. He spoke loudly with a warm, strong voice that did not waver, standing proudly and erect at a side of the choir, and he began to read the story of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. He spoke slowly and solemnly and as the tale advanced, a very bright ray of light illuminated scenes of the story, which appeared in the green leaves of the firs over, above and beside the altar. Village people dressed as Jews of the first century personified the figures of the Holy Nativity. The voyage of Mary and Joseph to the stable of Bethlehem was told and the counting, the search of Joseph for a room in an inn, finally the grotto in which Jesus would be born appeared next to the altar. A live ox and donkey had somehow been sneaked into the church, and the story ended with the birth of Christ. Jesus was a real baby, the last newly born in that year in the village, and the proud, young parents had to play Mary and Joseph. The scenes and the story ended when the shepherds entered in procession with sheep on their backs, and then a choir of angels dressed in long, white robes entered and appeared everywhere among the green branches, until very high, singing psalms of praise.

Virginie and I had participated in this Christmas Play until two years ago, when we had caused such havoc among the characters that the play almost ended in disaster. I suppose after that we were considered too devilish to represent divine angels. We had to admit we teased our old, gentle priest, the Reverend Jean Wastier, to heartache beyond all good reason. Reverend Jean was invited each year to our Christmas supper, but each year he declined because he came invariably close to a nervous breakdown over his organisation of the Christmas Nativity tale. Nevertheless, he upheld traditions with tremendous courage and a lot of shouting and cursing. He would join us after mass for a piece of cake in the castle. When the angels and shepherds had sung their last carols, the donkey suddenly started to sing a song of his own, so that the poor animal had to be shoved into the cold outside. After the Christmas star had faded away above the grotto of Bethlehem, Father Wastier sang his own mass. He proceeded quickly with the ceremony, for heads dropped on chests. Reverend Jean surmised wisely that his audience might well fall asleep in his church after the copious meals

and the beer and wine they had gulped down for a few hours before mass. Reverend Jean knew his Papeheimers! Mass ended in the 'Ite missa est,' and everybody wished a Merry Christmas to everybody there and then, shaking hands, accompanied by much clapping on shoulders and ardent kisses. We trotted back to our castle, parlour and supper table, following close Arlette and Jef who walked one beside the other without saying a word. We remarked how Jef seemed to want to begin a conversation several times, but the nasty looks of Arlette apparently held him at bay.

The table was once more set in the castle, way past midnight, with coffee and tea cups and small dishes, on which pieces of the also so very traditional cougnoux were served, sweet bread with dry Corinth raisins, the bread in the form of a swaddled baby, the form of the Christ child. One had to eat the cake at the table, but one was allowed to take one's cup to the parlour. Grandfather Charles and André the butler served brandy to the men, port wine and liqueur to the women. The maids also were now invited in. Some of the younger ladies preferred brandy too, we noted. Reverend Wastier was cheered a little later with shouts of 'well done,' and applause of hands, and he too got pushed in a sofa between the ladies who served him coffee and cake and brandy.

By that time, the older ladies began to show signs of fatigue, but Bastien put on music records on the phonograph turn-plate and more joyful sounds flowed into the parlour. He made us listen first to Christmas carols, among which the famous Holy Night, Christmas songs by Bing Crosby, and then he also played a few jazz records. Max Vinck discovered a record of dance music in the pile. He drew Rosine into a very appropriate Castle Walk, which they performed admirably, inducing much merriment in the assistance. The older ladies then said good night and went upstairs, but the younger folk remained in the parlour.

Our great-grandmother remained sitting as if she had not aged. Bastien made us listen to a few songs by Maurice Chevalier and songs from Viennese operettas, and later on by Charles Trenet. Trenet sang 'Blue Flower', a fresh song on light-hearted, flirtatious love. Great-grandma had joined in to the brandy after her port, and Virginie and I served her lavishly until she started telling a few stories about the lovers of her twenties, a very long time ago. Grandfather Charles knew this was bound to happen, so he arrived nearby and made desperate attempts to usher Claire upstairs, but the young men all moved around her and they pushed him back. They urged her to more tales. Great-grandmother Claire was more formidable than the young men suspected. She had eyes in all corners of the castle, and Trioteignes had hundreds of corners! Claire simply knew everything that happened in the castle. Maybe that was why, in a very Socratic way, she was wise. We adored her.

Bastien dared to ask, 'and where are your Blue Flower lovers now, Grandma Claire?' Claire answered clearly, without hesitation, showing she still had all of her head straight on her shoulders despite the brandy, 'why, Bastien, you all, so very beautiful young men are my Blue Flowers now, aren't you? Don't you all love me?'

That answer drew laughter and cries of 'of course we do,' and indeed, Virginie and I remarked with a shock that all the young men around her, Bastien, Georges, Thomas, Jef, Richard, Jan and Max, stood or sat in the slate-blue uniform of the Belgian Air Force, cheering and applauding to her. They were Flying Officers all, Lieutenants and Second Lieutenants, serving either directly in the army or having been called in as reservists. Yes, the young men were truly the Blue Flowers of Claire de Trioteignes, for this was Christmas Eve of the year 1939.

Max Vinck brought his glass up and shouted, ‘to Claire’s Blue Flowers’, and we all drank.

Chapter 2. From Christmas to 13 January

Arlette de Trahty

Christmas and the following days passed agreeably for our guests, who remained the fortnight at Trioteignes. Each breakfast, lunch and supper, as well as the afternoon teas, were organised as feasts, though much more informal than the Christmas Eve meal. Grandfather Charles showed thus how much he appreciated receiving people and the guests responded with gratitude and grace. On Saint Sylvester's Night, on New Year's Eve, many more people got invited to the castle, most of them dear friends from the village. We held a very animated party of dinner and dancing. The weather turned to icy cold, dry weather but very frosty, and then it changed rapidly to warmer but humid weather, so that Virginie and I did not really like running around in the woods and explore. The days of winter were short and sombre and cold. Our own moods did not leap with joy, though we had our new toys to try out and our new books to read. We had received many presents at Christmas. The moods of our families and friends were not outspokenly morose, for everybody tried to make the best for the sake of Charles and Claire and Anne, the open fire in the parlour brought intimacy and conviviality. We felt good among these gentle people, but a dark undertone broke the too loud laughter, and the happiness seemed more subdued now than at Christmas Eve. As if by general agreement the wireless radio was not turned on, the few newspapers that reached our seclusion were discarded for a while, but Virginie and I listened often to the wireless sets of the Orangerie in the evening, and we sneaked off to the corridor of the upper floor of that building for more open shouts and laughter. The pilots were a happy lot!

We preferred to remain in the castle and in the Orangerie, but every once in a while one of the ladies itched to go shopping or merely longed to walk leisurely by the shop-windows of the nearby largest city, Namur. Sometimes, we moaned long enough until we were allowed to accompany the parties that set off in one or two cars. We kept of course also very busy stalking the couples and the groups that wandered into the village or through the woods of the Trioteignes domain on winter walks. We hid then, and followed. We interrogated ardently about what had been said when we couldn't hear, were rebuffed by some, but many confided in us, maybe believing we didn't understand anyway. We did grasp the full significance of what was said, however, well: most of the times. A completely different, surprising and wonderful new comprehension of the world began to form in our mind. We strung the bits of information we learned like pearls on a necklace, and we wove our webs.

The first confrontation we overheard went between Arlette Trahty and Jef Asten. We had been keeping a keen eye on those two, knowing something would happen soon. We already caught them alone on the afternoon of Christmas Day, in a corner of the inner courtyard, standing close together at the parapet between the castle manor and the chapel, from where one had a fine view over the low-lying pastures at that side of the castle. One of the previous owners had cut massive openings in the walls there, to open the courtyard to the fine, wide and far views on the landscape. The high trees had been felled for that view, so that the castle did not look, at least not at that side, like a hideout of Dracula.

Arlette and Jef stood hidden in the niche, in the recess that the thickness of the walls formed around the open, pedimented windows. They could only be noticed by somebody who walked close by. Virginie and I hid inside the chapel. We drew ajar a window of the small sacristy, and we heard what they said from the first to the last word.

Arlette had begun to walk innocently in the courtyard, studying the details of the façade of our manor until Jef Asten hurried through the gate, coming from the Orangerie. He stopped brusquely in his tracks, went up to Arlette and whisked her into the alcove. They hid, ensconced in the shadows. By then, we were watching Arlette from the chapel, and quite excited to see them together.

Jef Asten started by thanking Arlette. We leaned closer to the wall of the chapel, inside, under the window.

Jef whispered, 'I wanted to thank you for not having revealed my name yesterday, at Christmas Eve.'

Arlette put in rapidly, 'well, well, Jef Asten is it, now? Tell me why I shouldn't run to the police, shouting a British spy called Carter Ash is in our midst with a false passport? Why do I not reveal to the Lieutenants who you are and have you thrown in jail? This castle has a few, not so nice dark cellars with iron doors to lock you in! What are you up to this time?'

We gasped, of course.

Jef retorted bluntly, 'the Lieutenants know who I am. They know what I am doing here and why. Not all of them know the whole story, but they know I am on a special mission. I do not want to draw you into this, so I would prefer if you would not ask me to reveal too much. I am on the side of the just and the righteous, though. I am not the evil wrong-doer you may think I am.'

'I don't believe a word of what you say!'

'You have to believe me. Charles Trioteignes and Léon-Alexandre know. Jean-André knows. I have been here for two months now, under their protection. I work out of Trioteignes Castle. Bastien Trioteignes and Georges Trahty know why I am here. Your other family members don't, however, none of the ladies do. I am cooperating with the Belgian Army. This uniform is not a fake. I received the rank and the insignia from the Belgian Army Headquarter. My passport is a true Belgian passport in due order. Call in the police and I will be held in interrogation for no longer than half an hour. Then I'll be back, but my disguise and my purpose may be compromised. Don't do that!'

'Why should I spare you? Who tells me you're not lying? You can deceive anybody you want. Why would you not have stolen the identity and the uniform?'

'If you must, ask Charles and your father, but do it discreetly, not with other people around, especially not with the German guests around.'

'What are you doing here?'

'I cannot tell you that, and I do not want to involve you, but I assure you I work for the Belgian and for the British Governments.'

'So you finally wriggled your way up to becoming a Lieutenant, he? I never thought of seeing you in the Army. There is too much discipline in the Army for your damn character! How did you get here? Are you stalking on me?'

'I'm a Captain in the British Royal Air Force, Arlette. Yes, I climbed even higher in rank at home. I'm only a Lieutenant in the Belgian Army.'

'You disappeared so many years ago, Carter. Where have you been? What are you up to?'

'Is it really you who asks me so much? You despised me, hated me, loathed me in Oxford, do you remember? You wanted to see me dead, years ago, during our last conversation on the bridge in front of Maudlin College. Yes, I did disappear. I hired myself to the Royal Air Force from out of the Reservists of Oxford University. The Oxford University Air Squadron taught me how to fly and I continued on those courses. I joined the Secret Service while being a pilot and a RAF Officer. I accepted assignments abroad. I came back not so long ago, and then I was sent to Belgium.'

‘And so you surfaced in the castle of my father’s best friend. Are you pursuing me to harass me? I should complain! I also know a few leaders in the Army, you know. I should explain to them who you really are, what you are!’

‘What am I then, Arlette? I am a soldier, a pilot of aeroplanes. A war is going on! I also didn’t do anything wrong at Oxford.’

‘Oh no, you didn’t do anything wrong at Oxford,’ Arlette chided. ‘You were merely Carter Ash, the most ruthless seducer of women, the rashest and richest gigolo of the town. You squired around every pretty face in town. Not one mischief or scandal happened in Oxford you were not a part of. You only had to whistle and the women came running to you.’

Arlette did not struggle to tamp down her anger.

Jef tried to defend himself.

‘I did not seduce women who did not want to be seduced, Arlette, and my reputation was much more exaggerated than true. I flirted and was flirted upon, but I slept with very few of those women.’

‘You relished the exaggeration and fed it.’

We heard Jef Asten laugh and answer, ‘that is true! I grant you that. I was very young and reckless, then. I had few loves, though, but I loved you. You must know that. You called me time upon time a liar, a cheat, and you despised me. Why you engaged nevertheless in that little affair with me I still do not understand after all the hatred you spewed at me that last time we talked. So I left. I was already then a lot more serious than you thought I was. I was rich, but I was not spoilt, not one of the many aristocratic gentlemen that hung around you like flies to a streetlamp. You despised me, so I left. I fled from you.’

‘How do you think I felt when one after the other of my and your female friends came to tell me what a fine piece you were? They asked me openly whether you were as good in bed as you had been with them. They explained what a little, innocent fool I was. You cheated on me!’

‘Those were lies, Arlette, meant to hurt you!’

Arlette stood now closer to tears than to anger. I thought I heard a sob, but only one.

A silence fell in before Arlette continued, ‘why did you turn up here, in the midst of my family, if not to stalk on me again?’

‘There is something on the Trioteignes domain I have to work on. I didn’t even know you were connected to the Trioteignes until very recently!’

‘Oh come on, Carter, do you expect me to believe this? Believe in an accidental surprise? I’m not that gullible!’

Jef Asten sighed. ‘There is a lot you don’t know about me. My mother was a Brioges! My mother’s name was Géraldine de Brioges. She was a sister of Anne, Charles’s wife, and a sister to Amandine, your father’s friend. Géraldine married an Englishman and she died young. You may know so much. Géraldine gave birth to a child, but my father married again and relations with Belgium were severed. The British Service sought to send someone here, and found out about my connections to Charles and Anne in their files. My coming here was no accident. I only did not expect to find you here. What has become of you? Are you married? I saw no ring on your fingers.’

‘No, I’m not married. I’m a doctor and a surgeon in a private hospital of Brussels. I take my work serious.’

‘So do I. Please ...’

We heard Rosine and Violaine arrive cheerfully, interrupt the conversation, and the rest became inconsequential chat on the cold weather and the fine view. We heard the four of them leaving. We closed our little spy-window and sneaked out of the chapel. The three women and Jef Asten – or should we now say Carter Ash – walked back to the castle.

Bastien de Trioteignes

A few days later we followed Bastien Trioteignes and the German Countess Irene on a walk in the forest. They invited us to accompany them, probably as a form of chaperoning, and Virginie and I ran most of the time ahead of them or behind them, seemingly not interested at all in what they might have to say to each other. We were, however, very much interested in hearing what they might tell. Were there more secrets to discover? Who of our guests harboured no secrets?

Irene wondered whether Bastien liked being a professional soldier.

‘I do, yes,’ Bastien returned, ‘but I shall not remain a soldier forever. I have given the matter much thought, and after the present turbulence, I think I might seek a job as a pilot in the civil aviation companies, maybe at the Belgian airways SABENA. Our family does have a sizable stake in that company, and after a while of flying, when I become older, I may enter the management team of the company or found my own company of aeroplane construction or of civil aviation. The Vresele family of Violaine builds aeroplanes and they may be enchanted to have me in. I believe flying will develop rapidly, together with the economy and the business of our countries. The African continent is well known by SABENA and may open to a fruitful aviation business.’

‘What aeroplanes do you currently fly with?’ Irene asked.

Bastien was obviously pleased to hear Irene took an interest in him.

‘I fly on aeroplanes that are both observation machines and light bombers. We have of course only a small force of bombers, for Belgium is a neutral country, but I fly on Fairey-Battle aeroplanes.’

‘What kind of a machine is that?’

‘The Battles are British and Belgian built aeroplanes, designed and assembled in the Fairey manufactories of Hayes near London. There is also a Fairey factory in Charleroi, not so far from here. Our aeroplanes are slow but sturdy. They have been designed by a Flemish engineer, Marcel Lobelle, so they are part Belgian. Lobelle is the chief designer at Fairey. He also designed the Fairey-Fox machines we use much in our Air Force. The Fairey-Battle machines are all metal, two-seat, single-engine, low-wing monoplanes, equipped with a retractable tail wheel landing gear. Three people can fly in them, a pilot, an observer and a rear gunner, but we fly them in the two-seat version, so that the observer is also the gunner. They dive well, are very manoeuvrable, and reliable, but of course, they date from a few years ago, so they are no match for the contemporary German and British fighters and also not for the heavier bombers. I do not want to bore you with any talk of machines, Irene! Where do you come from, actually, how did you come to be a friend of the Baron?’

‘I live near Stuttgart. My family owns factories near that city. We are not aristocratic, but I married the Count of Schillersberg four years ago. The Schillersberg had a name and a title, but little money, so our marriage was one of convenience, but we lived quite happily together. My husband was a dazzling personality in the society of Stuttgart, yet also a wise and gentle man, not given to vices, about ten years my elder. My father relied on him and Johannes would probably have become a fine manager at our factories. If I did not come to love him, we did respect each other and we enjoyed a happy marriage. He died two years ago in an aeroplane accident. He was the only son of the von Schillersberg, and I have a small boy by him. My boy is the hope and the joy of the two families. I try to stay with him as much as I can, but this Year’s End I let my husband’s parents monopolise him for a while. He lives at

our Castle Schillersberg. My own parents live in a large house in Stuttgart. I met Baron Andreas in Frankfurt. We sympathised at a boring reception. He is a friend, not more. I guess we were both a little lonely and we sought company. He invited me to Brussels. I visited the Embassy, then I received his invitation to spend a few weeks at Trioteignes, and I accepted. I may be weary and a bit wandering around for the moment, but there is nothing sentimental between the Baron and I. We are too different in character and opinions. We shall remain friends.'

Irene looked straight at Bastien, and Bastien, who had been staring at her, diverted his eyes rapidly.

Bastien continued after a while, 'I have only been to Aachen and Köln in Germany, not very far. I passed Koblenz when my parents visited the Mosel Valley with me and my brother. We drove from Luxemburg to Trier, on a buying spree of Riesling wines for my father's cellars. My father loves the sweeter German wines, the wines made by grapes plucked late in the year. I've never been farther into Germany. What I saw was lovely, of course!'

'Oh yes! Germany is such a lovely country! It is truly the country of Romanticism, and that could hardly be otherwise because of its wide forests and varied landscapes. I travelled much with my husband. I visited several cities of our country also later. I liked the Bavarian Alps. The Rheinländer are very beautiful too, as is the Schwarzwald and the whole of Bayern, and of course our capital, Berlin. I like München a lot, and Lübeck, Nürnberg with its art, and you name it. I hope our lands remain undisturbed by war.'

'Your husband died in an aeroplane accident. How did that happen?'

Irene dropped her head a little.

'My husband worked in our factories. My father offered him a place on the Board and he was also a Director in the company. Johannes flew in aeroplanes too. The one he flew was badly balanced and his engine failed on him. He flew alone. He spiralled down. He could not pull the machine in a glide. He crashed. He wore no parachute.'

'I'm sorry,' Bastien sighed, 'yes, such an accident can happen to us all. We also fly often without parachutes, though that practice diminishes rapidly.'

Irene changed subjects.

'It seems we cannot continue our path here,' she exclaimed.

They had been strolling inside a hollow road, the banks of which rose to a height of two meters. The path was completely blocked by tree trunks and branches. It would be extremely difficult to climb up and follow the path. Bastien might have done that, on all fours, but Irene could not have messed up her woollen dress and her nice, fur-lined coat in the frozen mud. It was bad enough already, for her boots were covered with grey-green clay mud in which clung rotten leaves.

Bastien seemed to notice the dirt only now, so he took Irene's arm saying, 'we should return. If we go back a little, another path leads to the fields. The road is better there, the views nicer, and we might walk to the village.'

Irene drew her arm loose, and Bastien gave her a hurt look, but she turned and slung her arm back in his, held close to him so that their bodies touched, which both seemed not to mind at all. Virginie looked with high eyebrows to me, and we both understood that an adult kind of game was one of which we still had to learn the particulars.

Bastien and Irene continued to chat and we saw Bastien laugh farther on, and he even placed his right hand on the right hand of Irene.

Virginie followed them, but I was intrigued. Something seemed odd in the fallen trees of the path. This path had always been meticulously kept open in the past. It led to large barns at the

outskirts of the forest, the end of the domain. The barns were used by Grandfather Charles to store hay for his farms in winter and they were also used as his hunter's pavilions. The barns had even been made larger at the beginning of the year, for we had seen construction builders there. We seldom walked as far as those barns, but they could also be reached from the other side, through open fields. Those fields beyond were used as pastures, but in winter the cows and bulls were led back to the farms. Trioteignes owned three farms in the village, and much land on the south-western side of the castle. The farms were given in lease. It had been at least four months since I had walked to these parts of the woods. I climbed up the banks.

I inspected the obstruction, which was extensive. Four large trees and several smaller ones had been felled across the path, the branches left to rot, which seemed awkward, for Grandfather Charles managed his woods with care. The trees had not fallen from the action of the winds. They had been felled with axes! The obstruction had been made recently, for no lichen covered the points of breaking. I did not give this detail much further thought at first, but what I had seen kept hanging in my mind. Why would somebody have wanted to block this path deliberately?

I ran again towards Bastien and Irene and heard Bastien tell, 'I studied a few years at Leuven University, but then father couldn't hold me back from flying. I joined the *Aéronautique Militaire*, which is how the Belgian Air Force is called, and I became a pilot and passed my examinations for Officer. I'm afraid I am literally obsessed by flying. It seems almost too trivial to mention, but I always envied the birds when I was a young boy. I supposed flying was the only thing in the universe man could not do, so I wanted to stand up to the challenge and yearned to fly like the birds. I had to learn aeroplanes of metal or even of wood cannot by a long way do what birds do in the air, hover at low speeds, flutter and dive abruptly and get down wherever they like, even on the smallest branch, but our modern machines are the closest thing. I was originally schooled as a fighter pilot, but I got a place in the Fairey bombers. Our Fairey-Battles are quite versatile, of course, and I don't complain. I fly often. The dreams of boys get realised only up to a point. For me, flying is the nearest thing to paradise!'

Irene added, 'I have flown in aeroplanes and I know the feeling of elation. Up there, our sorrows and worries of down under evaporate. The earth is so beautiful from the air, varied in hills and forests, in rivers and in the patchwork of fields and forests! The landscapes seem pure and pristine. One dwells in a territory where man is not dominant, where vice and greed and vanity and injustice do not exist, and the feelings of purity of the skies also affect the men and women who fly. How little do the people on the ground look, the people that crawl like ants beneath, how little their cravings, their egoism and egotism!'

'You understand how we, pilots, feel about flying. You also seem to harbour little doubt about the dire quality of mankind. Have you been disappointed by men?'

'By men and by mankind, yes, yes! When one thinks about our current way of living, in Germany and elsewhere, it seems hard to retain one's dignity and purity of heart. It seems to me there are only two ways of living in our modern societies, Bastien. Either one refuses and fights the vice, the hatred, the greed, the jealousy and then one gets squashed like a beetle under a boot, or one lives by it and joins it. Then one loses one's purity of mind, of course, and dabbles in the ignominy like so many other people. One's ruthlessness is admired in that world. A third way might be to plunge in that kind of life and exploit the vices of others, somehow hiding one's sensibility and keep it hidden in private. Castle Trioteignes seems to me a perfect place to do just that. One can work in a city, lead industries and finances, exploit the world's vices, and hide inside one's forests for the rest of the times. Maybe it is a truly

schizophrenic life, but leading a double life seems indeed a way to survive and to live in relative wealth even. Maybe such living is the ultimate wisdom!’

‘You have been hurt, Irene, I sense that. I and my family can offer you the rest and peace you desire. Maybe you will let me, one day. In our family, the men carry the burden of the vices of the world. We don’t use vice as a means of doing business, yet we work in it, yes. We protect our families from it.’

Irene laughed, ‘you are the white knights of medieval times, indeed! I see you, Sir Knight Bastien, dressed in helmet and shining armour, brandishing a sword and holding a shield, defending the poor and the widows.’

‘In a way, yes,’ Bastien continued, refusing the sarcasm, ‘of course! It is our pride and also we tend to believe it is some form of sacrifice, but a sacrifice willingly given for love to preserve at least a few persons, one’s wife, one’s children, true friends.’

‘Is that not the old, truly aristocratic view, dear Bastien? It is a tempting image for a woman, especially for one who has to lead factories and domains like I have to do. Women are now also ensnared into the whirlwind of the modern world, you know. Men alone cannot guarantee wealth any longer. The effort is harder and wider. Many women now also need to be involved to earn their living, their wealth and safety. The prospects you propose seem so nice and gentle and soothing, but they remain the rare privilege of very few, and many women would reject it. Look around you. Rosine and Violaine hope for a world like you describe, but what if they are drawn into the real world? Rosine, I think, longs to play a more active part, and the doctor Arlette is already fully working as a surgeon! You can no longer fend off all the foes from modern women, Bastien. It is too late for that! Women are confused. Yes, they seek protection and they cherish that, but at the same time they want to prove they can be independent too. We are trapped between our most fundamental feelings of old and our hopes of ever better life in a new world. We are torn to bits by the dilemma.’

Irene smiled and softened, then said, ‘we also do love to be enfolded in loving and strong, protective arms, you know!’

Bastien looked at Irene in amazement. He felt ill at ease with Irene’s disillusionment and bitterness. He kept silence a long time. Then he changed subjects and once more returned to his familiar base.

‘So you have been in contact with flying machines too! Flying is my life. My parents could not hold me back from flying. I only seem to live really when I’m in the air. All my senses are taut then, I feel intensely each second and each pulse of life, and each moment seems to last a lot longer than on earth. It feels like being in love. I also dreaded the war in the trenches, the mud, the explosions of a conflict on the ground, though I did not think much of war and death. I only thought of flying, of flying higher and higher! The only fear a pilot has is to be shot down in flames, but such terrible deaths are rare.’

Irene shuddered. ‘Do not speak of death. I know of death. We are too young. Like you I want to live and feel every instant of my life and being. Castle Trioteignes is a place out of a *Märchen*, a German castle really, as it lies in the dark forest. Our castle of Stuttgart is also surrounded by woods, but the terrain is more open, our place is all green, grassy, in fat and flat pastures. The woods lie farther off. Your castle is a heaven of peace, a hidden recluse. One can feel danger and darkness outside, but inside it is a snug love nest. I can so well understand you wanted to break out from the sombre woods, to seek what we, Germans, call the *Lebensraum*. You sought light, actually, I suppose.’

Irene grabbed Bastien’s arm more tightly and she walked very close to him, bodies touching. They stepped on like that in silence.

Later, Irene asked more of Bastien's life, of his studies at the University, which had been in Economics, and he heard about her life in Stuttgart. When they arrived back at the castle, they stepped slower and slower, in synchrony with each other's body, and they laughed happily. By then I had mentioned to Virginie we should explore the old barns, but she had only eyes for the couple in front of her. She was fascinated since very young by the early stages of people falling in love.

Library talk

On an afternoon near New Year's Eve we sat in the library near the open fire, reading the books we had received for Christmas. We sat alone and kept silence. Jef Asten entered, said a quick hello, and began to look for a book in the science department, high up in the left corner of the mahogany bookcases. The library of Castle Trioteignes was Grandfather Charles' pride, and he kept adding books to it regularly, books he bought in Brussels and abroad. Lately he had bought a great deal of books on art and he had started to teach us about the great sculptors and painters. Jef took the elegant wooden staircase that could be rolled along the bookracks, and he sought a book in the upper rows. He remained standing there for a while. He came back down, rolled the staircase on, climbed up again. We followed him with our eyes without moving our heads. Jef came to sit in an armchair near us, three books under his arm. He began turning the pages, smiling at us for the first time. We buried our faces in our books.

Suddenly, Arlette de Trahty opened the door of the library, as if by coincidence. Virginie and I exchanged an amusing glance. How limpid the adults' intentions seemed! Arlette had of course followed Jef Asten, her Carter Ash, but she had not counted on us being in the room. She looked at where Jef sat, nodded a quick greeting and turned her back to him while looking for a volume on the opposite side. When she stepped back, she had a large picture book on the painter Tiziano in her hands, and she came over to the fireplace to sit in another armchair, not far from Jef. They read in silence, Arlette turning pages with obviously little interest, more out of boredom than because she wanted to study the Italian artist. We did not know Arlette as a particular art lover. She obviously waited for Jef Asten to say something, but he acted as if he was lost in a book on hydraulics.

Jef Asten had been in our castle for over two months, but as I had remarked to Virginie, we knew almost nothing of him. He lived in the Orangerie, came only for his breakfast and suppers to the castle, ate often alone in the kitchen, he talked with nobody else except Grandfather, and that very sparingly, and we had no idea what he was doing with the rest of his time. He had no other means of transport than a bicycle at the Orangerie, but when we wandered off to that place we never saw him around, and the bicycle remained standing against the wall, inside the hall of the pots. What was Jef Asten doing with his time? He could not walk about in the woods for days on end! He was a pilot in the Air Force too, but he never left for his aerodrome. Yet, he should have been mobilised and on duty at Evere or at another airfield. He might have taken one of Grandfather's two cars, but we knew the cars never left the garage in the stables. What indeed was Jef doing here? Not only Arlette had asked that question! We had an enigma to solve. Nothing could have interested us more. We were young, and therefore inordinately curious.

For what we had learned in the chapel, we should have left the room. We stayed on obstinately, wondering what was going to happen next. Arlette could not hold back after a while.

She must have found it rude of Jef not to address her, so we felt the angry vibrations in her voice when she suddenly exclaimed, 'the weather seems to be clearing up. The sun shines through the cloud blanket. It will become very cold, this night. I may go for a walk. I dreaded the cold humidity of this last week. I felt the cold in my bones. You seem to enjoy a long leave from duty, Jef. Don't you have to return to your aerodrome sometime soon? Will you have a walk with me?'

Arlette asked two questions in the same breath. Jef brought his nose out of his book and acted as if he emerged from a dream, and if he only now remarked the female figure that sat in front of him. He saw Arlette staring at him, expecting some reaction. Arlette had not noticed he had thrown her a few furtive glances just a few moments ago, but we had. Virginie and I had also learned not to giggle.

Jef replied, 'I am indeed dispensed of duty for a while, so, no, I do not need to join my squadron. I am allowed to stay here. I have but little time for walks, though.'

'How is that possible, I mean your remaining off-duty? We are at war and nothing happens! You, an Officer in the Belgian Army, are on holiday for months on a row. That seems absurd!' 'Would you prefer tanks soaring through the woods of the castle, aeroplanes to bomb its towers, infantry fighting with sub-machine-guns in the moat?'

Arlette must have wanted to retort something nasty, but Grandmother Claire stood suddenly behind the high chair of Jef. She had a habit on sneaking on to people without making a noise, something we may have inherited from her, and also Baron Andreas entered the library at that moment. Jef stood up to make place for Claire, but she pushed him back in the chair and went to sit in the large sofa. Jef was startled by Grandmother Claire, and even more by the stately German who came near.

Arlette stated, 'no, I do not want war in this nice domain, nor do I seek the horrors of war for our country. We are a peaceful, small, neutral land. We do not want the belligerent parties to start fighting over our heads.'

This was the first time since many weeks we had heard the war mentioned, and we brought our heads forward to hear better what would be said further. Baron Andreas stood behind Jef Asten's armchair, one hand on the cloth, listening.

Grandmother Claire insisted, reacting on Irene's words, 'good heavens, girl, I have suffered throughout the last war. I hope never to live such horrors again. I was in the prime of my years then, and very sad times they were! Life was hard. We survived barely, here in the countryside. We lived from our farms, we grew vegetables and we had our animals, our pigs and oxen and chicken. The wood gave us the combustible to keep us warm. Life in the cities was dreadful! Yes, France and Britain and Germany are at war again, but little seems to happen, God be thanked for that! I wonder when this idiotic game of fools will be stopped.'

'Belgium is a neutral country, indeed,' remarked Baron Andreas in his low, warm voice. 'Germany is not at war with Belgium. The war will happen to the south of Belgium, and even south of Luxemburg. Belgium shall be left at peace. Moreover, the belligerent countries do not seem to want a fighting war, not now. There is still ample time for meetings and negotiations and agreements. Germany and our Führer do not wish war with France and Great Britain. We want our lands and our people to be returned to us, nothing more, and most of that has been realised. France and Great Britain declared war on us, not we on them! Since they declared war, we, Germans, expect aggression from their side. We have what we wanted, all

the German-speaking territories are back in the Fatherland. So, if the French and British do not attack us, despite the declarations of war, nothing much should happen.’

Jef Asten was in a quarrelsome mood that day and he might have been waiting for a discussion with the Baron.

‘Germany has been warned sufficiently a long time beforehand by Ministers Chamberlain and Daladier that talks should continue and not the invasion of Poland! The ultimatum delivered that the invasion of Poland would mean war was clear. If I may quote another British Minister here, the ‘Twilight War’ we live now, as he calls it, is sufficiently hot. Since the declaration of war in September of this year, a war has been going on in Poland, in Finland and in the oceans, to say nothing of the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Merchant ships are being sunk by German U-boats, hundreds if not thousands of sailors are burning and drowning in that carnage. There is also very much a war going on in the air over the Maginot Line and over the Belgian-German border. German observer aeroplanes cover the territory of neutral Belgium daily. Why is that? Also, who says that Belgium will not be drawn into the war? It will almost certainly be drawn into the war. Only a fool would deny that! In 1936, your Führer re-occupied the Rhineland. Germany began immediately to build a long line of fortifications along the stream. At that time, in April of 1936, the same British Minister I quoted wrote that the creation of the Siegfried Line of forts along the Rhine would enable Germany to economise on troops facing the Maginot Line so that the main German forces could swing around the Maginot forts, rush through Belgium and Luxemburg and the Netherlands and attack France from the north the wide open plains of Flanders. Germany attacked France through Belgium in 1914 and Belgium was also a neutral country then, as now. The neutrality of Belgium is but an illusion of cowardly politicians, an illusion to be trampled upon by the boots of the *Wehrmacht!*’

Baron Andreas reacted calmly, but his voice mounted in tone.

‘Winston Churchill is the most belligerent of the British Ministers! He likes seeing Germany humiliated. He is First Lord of the Admiralty currently, and taking aggressive action with the British fleet. Germany is not aggressive. The first aggression has been directed against our country. Millions of German-speaking people, our people, lived and suffered in former German territories, handed over as war booty to foreign European nations like loaves of bread in a bakery. The Alsace Region is still in France, our Sudetenland was occupied by Czechoslovakia, Austria was but a ghost of its former imperium, the corridor to Danzig was drawn like a peg in our lands, Danzig in reality given to Poland though managed by the League of Nations, so that we had no link anymore with East-Prussia. The only thing we have done so far is to demand that those territories and these people would be transferred again to their Fatherland, to the country they have ever belonged to by culture and language. These people desired ardently to return to Germany. The wrongdoing of the Versailles Treaty, forced upon us at the end of the last war, has been redeemed by the actions of our Führer. And yet, while we did not do more than reclaim the people and the land that was ours, France and Great Britain declared war on us! We do not want to attack non-Germanic countries! We only want our true Germany to be reconstituted.’

‘Is that why you liquidated Austria, the entire country, and brought it under your rule? And is that why you dissolved Czechoslovakia and ran over Poland entirely? In Belgium live Dutch speaking and French speaking and German speaking people happily together. Should Flanders return to the Netherlands, for whom the Flemish have no affection, Wallony to France and Eupen-Malmedy to Germany although the people there voted in a referendum to remain with Belgium? In Switzerland too people who speak different languages formed one nation. Has Germany not caused sufficient harm and distress in Europe by the war of 1914 to 1918? It

seems to me that not only France and Great Britain, but surely also Belgium and the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries, and truly every other country that borders on Germany, including the vast Soviet Union, should fear Germany's hatred!

Baron Andreas almost shrieked at that point. 'I repeat, we do not seek war with the countries you mentioned. We signed a pact of non-aggression with the Soviet Union. France and Great Britain declared war on us, although not one German soldier has passed the frontier of those countries. Who is the aggressor then?'

'Hitler is the aggressor! That is so very clear! Germany, and equally Italy, is not a democracy anymore. Your country is governed by a dictator. Germany has become an oligarchy and a dictatorship. The Germans resented the loss of prestige and grandeur of your nation. The people in the street sought revenge for the diminished glory of Germany, which was only the justified reward of her aggression of 1914. And out of the gutter of the streets rose Adolf Hitler, created by the resentment, and he kindled the hatred even more. He shouted in unison with the mobs of the streets, and pushed himself to the front row with his elbows, shouting and vociferating. But to remain at the front, he now needs success after success! He must give the Germans ever more victories to consolidate his power, for the loss of that power of the streets is the nightmare of every dictator. In 1918, the war ended when the German troops deserted their dictator of the times, the German Emperor. Hitler and his co-rulers will cry out claim after claim, wage war upon war until Germany will lay once more in ruins, destroyed and humiliated. The Twilight War period must therefore end soon, and it shall be ended by Germany. I am so convinced of that! I repeat, beware, Belgium will be squashed in blood and violence. Why don't you Germans understand not the perfidy of the spiralling logic Hitler represents?'

'Germany may win and see her viewpoint acknowledged!'

'Yes, the violence will go on and on until she wins or lays destroyed. The war will not be waged anymore like in 1914, Herr Baron. Our countries wield now destructive power as never heard-of before. France and Great Britain, and the United States of America, shall in the end destroy Germany. That is the law of God! Good always destroys evil! Also, since Hitler needs further successes, he shall have to attack. Every dictator knows he cannot hold his dominant position without quick results. Germany will therefore not risk another long war of the trenches, a confrontation of the Siegfried Line against the Maginot Line. She needs quick, dramatic victories. Hitler needs quick victories. Therefore, he will hurl her tanks, his *Panzer Divisionen*, in massive attacks, protected by thousands of aeroplanes, through and over Belgium, as Germany did in 1914, but with a lot more devastating speed and power and anger. Poor Belgium!'

'Stop! Stop!' cried Claire de Trioteignes, bringing her hands to her ears. 'I shall not tolerate dispute and anger and talk of war in this house! I lived through the horrors of the war. I want no more of that! I don't want to hear about it! Nothing justifies war!'

Grandmother Claire began to sob and Arlette walked up to her, held her shoulders.

Jef Asten muttered an apology, but nobody heard distinctly what he said. He bowed and left the room, clutching his books under his arm.

Baron Andreas remained standing, straight and stiff, and his face reddened with anger. We wondered whether he would now succumb to an apoplexy, but he stood, seething.

He said, addressing Grandmother Claire, 'Madame, I am sorry. You seem to harbour an English-lover in your midst. I assure you, Belgium will be left alone in this conflict that Germany did not seek. German honour will respect the peace of Belgium.'

Arlette de Trahty nodded to everybody and left the room with Grandmother Claire. We saw her run after Jef Asten a little later, and Virginie followed her without being noticed.

Arlette caught up with Jef Asten after the bridge of the castle. She caught Jef Asten by the arm and turned him around. Her face was distorted with anger. She addressed Jef in a very snobby tone.

‘You shall not disturb the peace of this house, damn you, Carter Ash! Keep your English violence to yourself!’

The words stung Carter Ash like a slap. His brain raced. We saw his eyes move, looking almost desperately for a way out, as if he stood in a quandary, defiant, cold and hostile. He acted with muted outrage. He seemed to remain in his violent mood, for when he turned and heard Arlette shout at him, he suddenly grabbed her and kissed her passionately on the mouth. To Virginie, the kiss looked like the first stadium of a rape. Arlette withdrew, just a little too late, and she slapped Jef hard in the face.

The slap cooled Jef Asten considerably down. His right hand went to his face.

He felt at his cheek, and he swore, saying, ‘Arlette, let one thing be clear. I love you. I repeat that: I love you. You always looked at me as if I were an insect, but I love you. I will not repeat this, nor touch you ever more, and I will not enter the castle anymore unless I cannot avoid it. Yet, I have a work to do, here, and I must see to it that my work gets finished. As to German violence, and if you wonder what I have done since we last saw each other in Oxford, I can tell you I have been in Spain. I saw the Civil War there, and I noted the indiscriminate violence of modern warfare and of German aviation. I fought in the Battle at Suicide Hill in early 1937, and I heard of the bombings of Durang and Guernica in the battle for Vizcaya! I suffered, and whether you believe me or not, the sufferings of the Spanish people will be inflicted on Belgium, sooner or later. You’d better be aware of that, and prepare. As a doctor, you may be spared the worse, but you will see suffering beyond imagination.’

After these words, Jef Asten turned and ran, literally ran, to the Orangerie. Arlette de Trahty remained standing on the bridge, utterly stunned. She should have been stunned, Virginie explained to me, for what woman had ever heard being told in the same breath she was loved by a man, but was never to be touched again by that same man?

Virginie ran back into the castle and to her room, where I found her in the evening. She refused to talk to me and shut her door. She could bring it up to tell me what had happened only two days later.

Virginie was like that. When something disturbed her profoundly, she shut herself up inside herself. I knew she would tell me about it, but only much later, when her feelings had been tamed and the information digested.

When I grew older, I understood that many structures of society, family and marriage among them, had been devised to provide safety and stability for children, because nothing affects the mind of children so earth-shattering as the destruction of their simple needs of safety and beliefs of protection and love. The conversation of Jef Asten, or rather Carter Ash, and our venerated Arlette Trahty, was the first frightening event that shook our childhood into a vision of horror. We understood too young that our world could be very different from what we had known till then, to a much more scary picture. More shocks would fall on us in those few months, the ones more destructive of our beliefs than the other. Virginie hid for days and she huddled against Great-grandmother Claire. We have lived through more devastating experiences afterwards, Virginie and I, but we were adolescents and adults when those befell on us, and much better armed to cope than we were in the period after that Christmas of 1939.

Andreas von Reichenfeld

Baron Andreas Reichenfeld, we noticed, had also been badly shaken by his dispute with Jef Asten. I heard him talk with Irene Stratten that same day. They sat in the parlour on a sofa, sipping from a cup of coffee, just the two of them. Our Christmas tree still stood in the corner and I sat under the tree, playing with my model cars, ostensibly humming and pretending to listen to nothing and nobody. They spoke German and may have supposed I understood nothing of what they said. I knew Dutch well enough, though, and I had received first lessons in German from Grandfather Charles and studied the language later on all by myself. I understood sufficiently of what they said to grasp the meaning.

Andreas began, 'I had a violent confrontation a while ago with Jef Asten, the Air Force Lieutenant. He seems to be a very aggressive man. He mentioned sayings of Winston Churchill, and he is all won to the British views of the more nationalistic tendencies of British politics. He might be one of the men involved in what we seek.'

Irene nodded, 'maybe he is. Bastien de Trioteignes is not, I am sure of that. Have you made any headway with Charles?'

'I did not dare to breach the subject to him. I know Charles. He is all honesty and old-school Belgian patriotism. I also cannot shatter the relations that have been built up between him and my father. Charles de Trioteignes stands at the top of conglomerates of connections we have with Belgium and farther off. Through Charles and his associates and friends we have access to the colonies. Neither Charles nor my father adhere to National Socialist ideas. I cannot break the confidence and trust they have in each other. I am sometimes disgusted myself by the situation in which you and I are involved, but I shall have to do my duty. Have you found out anything more?'

'The son adheres to the ideas of the father. Bastien has no sympathy for the Rex movement. He thinks of Léon Degrelle, the head of the Walloon Fascist party, as of a misguided fool, a criminal even, as of someone who violates true Christian ideals. I don't believe Degrelle has found a very large base of support in Belgium. The Trioteignes stick to their values of old, and I must admire them for that. But as you said, I too came here to do a job, and I must go all the way in that. I only found out one interesting thing. There is nothing special or suspect in the castle. All rooms are open to us. There is no space to hide anything as big as we seek. I have even been with Bastien in his father's office and in his brother's office. He showed me all. There is nothing odd in the Orangerie neither, but a path in the forest is blocked. It was just an old, apparently unused, abandoned and neglected hollow path, but the trees that seemed to have fallen across it have not been torn from the ground by a tempest. The trees have been felled by axes, not even so long ago for the cuts showed no rot. Those trees have been placed over the path recently. Bastien told me the trees had fallen down and were left there because his father hunted beyond and Charles did not want the children to wander on the other side of that point, but that explanation did not sound very convincing. Either there is something at the end of that path, or what we seek is hidden somewhere in the village.'

'I have been walking a lot in the village. I sauntered to in each farm. I have noticed nothing special there. The farms are farms, or so they seem. I remarked only normal activity at the

farms, at all the farms, and no other buildings are large enough in the rest of the village to hide anything big.’

‘I definitely heard a noise of engines the other day, but the sound was faint and I could not determine from what direction the noise came from, though it seemed to originate from the front of the castle, maybe vaguely southward. I also saw an aeroplane circle above the forest. It looked unfamiliar and it landed somewhere near!’

‘I heard an aeroplane too, and I saw one above the village, but it disappeared beyond the forest, about south-east. I don’t know much about aeroplanes, though. It might have been a regular Belgian civil aeroplane, or another, I don’t know.’

Irene proposed, ‘you try to explore the southern side of the domain, then. I will try to get inside the wood in the south-eastern direction. I did see imprints of footsteps leading beyond the blocked path, going to the right into the forest. I shall have to do some climbing through the dirt.’

Baron Andreas remained silent for a while, thinking. Then he said, ‘I can only stay one or two days more. The tension here mounts against me and I have to get back to the embassy. We are preparing to evacuate our premises, sending most of our personnel back to Germany, but for a few trusted people around the Ambassador. I have come to like Belgium! I do hope the neutrality of the country can be safeguarded, but I fear that Jef Asten was right when he expected his Belgium to be overrun by our troops the same way we did in 1914. Our official position is that this will not happen, but forcing our way to the side of the Maginot Line instead of through those defences, makes sound military sense.’

‘I have learned to know you as a peace-loving man, Andreas, but our times are tough. We must hold on to our orders. If not, we will perish. I too hate to think about what may happen to these friendly people who received us so warmly, but we must continue watching out for what we came to find.’

‘If they do not resist us, no harm will come to anybody,’ assured Andreas. ‘You just go on with what you came to search for, and I return to the embassy. I may have some trouble fending off the agents and urging them to patience. We have to watch out for that guy called Jef Asten, and I would say also for Max Vinck. He seems a quite hot-tempered little devil, too. The man called Sinnagel is a Jew, I am sure of that, but I have detected no special animosity towards us. It may only be show. The truth is, this peaceful castle contains few men who are supporters of our cause. Wallony is not a fertile ground for our ideas.’

‘The Lieutenants are all men to suspect and to fear. Even if they know nothing about what is on here, they are all adversaries and Belgian patriots, rather in favour of the cause of the Allies than of Germany. This fact is underestimated in our country. I cannot blame the Belgians for eventually wanting to stop us. They are courageous men, fine soldiers, as much obsessed with flying as are our own pilots, and they have that additional touch of dash and rashness that some of our men lack. They are not bad men. I quite like them.’

‘Adversaries and dangerous they still are!’ the Baron warned.

‘They have handguns, of course. I saw their guns. They brought no sub-machine-guns with them.’

‘We’ll just have to keep looking, then,’ Reichenfeld concluded. ‘Maybe, and I almost hope that, just maybe, the information that was leaked to us was wrong. Anyhow, after a few days more we shall abandon our searching. For now, I must return to Brussels. Will you come with me?’

‘No, I think I’ll stay.’

‘For the interest of our cause or for interest in Bastien de Trioteignes?’

Irene laughed hoarsely, ‘you have noticed then have you, my dear Baron. Maybe because of Bastien Trieteignes, yes, maybe not. Whatever, I’ll stay on a little longer.’

The Baron and Irene Stratten kept their silence thereafter. The Baron left the parlour and Grandfather Charles entered. He talked warmly with Irene, but on nothing of importance. I also left the room unnoticed, and went upstairs to tell Virginie what I had overheard.

Ideologies

On one of those evenings, Virginie and I found the pilots sitting together in the Orangerie. They had placed chairs in a circle around an old iron table, and they had rekindled the fire in a rusty iron stove commonly called a ‘Flemish devil’, a stove we had thought would fall apart when somebody put a fire to a piece of wood in it, but the pilots had succeeded in creating a warm atmosphere in a corner of the hall. Grandfather Charles had installed central heating in the building, but the men apparently enjoyed the crisp heat of burning wood and the primitive intimacy and conviviality created by an orange flame rather than by the smooth, impersonal warmth of the radiators in which ran hot water. The pilots had also secured a couple of bottles of Cognac, which I supposed Bastien had gotten out of Grandfather Charles’s cellar. Virginie and I remarked a glow of light in the darkness of the evening, flickering though the denuded tree branches, and we had hurried to the Orangerie hall, where we were welcomed by cheering and much enthusiasm, and pushed on two more chairs.

Our mother Amélie had tried to instil into us the principles of good manners in courteous conversation. We believed we could dispense with such recommendations in the presence of rough and tough soldiers, so we were determined to ask a few questions that bothered us and that were otherwise forbidden to bring up at a solemn dinner table. Our mother had told us never to embark on discussions about politics and religion when we sat in fine company, so we breached these subjects now.

Virginie asked naively, ‘we heard somebody mention these last days that all the ideologies of Europe would be clashing in war. I read something about Communism, and that system seems to be a way of living together in a society that has some advantages. We have seen a film recently, called *Misère au Borinage*, a documentary made by Joris Ivens and Henri Storck on how the coalminers lived in the Borinage Region. The poor people lived indeed miserably! Is Communism not a fine way to provide more justice among men and ban one man exploiting the other?’

Our mother would have been scandalised had we dared to confess we had seen that film, but we had, at a special session organised by our school. The Director of our school had ostensibly had no idea what the film was about before projecting it. Virginie also had read the first phrase of her question almost literally in a documentary book from the school library, a phrase she had discovered a few days ago and which she had read triumphantly to me, so I recognised the provocation of thought.

The pilots were in a good mood. They took up the challenge.

‘I do have some sympathy for Communism as a wonderful utopia,’ Jan Sinnagel reacted while the others drank their Cognac in some embarrassment, and they did not seem to want to give too much attention to what we threw into the conversation.

Jan continued, ‘would a classless society in which the people own in common the means of production, a truly socialist society moreover, not be the ideal? We have written in our Belgian Constitution that all citizens are equal before the law, so does that also not include

social justice? I believe in the free exchange of goods between communities and countries, based on correct and honest prices, but a totally free market economy in which the prices of goods are mainly determined by supply and demand, and in which therefore decisions regarding investments and production are made by companies that compete, and through competing destroy the most vulnerable ones, and then conglomerate to empires, is too much an economy based on the law of the jungle for me, a jungle in which only the strongest prevail.'

Thomas Drandin agreed. 'The law of the strongest is not what we want. I believe also much in a mixed economy, in which a democratically chosen government uses regulation to weed out the hardest economic battles and hence injustices of exploitation of the weakest. The human being is essentially egocentric and selfish, but we should not allow one man to encroach on the rights and freedom of the other. No survival of the fittest for me! We should transcend that evolutionary concept of nature to more humanism, and show us more dignified. When the means of production are completely privately owned, all of them, and all regulations abolished, then all kinds of perversions can occur, such as unbridled accumulation of capital, features that can then be used to corrupt democracy by lobbying for favours and by bribing.'

'The main problem with Communism,' Georges de Trahty threw in, 'is the notion of the dictatorship of the workers. Pure Communism is a utopia, because it seeks a classless society, whereas the difference in intelligence and in ambition will always create classes in any society, whatever its political system. It seem contradictory to me that Communism bases its political system on a class of party members and party administrators. This draws all political power to them, until one dictator holds all power, crying out that this is justified because he wields the power of the people! He only wields his own power, then! I see this to be increasingly the case in the Soviet Union today, in which Stalin has acquired as many prerogatives of absolute power as Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany and Franco in Spain. We must not forget that Mussolini and Hitler used and misused the class of industry workers to base their power on!'

Max Vinck went on, 'you might consider Anarchism than, which rejects the authority of the State and abhors hierarchical relations between people. Anarchists claim they are free men and women, refusing authority and formal organisation. This is even more utopia, it seems to me, for to produce something, to realise any work of man, we must organise our means and people, and manage, take rapid decisions, and that is impossible without some form of authority. I believe nevertheless only in a form of organisation and authority that is freely discussed and agreed upon by free people. I, for instance, acknowledge the authority in the Army because I entered by free will into the *Aéronautique*.'

'If Communism and Anarchism cannot work,' Thomas Drandin interjected, 'some form of Socialism might. Cooperative enterprises, strong public enterprises owned by the State, in common, bring some of the advantages of the classless society and of the market economy. The accumulation of capital, to reasonable levels, for instance in the financial services, can then be plied back into the society and be used for the common good, prices could be regulated and remain honest, and so on. A social democracy creates the welfare state in which solidarity among people can be fully realised. The conditions of agricultural labourers and of the working class in the industry can be bettered, and yet the system can allow some accumulation of wealth up to a point where it cannot harm the State. It aligns capitalism to the ideals of social justice and social compassion.'

‘That is also conformant to the messages of the New Testament,’ Bastien remarked. ‘When you talk of classes, don’t forget that families like the Trioteignes do not find they are in any way superior to other men. We use our gifts to the best we can, but we truly want to remain honest in business. What is your opinion, Carter?’

‘I’m of Anglo-Saxon descent,’ Carter reminded, and we chuckled, for this was the first time we heard him acknowledge that fact in front of us. ‘We believe in the power and duties of the individual to serve our country and ourselves. We do not believe much in undue solidarity, unless it means providing each person with the means and the capacity to make something of his life. Our ideal is the gentleman, though, and that means fairness in business and care for the poorest by charity. What I just said may seem tough for many men and women, but it grants freedom to everybody to rise to the best of each one’s abilities. It is our measure of freedom.’

‘You did not mention Fascism,’ I exclaimed, ‘yet that system seems to prevail in Italy and in Germany. Also in our own countries, in Belgium, Great Britain and France, the system has its many adepts. I refer to the Rex Party led by Léon Degrelle in Wallony and to Rex-Flanders and the ‘*Vlaams Nationaal Verbond*’ of Staf de Clercq in Flanders.’

‘Fascism is the worst system imaginable!’ Bastien cried, rather passionately, and for a second we thought we had brought the discussion in too dangerous waters. What if one of our pilots showed some sympathy for Fascist ideas? That seemed not to be the case.

He said, ‘I agree that our nations need more discipline, as contrary to the disrespect of anarchy and even to some forms of exaggerated socialism, but brandishing eugenics, the refusal of all foreign influences, stark conservatism and a single-party State in one’s banner as ideals of life and society, is sad and wrong and encourages to hatred and violence. The single-party State, whether it be introduced in Italy, Spain, Germany or the Soviet Union, is nothing else but the creation of an oligarchy, the rule of a few men over all, and it leads irrevocably to the rule of one man over all, because the oligarchy needs organisation and hence a chief. It leads to dictatorship. We should, like in ancient Athens, reject dictatorship of one man only, and I don’t understand why this is not done in our countries. How can one be such a fool as to tolerate single-party regimes? That means one gives up one’s freedom! No Duce, Führer, Caudillo, Chairman or Leider for me!’

Jan Sinnagel added, ‘a Fascist State is inward-turned, haughty, believes its original citizens are superior to anybody else in any other country, and that also is a stupid contradiction, for history learns us that in all countries immigration of thousands of years has shaped our common beliefs. None of the West-European countries still has its original inhabitants. The Belgae of Julius Caesar have migrated to Kent in England; North-Italy has been overwhelmed by the Lombards, and so on. Fascism leads to a typical elitist, narrow-minded bourgeois view of people impressed by their own wealth, of how the State should be run.’

‘I believe first and foremost in democracy,’ Max Vinck continued, ‘in a political system in which people choose their representatives, who then form a Parliament to discuss on political issues. The Parliament chooses a Prime Minister and a Government. Our democracy must after all remain practical. We cannot anymore gather all together on a Pnyx, like in ancient Athens, and vote all together on State matters. A Parliament of chosen representatives is the next best thing. The State also needs a symbol to represent it versus other States, and to form its ultimate conscience, somewhat like the ideal British gentleman Carter mentioned. The symbol must be a person who stands above the political groups and influences that seem unavoidable in a form of political organisation during elections. The symbol, the person of which I speak, may be a President or a King or a Queen. The disadvantage of a President is that such a man or woman shall be chosen from and by Parliament, hence shall be a political

figure and a former representative of a political party. That makes him or her suspect to partiality. The disadvantage of a King or a Queen is that the institution of Kingship brings with it a lasting entourage, an aristocracy, and hence a form of class. Moreover, since the Kingship is inherited, the throne may be inherited by a person of valour as well as by an idiot.' Bastien and Georges and even Richard brought their eyebrows up when they heard about aristocracy, but Max added quickly, 'of course, aristocracy can be moved into a certain state of mind of nobility of the soul, overcoming sentiments of selfishness and feelings of superiority.'

'Where does Christianity enter in this picture you paint?' Virginie dared to ask.

'Christianity is a religion,' Thomas Drandin answered. 'Christianity is not the only religion of the people in a country, not the only belief. Religion and beliefs should remain in the private, in the individual sphere. The State, in which people live with divergent beliefs regarding the origins of life and of the after-life, in order to provide justice to everybody, should be a lay organisation. History has shown the horrors a theocracy, a religious society can lead to, which is usually also to a kind of single-party State and an oligarchy, even to dictatorship. Nevertheless, when religions point out very strongly the struggle of good against evil, and when they provide guidelines for the understanding of good and evil, Parliamentarians can reflect on the religious values, up to the point where they do not interfere with other religions or beliefs. The religious teachings have great value for the building of personality. I have found no better description of which values to live by than in the message of the New Testament. These are the only texts I know which learn us to live out of love and to exercise altruism towards our fellow men, to fight our damned egoism. Altruism is a notion we, pilots, should know well, even if we do not realise it, for do we not give our lives to guarantee the freedom of others?'

'I agree,' added Bastien. 'Other texts but the New Testament remain very incomplete as guidelines, but do not forget many texts have been added to the New Testament, and those texts were man-made, and are therefore suspect to a certain degree.'

Max Vinck remarked, 'there is of course the 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen' of 1789, of the French Revolution, and the 'Bill of Rights' of the Constitution of the United States of America of 1791. These too are a good basis, but if we want to live together in peace and compassion we indeed need some higher concepts, concepts not of the mind but of the heart. The word of love is not mentioned once in those papers, but it is mentioned on every page of the New Testament.'

'It is strange, I remarked, 'how you seem then to reject most of the political systems of our present European States and many of the political tendencies in our own country.'

The pilots laughed, but while they laughed they looked right and left, as if to ask one another whether that was the right conclusion of their short exchange of views. There was however no outspoken supporter of Communism, Anarchism or Fascism in this group.

'I just love you Belgians,' Carter Ash exclaimed. 'You guys think utterly devoid of ideology. You are such practical people! You apply simple concepts, which seem to be reduced to the good old saying of 'be nice to each other, be courteous!''

'You pilots are therefore the ultimate English gentlemen,' I concluded, 'and you, Carter Ash, seem to be half Belgian yourself!'

The pilots all laughed without exception at that, and they all laughed heartily.

Carter Ash was wondering where we had heard his full true name, we could see that, but he did not react in anger. Maybe his true name was normal already in this company!

'The truth always comes out of the mouth of a child,' Carter ash finished, quite baffled and puzzled by our assertion.

Max Vinck wanted to say one thing more.

‘Yes, what are we really like, we, pilots and Belgians,’ he asked himself. ‘I would say we are Blue Flowers, light and happy jokers who want to enjoy life, who like to fly and who seek the lightness in the vast space of the skies. We love women, beer and dancing, and when we love something or someone, we remain very loyal. Yes, we are very pragmatic. Do not ask too heavy, melancholic thoughts of us on how people should live. We may be a little negligent in everything we do, and one can see the result of that in the kind of machines we use in our Air Force. We must admit we are no real warriors like the Germans and the British or even like the French. Belgium and the regions that were part of it have never, in a thousand year history, waged an aggressive war against their neighbours. But when we are placed before an enemy, then we pull the trigger, without thinking too much. We do what we have to do unhesitatingly, and we can do our duty as courageously as any other.’

‘Amen to that,’ said Georges Trahty. He brought his glass high. ‘I propose to introduce two new members to Claire’s Blue Flowers. To Paul and Virginie!’

And that was the way, with a toast of Cognac, that we too came to be called Blue Flowers.

Monster

We had another great feast at New Year’s Eve, with much joy and dancing. Rosine and Violaine, Amandine and even Arlette danced with everybody. Jef Asten remained alone in the Orangerie, but nobody commented on his absence. On New Year’s Day, Grandfather Charles offered a fine lunch, which lasted far into the afternoon. Jef Asten did also not show up for that dinner, but grandfather ordered the maids to bring a basket of goodies from the kitchen to the Orangerie. To the guests who asked why Jef did not attend to the festivities, Grandfather told that Jef was a loner and on guard duty for his squadron. We knew Jef had not been at his aerodrome for at least two months, though. Irene and Baron Andreas frowned their eyebrows when they heard that excuse, and exchanged glances, and Arlette reddened in the face. Bastien tried to secure a seat next to Irene, but she changed places at the last instant, and she avoided looking at him during the dinner. Also afterwards, in the parlour, she did not address more than a few polite words with him. Bastien looked dejected all day. At desert, Baron Andreas announced he would leave the castle the day after. Irene asked to stay on for some time at Trioteignes, and that was graciously granted. Bastien seemed very pleased she wanted to stay on.

The following day, Virginie and I were up early. We ate quickly and said we were going for a walk in the wood. Grandmother made us dress as if we would be travelling to the North Pole, and she was right in that, for the temperature had even fallen more sharply than in the previous days. Grandfather Charles warned us out of the village on our own, as usual.

We walked leisurely through the courtyard so as not to arise suspicions about our intentions. Virginie even held my hand until we would be out of view of the castle, like a little angel. In the courtyard, out of a corner of my eyes I saw Max Vinck and Thomas Drandin sitting on their knees on the far side of the mansion. I yelled a warning to Virginie, and we both went up cautiously, suspiciously, to near them, remaining at a respectable distance. Max and Thomas were kneeling in the courtyard at the end of the manor, on the place where the walls of the castle began. They had our backs to us and were looking at a piece of iron that stuck out of the

wall, but I had already remarked that Thomas threw quick glances at us, without turning, to see whether we came hither. I guessed they sought to ensnare us in a trap. I heard Thomas say, 'that must be one of the old wires. See how it has been wrung as if a very strong force bent it!'

Max Vinck remarked us behind him, or he pretended to become aware of us only then. He added, 'that is a strange phenomenon indeed, Thomas. What is the power that transforms the castle? If the monster can do such a thing, it must be a very powerful force at work, here!' 'What monster?' Virginia exclaimed, falling into the trap. Virginia feared nothing but spiders and monsters. 'What are you talking about? Monsters do not exist! And certainly not at Trioteignes!'

'No, except this kind,' Max Vinck tried. 'A monster that can use its formidable powers to reduce and bend steel is a new one on us!'

'That's not steel, you dumbass,' Virginia sneered. 'It is just a piece of copper wire. Steel is grey or black, copper is red. That wire is red.'

'I has been burnt red, yes,' Thomas corrected. 'I guess this was a fire dragon's work! I wonder where it operates from. Do you think it might have taken its base in the cellars of the castle? It may be hiding in the forest!'

'No, no,' Max Vinck argued, 'it is the mark of an earth dragon. It may come out of its hiding place in the evening or at night when it's near invisible! I rather think its hole is in the forest, maybe in a grotto or in an abandoned barn. Take care, you kids, when you wander off! See to it that you don't meet with this monster, for it must be a very powerful beast indeed. We found evidence of its action at several places on the outside of the castle. We were alerted by the butler, by André, and we believe he was right to fear and take a few precautions. He wears a loaded gun on him, now, and he keeps watch at night! These kinds of monsters do not like gunshots, but one never knows. Take care!'

'You are talking nonsense,' Virginia claimed feebly. 'Monsters and dragons do not exist!'

'Oh ye, little of faith,' Max Vinck began.

'No dragons?' he laughed. 'Try to convince the Chinese of that! Have you ever asked yourselves why Chinese houses have doors in odd places? Do you know that when a house is built in China, first a master wizard must come to inspect the plans and the placement of the building to check on whether the house does not disturb the peace of the earth dragon? When the architect has placed the front door on the eye of the dragon, nothing but misery befalls on the house. The dragon must be left in peace, so doors must be placed away from the dragon's head. That is why Chinese houses have doors in all kinds of odd places, and something like that has happened here too, I surmise. Look where the windows of the mansion are situated! Not one of them is placed in a symmetric place or pattern. The old builders of those times knew everything about dragons! And also about the rays of subterranean streams the dragons used to drink from. I tell you, a powerful dragon looms in this place! I bet your Great-grandmother Claire knows more about this. Now, run off, you two, and let us continue our job of looking for the beast. We sure are not going to wake it up before its time! Just take care when you see one, and do not get close to its hole, for I have the impression, seeing the damage it has made, it might be wandering about! Off you go, dragon brood, dali, dali!'

We stayed dumbfounded, perplex, but we ran on.

'Do you believe in anything they said?' I inquired to Virginia.

Virginia waited, and then answered, 'of course not, fool! They talked nonsense!'

I was not too sure about what Thomas and Max were doing to that piece of iron in the courtyard. They were twisting and tearing at it. I should ask Great-grandmother Claire about it, and in the meantime, watch out for strange noises or smells in the wood. I was certain

Virginie was a little nervous, too. She did not release my hand when we ran beyond the bridge.

We ran straight for the path that led south, then to the east border of the domain, and arrived rapidly at the place where the fallen trees blocked further access. We found the footsteps to the right that led into the trees, up the bank of the hollow road. We climbed on all fours out of the hollow path, and we followed a trail, painstakingly stepping over fallen branches and over thorn-bushes of blackberries. Our feet got entangled in the thorns, so we advanced cautiously. When we stood past the blockage, we left those tracks, climbed down, back to the path, but I forced Virginie up to the other side, into the forest. She protested, for we had to walk through difficult terrain, so that we lost much time, but I did not want to run the risk of meeting someone on the path and being sent back.

We stepped into the long, winding vines thrown over the ground by the blackberry plants. We caught our feet in those thorny lines and stumbled. Those vines stung and clung to us! We walked among the spindly trees, through tangled thickets of wild plants and grassy hummocks. The trees in these parts of the forest were of all sorts, tall and small, many old oaks, and beeches and willows. A hart twitched its snout as we surprised it with our noise, then it bolted among the ferns and the trees. Magpies and crows and turtle doves flew up. I realised we made way too much noise.

Virginie cursed and moaned, but we stepped under the trees and made a good distance. The wood of leave trees gave way to a dense growth of only ferns, and then of fir trees. Stepping through that thick was easier, for the fallen and decaying needles of the firs had killed all plants at their roots. We had to avoid dead branches that stuck out of the tree trunks at the height of our faces, but we had only to be careful; there was ample place to walk easily between the fir trees. We did not see where we were going to, though. We walked on, very slowly, until we saw the dark volumes of two barns loom in front of us. The barns we reached did not look anymore as barns! One barn was still the structure built of bricks and topped by a steep roof of tiles as I knew. The other barn looked like a pre-constructed iron or aluminium affair, a hangar with a round roof that descended to the ground in one curve. This was a new building, and I discovered the second barn that I knew to the side of this new building. Instead of the two barns I knew, there were now three buildings! We sneaked around the first barn, to see that the rear wall of the iron hangar was also built of bricks. On that side only, maybe also on the opposite side, I remarked high windows. My curiosity was piqued, for the shape of this construction was not what I was used to in any of the barns of the village. Our hearts throbbed. Virginie kept silent. We went closer.

We first scouted the environs of the traditional barns. Nobody seemed to be around. We checked on the outside walls. Virginie found tyre marks leading in and out of the new structure. We whispered to each other.

‘Don’t you suppose the dragon or monster of Max and Thomas has anything to do with this?’ I asked.

‘A barn or a hangar made by a dragon? You silly, of course not,’ Virginie asserted, but she went more slowly along the walls and crept behind me. I had to prove I was the man, here. I sneaked on. We heard noises in the second barn, the one closest to the hangar. We crept along the walls, but found no window in the brick façade. We glanced around the corner, and saw a door in the wall, and two high and large windows. We could not reach the barred windows but there was also a small window in the door, wide enough to let somebody inside see who stood outside. We crept to the glass. Virginie whispered to me to keep guard to the side of the forest,

while she peeked into the barn. She did that, then started on a run back into the wood, under the trees, where I stood. I ran after her. We hid deeper among the trees.

‘What did you see?’ I asked.

Had Virginie answered she had seen a dragon, I would have believed her.

‘Jef Asten is working on a kind of huge machine,’ Virginie whispered mysteriously. ‘He glanced up, and I thought he might have seen me. I guess not! He would certainly have opened the door had he detected me.’

We waited.

I said, ‘I’m going back and having a look too!’

Virginie hesitated, but she let me go, assuring, ‘I’ll keep watch. I’ll whistle when something comes.’

Virginie could whistle better and much higher in tone than I.

I sneaked to the wall, went cautiously to the door and looked inside. I saw Jef Asten standing behind a huge lathe, wearing a blue overall, turning a steel cylinder and cutting it to a complex form. Curls of steel fell at his feet. I also saw what I thought was a large press for metal forms, and several smaller machines were neatly arranged in a line in the middle of the barn. Jef Asten was looking very intently at the piece of metal he was turning. He did not look at the door at all. I remarked that the barn was remarkably clean, well swept and dry. A series of barrels of oil or of other liquids stood lined against the walls. I also saw two rifles neatly stacked against a wooden table. I have always been fascinated with firearms. I ran back to Virginie and explained to her.

‘What do you think he is doing?’ Virginie wondered.

‘I have no idea,’ I answered truthfully. ‘He is working on some piece of metal or steel on a lathe.’

‘Was that the strident noise we heard?’

‘Yes, it was. He is scraping off metal, transforming a cylinder, making it hollow and shaping it. He is a Lieutenant, but he also seems to be something of a mechanic. I wonder why he is doing that. What is he doing with metal forms? Is he building some kind of a machine?’

‘Let’s go back to the hangar!’

I followed Virginie. She was always in the lead, even when she walked behind. She pushed me on.

Three walls of the hangar showed no openings. The front wall, the wall directed toward the pastures, held a huge sliding door. I had never seen such a large door. Virginie tried to move the panels, but I found a heavy lock on the farthest end and showed that to her. The hangar was closed! We sneaked on to the other sides. We found a grid in the iron plates, a grid set low and large enough to let us crawl through. This had to be an air vent, but the grid resisted being torn out. I could stick my hand through the grid, bending the maze somewhat, and felt screws on the other side, four of them. The grid could only be taken out from the inside. I said, ‘we need a small screwdriver to open this. It won’t be easy, but it can be done. It is also very dark in there, we need a torchlight.’

We decided to return on another day and explore the hangar. We ran back the way we had come, still avoiding the path until we reached the blockage, but we encountered no one.

Fearless and Assailer

We returned to the hangar two days later. We walked exactly the same way, arrived at the hangar and crept close to the ground to the metal grid by which we hoped to get into the strange space. I pushed two hands through the grid and tried to turn the screws from the inside.

I had to exert all the pressure I could manage, and the top screw began to yield. It took me a long time, close to half an hour before the first screw fell on the floor inside, and I had three more to go. I had more trouble with the third screw, which was a lot more rusted than the other, but after a bout of cursing and sweating and changing positions, hoping desperately not to damage the thread of the screw, I succeeded in turning that one too. I lost as much time on that one screw as on the three other together, but I gained nevertheless there the undying admiration of my sister. I pushed against the grid and it gave way, falling on the floor. I reached inside, slid my body in and asked for the torchlight my sister held. Virginie slid in behind me. I switched on the torchlight, and the hangar suddenly bathed partly in a dim light. Huge shadows fell everywhere, and I gasped, for in the hangar lay not a sleeping dragon, but stood two magnificent aeroplanes.

I had not known Grandfather Charles owned aeroplanes! We had lost much time at the screws of the grid, so we did not walk around much in the enormous hall. We only looked at the first aeroplane. It looked like a single-seat, low-winged monoplane, and even I could see it was too lean to be a bomber or a civil aeroplane. Its engine looked huge, placed in front, and the aeroplane had only two wings, not the usual four. Its nose stood high in the air, its tail almost to the floor. This was a fighter aeroplane! I looked for signs and found the three coloured rings of the Belgian Air Force on its fuselage in black, yellow and red. Yes, it was a military aeroplane. I had seen photographs of the Supermarine Spitfire lately, shown to me from a book on aviation by the Lieutenants, and I thought this aeroplane looked a lot like the Spitfire. I distinctly remarked the line of exhaust pipes in front, just behind the three-bladed propeller, not unlike I had seen on the Spitfire's mouth. This machine had the same engine, I surmised. I said so to Virginie. Virginie held close on to me, she followed, but pointed out the word that was written in nice, flowing characters on the fuselage: the '*Fearless*'. I lowered the torchlight to the second aeroplane, and read '*Assailer*'. The words were written in English, not in French.

A flight of metal stairs led upward to a long platform that was set against the whole length of the wall above the grid. We had emerged beneath those stairs. I climbed up the stairs because I wanted to have an overview of the hall. Virginie was clinging to me. On top of the stairs, the two-meter wide platform had a wooden floor. I saw tools hanging on the wall, flying kits, helmets and oxygen masks. Also two sub-machine-guns hung on long nails hammered into a wooden board. I directed the torchlight downwards so that we had a good view from above the aeroplanes. The shadows increased the mysterious grandeur of the machines. I found them a bit bulky in front for fast aeroplanes, but they looked elegant in forms and quite unlike most of the aeroplanes I had seen so far. The hall stood empty but for the machines, but in a corner of the hangar we spotted a sofa and a few chairs arranged around a stove in which it seemed to me some fire still remained alive. It was also much less cold than outside, and a strong smell of petrol hung about. Tools and materials had been brought exclusively to the platform, which I did not find very efficient, for the pilots would have to climb the staircase each time they needed something, but the cement floor of the hall at least remained completely clear because of that arrangement. I also saw a tool-shed at the far end. But for the two aeroplanes and the corner sofa, nothing stood in the hall. No dragon slept here. I nevertheless admired Virginie for having followed me. She now made a movement with her head downwards, and she was right, we would have to go. I had spent too much time at unscrewing the grid. We went down the stairs. I saw then the huge lamps hanging from the ceiling, and switches against the walls, but I did not dare to bring full light. We slid back to the grid, sneaked outside, and I placed the grid back against the wall. Somebody who inspected the grid would notice the screws were gone, of course, but I put the screws in my pocket instead of letting

them lie on the floor, and drew the grid nicely in place. Then I pinched it in place, tight to the wall, with a piece of a small twig.

We had found the dragons! We were convinced now that Max Vinck and Thomas Drandin had merely wanted to scare us off from this hangar. They had not counted on the courage and obstinacy of the Trioteignes! Trioteignes we were, and afraid of nothing. We had pierced the secret of Carter Ash, but what might military aeroplanes be doing in our domain? We still had many puzzles to solve.

Georges de Trahty

When we ran back to the castle, we found Georges de Trahty and Violaine Vresele sauntering in the courtyard, hand in hand. They did not seem very happy to me for two people in love. Violaine was too serious a girl to my taste, but that was only normal, I guessed, she being Flemish and born in the large, dignified city of Ghent. Her complexion was very pale. Violaine was not a girl who lived much outdoors. Her skin gleamed ivory white, but was without blemish. Such white skins were also not without charm to certain men who liked delicacy, I noted. Her lips slightly parted from the cold, and she blew out her breath as if to check on how frosty the air actually was, and I remarked a little cloud emerging from her mouth through her small, very regular and also sparkling white teeth. A faint red blush rose to her cheeks when Georges stared at her a little too insistently.

Virginie and I went up to them and we sprang maybe a little too joyfully around them. Virginie asked, ‘why did you become a pilot, Georges?’ ‘I loved to fly of course,’ Georges answered. ‘I also had anyhow to become a soldier for a time, so I entered the Air Force.’ ‘What does it take to become a good pilot,’ I asked. ‘What brought you in the Air Force?’ ‘I did want to serve my country,’ Georges admitted, talking more, we guessed, to Violaine than to us, ‘but when I have to be very sincere, it came right down to me wanting to fly. In the beginning, I had a hard time, for in the first months at the aviation school we learned mostly only to march and to salute and all that rot. The lectures were horribly dull and tedious. We learned to shoot with guns, we had more lessons in navigation and in mechanics and we learned the basis of aeroplane hydraulics. We only learned to fly late, but when we did that feeling compensated for all our trouble. That dull time also formed our characters, though. The Sergeants and Lieutenants beat out of us the notion that we were God’s gifts. We did love aeroplanes. I guess we were fascinated by the engines and by the mechanics of the devilish machines that were as powerful as monstrous dragons in the air. The aeroplanes became up to a point our ideal of beauty. We loved the roaring of the engine, the sense of domination and mastery over the power. We loved the struts and metal wires in the fuselage, the linen canvas stretched on the wings, the way we could articulate parts of the wings. We felt intoxicated when we smelled the smoke of the burnt fuel. We felt an overwhelming sense of power for being able to master the monster of near a thousand horsepower beneath us!’ Georges laughed with himself. ‘Of course, when our instructor sent us into a roll for the first time, the world spun around incomprehensively, the land and the sky melted together into a kaleidoscopic image and we did not recognise the earth from the sly anymore. Some of the candidate pilots failed then, because they got hopelessly sick. Flying upside down too was frightening! All commands were inverted, but that is easier said than done. Our automatism were string. You hung in your straps, head down, fearing you would fall out of the open

cockpit any second, the grit from the bottom of the fuselage and the dirt fell all around you, as if it were ascending to the sky. After a couple of times you got used to it. You let yourself be lost for a while, then you caught your bearing, realised where the earth was and re the sky, and you brought your aeroplane back straight, sometimes instinctively, not really knowing how you had done.'

Georges looked at Violaine, who stared at him somewhat surprised, then he continued. 'I liked especially the camaraderie of the pilots. We were all fine pals. The nobleman who had a title forgot all about that. Pomposity is discouraged in the Aéronautique, we are all just friends, good friends, and we are not shy about it.'

'You say you like the camaraderie,' Violaine remarked. 'Is that only with the pilots of your squadron?'

'Oh no, no,' Georges objected. 'Of course we like the comrades of our squadron. We know we will have to protect each other, although flying is much a lonely job. We form many comradeships, among pilots in general, above the squadron or group level. For instance, do we not form now a club with the pilots gathered at Trioteignes for Christmas? We could call us 'Claire's Blue Flowers' now, couldn't we? We should have an enamelled pin as emblem, a golden flower with four blue petals!'

'Why four petals?' wondered Violaine. 'You are six!'

'In fact we are eight,' Georges winked at us. 'Four like on a clover with four leaves, a shamrock for luck, maybe a double shamrock' he added.

'We loved of course also, all of us, to be popular with the girls!' Georges added suddenly as an afterthought, calling up pleasant memories.

Georges looked sideways at Violaine, hoping for a reaction, but she acted as if she did not really care. I am sure she was only acting, playing cool, because a little nasty twitch tore at her lower lips. She still said nothing.

'We were quite romantic guys, walking around in silk scarfs around our necks, nonchalant and daring, as popular as film stars on the dancing grounds, a little snobbish to the Army boys, especially with the infantry who had to crawl around in the mud whereas we were as free as birds. We were also light-headed, insouciant, our lot was funny, and we showed little respect for anything but our Group Commander or our Squadron Captain, though these too were more regarded as pals than as bosses. We were and remain perpetually cheerful, and we would have fought among us to get a place in the cockpit of an aeroplane. We are addicted to flying!'

'Isn't that a tickle too boyish?' Violaine asked.

She smiled, 'will you pilots remain boys all your life?'

'There is something of that,' Georges admitted wearily. 'We are tough, usually intelligent, quick in reactions, instinctive, gregarious, loud-mouthed but dignified, despising discipline, irrespective too, I guess, and usually good-humoured. We like action and speed, and some of us can become quite aggressive and obstinate. All these qualities or lack of the contrary qualities smooth out with age, I suppose. The Aéronautique is a very young branch of the Army! Pilots are young! Nevertheless, I will not stay a pilot all my life.'

'What would you then like to be when you grow up?' Violaine grinned.

'I don't know yet,' Georges answered, thrown off-leg. 'I'll find something. The Army turns us out as men, you know, not little pussies. We learn to do many things. We learn to learn fast!'

Virginie and I looked at Georges de Trahty with admiring eyes.

I concluded, 'I think I am going to be a pilot, too!'

Whereupon Virginie drew me away, calling to me, ‘silly, you a pilot! Much water will run under the bridge before that happens!’

Something was odd with that conversation, I thought, and it took me a while to understand. Violaine and Georges were officially engaged, yet she still asked such fundamental questions about what Georges was doing! They should be very intimate, yet Violaine seemed not to know much about Georges. She also did not seem to admire him much. I already knew the importance for a man to be adored by his love. Violaine saw Georges as a boy. I would want my wife to admire me, to look up to me!

Irene Stratten

We could only return to the hangar three days later. We ran, armed once more with a screwdriver and a torch, though the screwdriver would be of no particular use. At the place where the path was blocked, we almost bumped into Irene Stratten who stood pensive at the tangle of fallen trees and intertwined branches. She wore sturdy boots, riding boots, which she had probably borrowed in the stables, and she also wore tights and a short jacket lined with furs, a woollen bonnet on her head. She had not seen us coming, so we went back on our steps, up the hollow road behind her, and we watched her from under a large tree. Irene seemed to be in doubt about what to do next, but we saw her resolutely come to a decision. She grabbed bushes and grass and climbed upwards, like we had done. She slid, but could grasp a beginning tree, and reached for a young bush, which held, and then she continued to climb. She heaved herself up at another tree until she stood above the path, panting, but obviously pleased of having got there. She examined closer how the trees had been felled, let her hands wander over the traces of the saws and axes, and then she stepped a little farther into the wood.

Irene walked cautiously around the blockage. We followed her at a respectable distance, so that she would not hear our steps. We avoided stepping on branches that might snap. She found the path beyond, like we had done, and she slid down back into the hollow road. She slapped at her clothes, brushing away the leaves and broken twigs from her cloak, and she wiped some mud from her boots. She strolled on, looking to all sides. We did not descend back on to the path like we had done the last time, but we sneaked above from tree to tree, always avoiding any noise. Irene continued slowly in the path, until she arrived at the barns.

At that moment, we heard the sound of a powerful engine start. Irene was puzzled. She stopped, and listened intently to the noise. She went around the first barn, then she stepped to the hangar. She did not sneak but went straight for the building, apparently unafraid, walking in the direction of the noise. She disappeared at the front, where we knew the gliding door was. We sneaked in behind the hangar, found our grid and I made a sign to Virginie to have a look inside. Virginie signalled me to follow her, and she took the grid easily in her two hands, tugged at it and shoved it aside. Nobody had detected something had happened to the grid! She slid inside.

When I pushed my head into the hangar after Virginie, I found that the front of the hangar stood entirely open, and the hangar bathed in light, not only from the open panels, but also from several electric lights that hung above the aeroplanes. The engine of one of the aeroplanes roared, a propeller swished at amazing speed so that we only saw a whirling circle in front of the *Fearless*. The sound was deafening. Nobody could have heard us entering and

climbing the stairs. The noise impressed Virginie and made me become exhilarated. I felt excited to the bones. We ascended to the platform and laid down on the wooden planks, our heads as low as possible to the floor. We could see what happened below through the iron railing.

Bastien Trioteignes and Jef Asten stood leaning against the rear wall, watching the tail fins of the *Fearless*. The stench of petrol fumes was intolerable where we lay, so that I supposed we would not be able holding out for long on the platform. Why did the aeroplane not roll forward? Suddenly, the roaring engine was cut and stopped, the rhodoid cockpit slid open and we recognised Max Vinck in the pilot seat of the fighter. He drew off his helmet. We also saw Irene Stratten come to the side of the aeroplane, along the wall. She caused quite a stir, below. The propeller stopped also, and Max Vinck jumped on the ground. Bastien, Jef and Max stood in front of Irene.

‘Hi, a good day to you!’ shouted Irene, striding near to where Bastien and Jef stood, almost immediately under, but next to our platform. ‘I was walking in the wood, heard much noise and came upon this barn. I did not expect aeroplanes here! Is this some kind of aerodrome? Is that why so many pilots are in the castle? I didn’t know you were stationed right here!’

Bastien went up to Irene.

He answered gently, ‘this is only one small hangar for aeroplanes, Irene, machines we are tinkering with. We have no aerodrome, just a few pastures and two aeroplanes. We are not stationed here at all, but on our military bases. We like aeroplanes, so we brought these here and work at them. They are not really ready to take to the air. We are sky-freaks, you know.’

‘I know indeed,’ Irene laughed her most innocent smile. ‘These two look to be powerful machines, though. You guys like speed, it seems, and manoeuvrability. They look like animals ready to leap, to me. Are these Spitfires?’

‘We do love speed,’ Bastien smiled also, and the tension seemed to lessen in the men, although the ever-joking Max Vinck kept his silence and looked sternly and worried at Jef Asten, who exchanged in his turn quick glances with Bastien and Max.

‘You must show me how it is to fly in one of these someday, Bastien, at least if they do fly without danger. Can you take them into the air? Or are you still indeed putting them together?’

‘We can take them up,’ Bastien replied.

‘They are prototypes, rigged by amateurs,’ Max Vinck interjected rapidly. ‘We are not sure they will hold up well in the air. Pieces might fall down when we’re flying them. Jef and Bastien are not too dexterous when it comes to mechanics and bolts. The last time I flew in one of these I lost a few screws while I was in the sky. I almost crashed on the castle. We may break a wing or the tail rudder in flight. The machines are still dangerous. We were testing the engine. I would definitely not suggest going into the air with a lady on board!’

‘Yes, we must continue to check on the engines,’ Jef Asten added.

‘The fumes are too thick in the hall, they are not too good for your health and complexion, Countess Irene,’ Jef Asten warned. ‘Bastien, why don’t you take the Lady back to the castle? I cannot imagine she is much interested in our boys’ toys. Max and I shall fire the engine again and check out on those strong vibrations we detected in the front fuselage. We have not much time left today for that!’

‘Sure,’ Bastien agreed, ‘shall we go, Irene?’

Bastien threw his blue overall on a bench, and put on his officer’s overcoat. He took Irene’s arm and led her away. Irene smiled sweetly, she hesitated but a moment, then she accepted Bastien’s arm and left the hangar with him. She did not protest, but continued to glance at the machines while she was pushed out. She also glanced over her shoulders, back to Max and Jef.

Jef Asten and Max Vinck watched the pair walk out of the hall. They heard Bastien chatting lively with Irene, and they waited quite a while before Jef Asten broke the silence. 'Damn, damn,' Jef cursed loudly, 'a German in our hangar! She has seen the aeroplanes. She will warn the Baron. Do you believe in coincidences, Max?' 'I never have,' Max announced with a face of steel.

I was very surprised to see quite another Max Vinck here, a determined soldier's face. 'Why the hell did Charles Trioteignes invite Germans to his castle at this moment?' he cursed. 'That is a very pertinent question. This place was supposed to remain a secret. Our secret is sprung. Why don't we now invite the entire world in? I shall have to confront Charles! Do you think Irene was deliberately prowling about?' 'She did pass the blocked path deliberately,' Max continued. 'She climbed around, and that took some effort. She could not have been innocently wandering around like a real lady. She is something of a sportswoman, and obstinate. There is plenty of space in the woods and enough open paths to walk on. It is not very lady-like to pass an obstacle of felled trees. The other women didn't come here. Maybe it was all innocence, the mark of a woman who does not like to be set back by an obstruction, but I doubt that view. The Baron has left, though, and she is indeed a lady, not a soldier, and not a mechanic. Maybe we are only seeing ghosts.' 'Maybe yes, maybe not. She has discovered the machines. How can we make sure she does not come back here, gets into the hangar, sabotages the aeroplanes or even leaves in them?' Jef asked, more to himself than to Max.

'Is she a pilot?' Max wondered sharply, incredulously, making a face. 'She is a Countess, Jef, really a lady, one who does not dirty her hands or her skirt!' 'We know nothing about her. She looked eager enough to get into the aeroplane!' 'She wants to lift herself in the air with Bastien,' Max chuckled. 'What would she find out during a short trip in these machines? She would fly for a few minutes with Bastien, who would certainly not push the aeroplanes to their limits. She would find out nothing special. Maybe we had better play this the innocent way too, let her have a fly and continue pretending nothing special is up here.' 'Maybe we should,' Jef doubted. 'I guess you are right. Anyway, I'd better sleep in the hangar for a few days now, and lock the gates from the inside at night. We'll seal off the petrol tanks of the aeroplanes. Can you fix something on the starter so that no one else but us can take off?' 'I can weld a locker on the cockpit so that no one can open it without a key,' Max proposed. 'That is too obvious, too easy,' Jef Asten refused. 'Fix something inside on the starter mechanism. Change the starting procedure. Do something less obvious to it!' 'All right. You don't take chances, do you Carter?' 'Would you?' was all Jef Asten retorted, and Max grinned and shook his head to 'no!'

The two men went back to work. Max fired the engine again, roared the machine, opened and closed the throttle, the propeller whined. He stopped the engine. He fetched tools from the other side of the hall, climbed back in the cockpit, worked there a while, then he stepped out again and opened parts of the fuselage. He fetched more tools. I began to wonder whether he would come up the platform, and then we would be done for. He got a welding apparatus out of a corner, however, put on an iron mask to protect his face from fire sparks. We saw him sawing and hitting with a hammer inside the machine, then he began to weld and metal sparks blew out fiercely of the belly of the aeroplane. Jef Asten stood beside him and opened more plates around the engine. He hammered inside, worked with a pair of tongs and with a wrench.

We watched them working for about two hours so that our legs and arms grew stiff from the cold, but we remained lying on the platform. We were bold at that, for one of the men might have come up the platform to fetch tools. Neither of them did, however. They worked with their backs turned to us. That gave me time to inspect the machine-guns that hung against the wall.

When darkness fell, they tried the engine again. Virginie and I slid down the stairs while Max and Jef had their backs to us, and we left by the air grid. Had Jef and Max known there was a secret passage into his beloved hangar, we surmised they would have seethed with anger and we would not have escaped unharmed. We ran to the castle.

In the following days, Uncle Bastien convinced Jef Asten and Max Vinck that Irene was but a woman interested in the excitement of an air flight with him. Jef and Max had thought about Irene having found the hangar and they agreed that they might as well try now to continue their game of innocence with everybody and especially with Irene. The best way to hide a secret, they supposed, was to act as if there was no secret at all. They might as well allow Irene in for a while, which was also a fine method of observing her, rather than tell her the hangar was off-grounds, forbidden terrain.

A few days later, therefore, Bastien left the castle with Irene, who was dressed as on the day we had seen her the first day in the aeroplane hall. She was dressed in trousers, boots, a short furred jacket, a large overcoat thrown nonchalantly over her shoulders, so that she was quite an exotic image and the representation of a refinement Bastien could not have found in most of the Belgian women he had encountered. Her outfit resembled a female flying kit, and it was a lot more elegant than the kaki overall-like flying kits of the Belgian Air Force.

Bastien and Irene walked to the hangar, the gates of which stood open, expecting them. Jef Asten scurried around in the hangar, but did as if he did not find Irene's presence anything else but normal. Bastien put on his true flying kit, helmet but no oxygen mask, and no furs, meaning he would not be flying very high, and he forced the inelegant clown-like flying kit also on Irene. He tightened the straps on her. Max Vinck entered the hangar then, and also Richard Bousanges, and they helped Jef with the propeller of the two-seated aeroplane, the *Assailer*, the one that stood at the farthest end of the hall. Irene and Bastien climbed in the cockpit. Max Vinck hurried to push Irene in, but Bastien shuffled him aside and helped her in, making eyes at Max. Bastien sat in front, Irene behind.

The engine began to roar deafeningly when Bastien pushed on the starter and drew out the throttle, and the aeroplane shuddered forward. Bastien rolled out of the hangar in the stench of burned petrol fumes, on to the green pasture that was frozen hard. Bastien met the machine take on speed smoothly and when the aeroplane was ready to lift, he eased the stick slowly back so that he rose not too steeply.

Virginie and I stood behind the walls, and we saw the aeroplane slowly drive out and then roll quicker and quicker, heave its nose and leave the ground in a steep climb, into the very blue icy sky. Bastien turned the aeroplane, flew in the direction of the village, over our heads, and we lost the machine out of view behind the trees.

Bastien flew for about half an hour, and then we heard the engine noise approaching again. We saw the aeroplane glide almost graciously over the tops of the trees, turn twice beautifully and then make a perfect landing. This aeroplane was equipped with powerful brakes on the wheels!

Bastien rolled into the hangar, where Jef and Max helped it to turn, engine still running, so that it faced the gate. Bastien and Irene opened the cockpit, they drew off their helmets and Bastien cut the engine altogether.

Irene was laughing when she climbed down. She had enjoyed the flight, obviously, for we heard shouts of 'whow!' and 'grand, tops!' above the rest of the noises of the men. Max Vinck stood a little aside, and even he smiled. He stopped the propeller and went on to the fuselage with dirty rags and cleaner rags, and he started to wipe on the wind screen and on the fuselage around the engine. Yes, these machines were his babies.

We heard him cry to Jef Asten, 'the engine lost too much oil again!'

Bastien and Irene stepped outside, arm in arm, but their bodies touched quite more closely than the last time. They left the hall and walked back to the castle. We followed them and at the blockage in the path, we saw Bastien helping Irene up, and once Irene was standing on the bank, when also Bastien climbed up, she kissed Bastien passionately on the mouth.

That kiss swung our eyes wide open. We looked at each other meaningfully. So that was a true kiss! They held on. What was happening with Irene and Bastien? Finally, we saw them separate, but sling arm in arm and walk on to the path. They kissed at least two times more on the way and then they even ran a few steps, laughing all the way to the castle like two young children who had been given toys. Nevertheless, when we ran aside of them, I thought I also detected an expression of ineffable sadness on Irene's face.

Thomas Drandin and Jan Sinnagel came out of the Orangerie behind them, they remarked the circus, and they smiled knowingly. I made a mental note that a fine way to catch a girl was to go flying with her. I definitely had to become a pilot! I wondered already how and where I might learn how to fly.

Explanations

Jef Asten did confront Grandfather Charles a little later about the presence of the Germans in the castle. Grandfather Charles, Jef Asten and Max Vinck sat then in the office of Grandfather, discussing over a glass of Cognac.

He began, 'the aeroplanes are ready. We boosted the engines a little more, re-shaped the tail plates, changed a few bars at the steering, modified the injection of petrol to the engines. We had five calls with the engineers of Rolls-Royce in Great-Britain. Your telephone bill at the Orangerie will run high. Max Vinck has been at the Vresele factories to discuss what to do next with the machines. They have another prototype in their hangars on which they continue to work, but nothing as final as what we have here. We should decide on where we are to take the aeroplanes to. The decision will be with the Vresele Factories, of course, with the proprietors. My work and Max's are nearly finished. His Majesty's Government is moderately interested. They do have the Spitfire and the Hurricane, but the machines we have here are slightly better. In pure speed, they are comparable to the Spitfire, which should not come as a surprise since they have the same engine. A few innovations might interest the Royal Air Force, and of course Rolls-Royce Works. Vresele appraises the situation with more realism than many politicians in Belgium. The Baron knows he cannot start production in Flanders. The war makes that impossible. The Fearless and the Assailer are attack aeroplanes, and the Belgian Government still refuses to think of anything that has an aura of aggression about it. Baron Vresele would like to offer the aeroplanes to the French and British Allies, keeping patents on innovations, getting income from patents only, even though the French and British

manufactories re his competitors. He knows Marcel Lobelle who designed most of the aeroplanes used by the Belgian military at Fairey. We must recognise that the true war, not this Twilight War, real attacks, are imminent.’

Jef Asten paused, and then continued. ‘At Trioteignes, Max and I are worried about your German guests.’

‘What are your worries?’ Charles wondered.

‘Max and I are worried that the Germans, the Baron and Lady Irene, might be spies.’

‘Baron Andreas is no spy. Definitely not! He truly is a member of the German embassy. He has served in Belgium for a few years already. The German Government uses his multiple contacts in Belgium, and that is why he remained in our country. He was not much involved with the German Nationalist Party in Germany itself. He is no spy!’

‘All attachés are potential spies. The German Ambassador for Belgium, Vicco von Bülow-Schwante, is a noted member of Hitler’s National Socialist Party,’ Jef corrected. He let that information sink in.

Jef continued, ‘we are grateful to you for having granted us access to the aeroplanes here, in your castle and domain, but why did the Germans show up, at this moment? What exactly are your relations with them?’

Charles flared up, ‘are you accusing me of conspiracy with an enemy? How dare you! I allowed you to test the aeroplanes in secrecy in my domain! If I had preferred the Germans, I would have invited them to look at the machines rather than you!’

Jef Asten coldly observed Charles de Trioteignes. He remained sceptical, for he knew as well the Vresele engineers had contacted the Royal Air Force in Great-Britain as Trioteignes.

‘I said we were grateful, but I repeat, why are the Germans here? Why did they show up just now? Did you contact them?’

‘I did not!’ shouted Charles. ‘Would I have called on Baron Andreas to spook around? He didn’t do that, by the way! He left the castle in the meantime. I know Andreas’s father quite well. He is an old friend of mine. We visit each other each year. I have eaten at the old Baron’s table. I received a phone call a few days before Christmas from him, from my friend. He asked whether his son might pass Christmas and New Year peacefully with us. My friend implored me almost to receive his son. It seems the atmosphere of Brussels is not very agreeable anymore to German guests. The grudges of the last war once more surface. Andreas could have spent the feast days alone, secluded in the embassy buildings, alone and sad. I could not refuse a favour to a good friend. I pledge for Baron Andreas’s family! They are honourable men.’

‘Honourable men are patriots,’ Jef threw back at Charles. ‘The Baron is devoted to his country, and I surmise also a convinced Hitlerian, a National Socialist at heart. I cannot blame him for all that, but what we are doing here is not exactly helping the Nazi Regime or the *Wehrmacht*. I suppose the danger left when he left, though. What do you know about the Countess?’

‘She was only introduced to me at the same time as you saw her. She is a woman, a Countess indeed, and she manages factories for her father and family. She lives with her little son in the Castle of Schillersberg. The names of Reichenfeld and Schillersberg are old names, of well-known and noble families. Are you accusing her of spying too?’

‘What kind of manufactories does she manage?’

‘The Stratten manufactories are of the metal industry. They produce mostly precision tools and instruments, complex devices used in the automobile and other industries.’

‘Do they produce precision instruments used in the Navy, in the Army or in the Air Force?’

‘I don’t know, maybe yes, also for military purposes I would assume. I haven’t asked her. I also have not heard her asking any questions of that kind or questions about what might be happening in the hangars. I never heard her asking one technical question. Questions about

financing and accounting and banking matters I heard her ask, yes. She is a woman, for heaven's sake!

'We remarked that,' Max Vinck grinned, 'and quite a handsome person she is. Your son Bastien seems to like her as much.'

'Bastien? I haven't noticed that!' Grandfather Charles shouted, 'but even if he has, Irene Stratten is a fine young lady though a widow, well-mannered, rich, related to very respectable families. The Reichenfeld and the Schillersberg have no National Socialist tradition. I bet they regard anything called socialist with dark suspicions. I have heard my friend mock the Führer. They are decent people.'

Max Vinck looked dubious.

'All right,' Jef Asten concluded, not wanting to push Charles as far as insult, 'anyway, we must keep them at innocent distance and act as if nothing special is going on, here. It would be preferable for the Baron not to show his person too early again. Let's hope his business keeps him a long while still in Brussels. His presence does urge me, however, to action and decision. I would like to take the aeroplanes and their plans to Britain, sooner than I wanted, even if it would be interesting to work still the engineers of the Vresele Factories a little further yet. Do you object to Max and I taking the machines out of the country?'

'The aeroplanes are Belgian and they are not entirely mine. I do own part of them in development funds and patent rights, but only a small part. What you do with them is not my decision. I am fine with Baron Vresele's opinion. The decision lies with Vresele and with the Belgian Authorities. I shall not oppose Vresele. Ask Violaine! She handles her father's interests here.'

Max Vinck smiled, 'Baron Vresele agrees to bring the machines abroad. The Belgian government will at this moment not allow us, not in the current circumstances, to take strategically important war material out of the country. They fear German retaliations, German wrath, and they do not want to give the least argument to the German Führer for tempting him into accusing Belgium of agitation against Germany. They are simply afraid! The Belgian Government understand nothing of the importance of these aeroplanes. The Belgian Air Force does, however, and a few Belgian Army Generals are of the same opinion as we. They agree we should not let the aeroplanes fall into German hands. So we shall have to act anyhow against the opinion of some Authorities, and count on the goodwill of others. Secrecy helps, of course.'

'Belgium has not declared war on Germany,' Charles objected. 'Belgium is a neutral country. Why should we support France and Great Britain more than Germany?'

'We must not start arguing about that subject all over again,' Jef Asten stopped that direction. 'We take it for granted that the German *Wehrmacht* will soon roll over Belgium like they invaded and ran over Czechoslovakia and Poland recently and like they did in 1914. Do you harbour any sympathies for the Fascists?'

'Are you mad?' Charles shouted. 'I have no sympathy whatsoever for that party, nor for its leaders, not in Germany and not in Belgium. Yet, you must understand that not everybody in Germany is National Socialist either! A lot of decent people, friends of our family, old friends, live in Germany too. I despise the Nazis for what they are doing to the Jewish people and for their aggressive attitudes. But Belgium did vote in Parliament to remain neutral in the conflict!'

'In case of a German attack, the German armoured divisions and their *Panzer Divisionen* might be at Trioteignes Castle in two or at most three days,' Jef Asten estimated. 'I know what they are capable of. Rapid advances is what they tried and succeeded in Czechoslovakia and Poland. Hitler needs his successes rapidly. The Germans will attack in spear-points with

their armoured divisions, supported by the massive use of their bomber and fighter squadrons. They learnt that in Spain in the first place! What is worse is that Irene Stratten has seen the aeroplanes, here. In the first hours or minutes of the attack, the hangar, and Trioteignes Castle itself, might be bombed if she leaks the information. We have to leave before that, or keep her from handing over what she knows.'

'Not even the Belgian Generals who are favourable to your cause will allow that,' Charles warned. 'The aeroplanes must stay here for the moment. I agree, however, that when a war is declared and when the Germans attack Belgium, you should fly immediately, permission granted or not. I shall not resist your departure, then, on the contrary. I shall help you as much as I can. Are you not a little rash, however? Countess Irene may have seen the aeroplanes, but what does she know of the innovations in aviation that have been built into them? For all she knows, the machines are the playthings of idealist pilots, boys still, who wanted to have a machine to tinker with in their backyard. Why would she phone Brussels or Berlin about the aeroplanes and cry of a plot against the *Vaterland*?'

'You may be right, Sir Charles,' Max Vinck brought in, sighing, 'but I have learned that taking a few simple precautions is easy and avoids a lot of trouble!'

'We cannot take any action against Irene Stratten now, because that would incite even more suspicions. Still, I do not like this situation at all!'

Upon those words, the men finished their brandy and Max and Jef left Charles's office.

They encountered Bastien in the corridor. Bastien also needed to talk to his father and sort a few things out.

Jef Asten stopped Bastien, asking, 'how was the flight with Irene?'

Bastien answered, smiling at the thought, 'it went fine. The aeroplane hums like a baby. I think it is ready for a long voyage. I did not try any acrobatics, of course, I flew low, at ease, and in a straight line, to Brussels and back. The sky was blue and clear.'

'I was not asking about the aeroplane,' Jef grinned. 'How did Irene behave?'

'How could she have behaved?' Bastien replied, a little amazed. 'She was strapped in, in the back seat. She was delighted. I suppose it was not her first flight in an aeroplane, but she was quite excited about flying in such a machine, and I showed her the landscapes from above. We circled above Trioteignes and Namur. The Meuse River allows fine views. I have nothing special to mention about her.'

'Nothing special, he,' Max Vinck grunted. 'We saw you with your arms tight around her, you great seducer! Take care, she is a German! Those dames plays for keeper's sake!'

'Take care also with your maps and orders of war,' Jef Asten added. 'The first thing to expect when the Germans attack is the bombing of the aerodromes. That is what they did everywhere, before. You will probably not admit to me that what you will all do in the first moment of alert is to fly to hidden campaign airfields and camouflage your machines, but I know. That is a good strategy, for the German bombs will fall on empty hangars, and Belgium will thus save its Air Force. You pilots must have papers with these orders and the location of the campaign airfields. Can you please hide those papers carefully, so that no German spy can find them here? I must also ask for a guard to be installed in the Orangerie. Can you too, Max, warn the others?'

'I have already done that,' Max replied, smiling finely. 'Since the Baron left, no Germans remain around and so far, I haven't caught Irene Stratten sneaking around the Orangerie. I have caught that other lady, Arlette Trahty, at that, but I suppose she has other reasons than being a German spy.'

Jef Asten reddened in his turn.

'Anyhow, Bastien,' Max continued, 'the warning of Jef makes good sense. We should not take it lightly. Damn, not everything goes like we might have wished!'

‘All right, all right,’ Bastien agreed. ‘We shall organise a guard at the Orangerie and Georges and I shall hide our maps. Still, I believe you are wrong about Irene. She is not a spy.’ Jef Asten nodded and he left with Max Vinck.

Bastien kept watching them before he knocked at his father’s door. What was he thinking of? Jef Asten and Max Vinck had sown doubts in his heart, and those doubts hurt him like a dagger in his chest. If Irene was really a spy, then she had merely feigned being in love with him, and that meant he had been a stupid, naïve fool. The true problem was that Bastien had totally, irremediably fallen in love with Irene, and that pain was completely new to him.

Max Vinck strode through the courtyard with Jef Asten, in fervent conversation and gesticulating with wide movements of his arms and hands, but he spotted Rosine Trioteignes out of a corner of his eyes. Rosine was lingering at the bridge over the moat, as if she was making up her mind about something, but very expertly wiggling her behind when she saw Max arrive. She was dressed in heavy clothes of furs like a Russian noblewoman. She looked about, as thoughtless as a wren, not at all diffident, but very well aware of what she wanted. It was Max she wanted!

Jef Asten saw Max Vinck hesitate.

‘I suppose I’ll have to check on the aeroplane engines alone this afternoon,’ Jef suggested, winking in the direction of Rosine.

Max did not respond. He took a step aside, let Jef pass, and he ran to Rosine, who stood all smiles and waited to meet him.

‘How is our great pilot feeling today?’ Rosine asked, blushing delightedly when she saw the speed with which Max changed direction from Jef to her.

‘I am fine, thank you, nice lady,’ Max greeted with a gallant hand-kiss that would have melted down an iceberg, eyes clinging at Rosine’s light brown irises.

She touched her jet black curls, fixed her furs higher and a little more to the side of the wind.

‘Would you care for a walk to the village, my fair lady?’ Max dared.

‘Why, of course, gallant sir,’ Rosine laughed. ‘Shall you be my cavalier?’

‘I shall serve as your defending knight, indeed! When I’m with you, you’ll not fall prey to philandering males.’

‘I was looking for a raindrop in the ocean, searching for a dewdrop in the dew, for a needle in a haystack, Mister Max, still, I got to find you!’

‘Under the hide of me there’s such a yearning and burning for you, dear lady, night and day!’ Rosine giggled for pleasure.

Max offered her his arm.

Jef Asten moved his head in disapproving astonishment, but Max Vinck walked off with Rosine. After a few steps he looked back over his shoulder to Jef who was still standing at the bridge, and Max winked broadly at Jef, who made a sign with his hand as, ‘off you go, scoundrel!’

Jef heard Rosine say, ‘what a nice chance to have met you, dear Max. I was wondering what to do with my afternoon.’

‘Chance is but the fool’s name for fate,’ Max tried.

‘Chances are that fate is foolish, and maybe fate is but the fool’s name for chance,’ Rosine mocked. ‘Should we not wait for somebody to accompany us?’

‘Oh no,’ Max replied definitely, ‘a third party would spoil this! Where would you like us to go?’

‘I’m fancy free for anything fancy, my dear man! As long as I can be with you it’s a lovely day.’

‘Yes, isn’t it a lovely day to be caught in the frost?’

The rest Jef Asten lost, but he kept standing there, head shaking to and fro, asking himself, ‘how is it possible? What is this? Is Trioteignes a Love Castle?’

Rosine and Max disappeared behind the bend in the road to Trioteignes Village.

Jef Asten walked to the Orangerie alone. He went to his room, met Richard Bousanges who lay on his bed reading a book, the door of his room open so that he could watch who passed in the corridor. Jef warned Richard to hide his maps and flight orders. In his room, Jef changed clothes to a rough pair of trousers and a woollen pullover. He took a clean overall out of a cupboard and rolled it to a parcel, and then he put on a course overcoat. His intention was to work a little in the hangar, but his mood was rather morose. He thought how lucky Bastien and Max were, and he felt suddenly very lonely. The work would change his mood.

He ran down the stairs to the large hall of the Orangerie, but he suddenly made large eyes because Arlette Trahty was coming up. Arlette stopped in her tracks.

‘I was looking for you,’ Arlette began. ‘I have been here a few times already, but you were never in. I found you, finally!’

‘What do you want from me?’ Jef grunted.

He was angry from seeing Arlette. She had wounded him enough, he would rather have forgotten about her. He wanted to tear her image from his mind, but Arlette was branded in his thoughts.

‘I want to talk, Carter. Is there a place we can have some privacy?’

‘Not here,’ Carter Ash hesitated. He could not bring Arlette to his small room.

‘Do you care for a walk? I might show you something a little further in the wood, a fifteen minute walk on foot. You may have to climb a little, but you’ll be all right in those clothes.’

Arlette Trahty was dressed for a walk like Rosine, though she wore a long and heavy overcoat, which had already hung in the dead leaves of the path to the Orangerie.

‘Show me the way,’ Arlette replied, and she turned to go down.

Arlette and Jef walked towards the barns, but they spoke little on the way. Jef brought her to the hangar of the aeroplanes. He opened the sliding doors with a key, slid the giant panels open, switched the lights on, closed the door again, and showed Arlette to the old sofa that stood against the farthest wall. Arlette went into the hall, looking about, stepping around the aeroplanes in amazement. She stood before the machines and remained there. Her mouth fell open.

Jef went to the wood stove that still burned a little from the previous day. He threw in more pieces of wood and held his hands to the fire for warmth. The flames sprang up and embraced the dry wood. Arlette went to the sofa and sat, without taking off her overcoat, but she opened the buttons. The stove began to warm the corner.

Arlette continued to look at the hangar and at the aeroplanes.

‘So this is where you come to work! What are you doing here with those machines? What in heaven’s name are they? Why are there aeroplanes at Trioteignes? That one, over there, is quite bulky for a single-winged aeroplane!’

Carter Ash hesitated for a few moments, then he sighed, and gave up. He might as well explain all to one more person. He also desired to explain, for Arlette burnt more than anything else in his heart.

‘These aeroplanes are the secret I told you about, and they are the reason why I was sent here. Everybody in the castle seems to know about them, so I suppose you too might as well be aware of them. When the war was declared on Germany, we received news in Great Britain that the Belgian aeroplane manufacturer Vresele Industries, a company of Flanders, had built

a few prototypes of what might be revolutionary designs, aeroplanes that could compete or even outclass the Supermarine Spitfire when brought to final plans. Apparently, people in Belgium from the Vresele Factories and men in the Belgian Army, people from around the Court and from the world of Finance, feared Belgium would be drawn into the war. They feared the prototypes might be discovered by whom they considered the enemy of always, by Germany. They hid two prototypes outside Brussels in a private domain, and they suggested that the models might be tested, evaluated and maybe worked upon by British engineers. That last scheme proved impractical, for a group of British engineers working on Belgian soil might cause a major political scandal in this country, and heads would fall. An alternative scheme was developed to send over one British engineer, who had to be a pilot, have him work with Belgian engineers, and have him hold contact with engineers of Rolls-Royce and Supermarine-Vickers to continue the development of the capabilities of the machine. That British engineer would also have to assess the machines, so he would have to be a pilot. The British Service knew of my connections to the Trioteignes, to the castle in which the prototypes were hidden. Until I was twelve years old I was cared for and educated by my mother and by Belgian nannies. I speak as well French as English, therefore, and I speak French without an accent. You can judge on that. Obviously, I could not walk around in my Royal Air Force uniform, so it was arranged with Belgian generals and with the Belgian Service, that I were to receive Belgian identity cards and a uniform of the Belgian *Aéronautique*. My papers and uniform are genuine, by the way, delivered by the competent administration of the Belgian Nation!

Carter Ash smiled at what he apparently felt was a fine joke.

He continued, 'I work on the engines, on the profile of the aeroplanes, on the armament, on other minor features of the aeroplanes, though the Belgians did the finest job on the machines, a remarkable achievement, and I send in reports to Britain on how much in my opinion these machines might advance our war industry. I don't work alone on this. Max Vinck is a Belgian pilot and engineer, occasionally people from the Vresele Factories come here, and we are finalising the machines. Violaine Vresele is not just Georges Trahty's fiancée. She is our major contact with the factory, from out of this domain. She is not at all a brainless little girl! She has studied physics and she helped her father. She too, knows what aeroplanes are about. We are finalising the machines. The other pilots of the Orangerie, Bastien, Thomas, Jan, Richard, also know why we are here. They form some kind of protection, but they are also just mobilised in quarters here for the duration of the war, and, of course, they are good friends of Bastien and Georges. Charles and Jean-André and Léon-Alexandre know too, of course. They have invested in the machines, like the Baron Vresele.'

'Well I never! My father is involved in this too! He didn't tell me anything! Why do you tell me all this, now?'

'Like I said, our secret seems to be dissolving. Irene Stratten has been prowling around in the wood. She has discovered the hangar and the barns. We keep tools, petrol and heavy machinery in two barns adjacent to this hangar. She knows about the aeroplanes and she may talk in the castle and elsewhere about what is to be found in the hangar. Bastien has asked her not to do that, but I doubt the secret will remain a secret for long. We shall have to take the aeroplanes out and fly them to Great Britain. We are negotiating for the permission to do just that. We may leave soon, giving me no further occasion to tell you about them.'

Jef Asten kindled the fire, poked in the stove, and sighed.

'So now you know too, Arlette. I am not the ugly beast you think I am. I am a Captain in the Royal Air Force, and quite senior therefore to the Lieutenants here, though they have probably flown a lot more than I.'

Arlette smiled. 'That cannot be the only reason you told me. What is the real reason? Also, something you said is not right! I have seen no tinkerers and riggers of any company pass through the domain to work here.'

'Like I said, our project is finalising. We desired secrecy. We stopped letting more men come in during the Christmas and New Year's period. We certainly did not want the Germans to know what was going on here. The aeroplanes are ready. We have to come to a decision. We will probably leave very soon. Max will fly one machine, I the other. When that happens, no warning shall be given, not even to Charles. I was lucky to have met in Max somebody who feels the same way as I do. We must get these aeroplanes out of here before the real war starts, at the latest when the first alert is given, but I fear to wait until that day, for the sky will be filled with enemy aeroplanes. The alert can come any day from now. The tension is growing between the Allies and Germany. You have seen no engineers or mechanics because most of the work was finished in the first weeks of December, and when we knew Germans were coming as guests to the castle, we decided to keep the people that still might have to work at the prototypes at their base, to keep them away from here so that the Germans would not suspect anything. Max and I did the work of the mechanics. The Germans, Baron Andreas and the Countess Schillersberg have complicated our task, as the Belgians say thrown soot in our soup. I feel as if the round shifts under my feet, nothing goes as I would have liked. I fear German spies.'

'Andreas and Irene are no spies. I know Andreas well. He is a patriot. He shows enthusiasm for Hitler's slogans and for what the National Socialists have realised, but he is not a bad man. Irene is something of a mystery to me, very different in character from me. We don't match well. I tried to talk to her, but despite her perfect French I could not learn one single word about what she really was doing in her homeland.'

'Patriotism is the key word we need to retain. They may be decent people, and there must be a majority of decent people in Germany, but as Germans they shall be enemies of Belgium soon. I doubt it they would not go much in the way of defending their people and their country, Hitler in command or not.'

'I understand.'

'There is more to it. I am uncertain also about the motives of Charles Trioteignes. Charles was one of the men who contacted the Service, but still he invited Germans to his domain.'

'I can tell you about that subject. Charles Trioteignes also harbours a secret, organised by my father. Charles owns important stakes in certain factories and financial institutions in Germany. His main business partners are the Reichenfeld. The money he makes in Germany is deposited in Swiss bank accounts, and partly re-invested in the Swiss industry through the good services of my father, and by Jean-André Trioteignes. Jean-André shall be the successor of my father in our family business. I wonder whether our families still distinguish quite well between what is Trioteignes money and what is Trahty money. I suppose Jean-André does, he is a good accountant. It was not Charles who invited Baron Andreas. My father told me Charles received a phone call from the Reichenfeld, almost summoning him to receive the Reichenfeld son and his female friend.'

Carter Ash whistled. 'Charles told me something like that, but not in such strong terms. So he is involved with the Germans, after all!'

'Not as you might believe, now, from what I said. Charles and my father are sincerely devoted to the cause they think is the right one, to the cause of the Allies, of France and Britain. But they have extensive interests in the German booming industry and in its finances. Like many other financiers, they too invested in the growth of Germany these last five years and even longer. Financiers do not invest in old, established economies; they invest in growth.'

Germany has grown spectacularly, and so have the benefits of Charles and of my father. I heard them talk! They are drawing funds back out, slowly, investing more in Switzerland, and I bet they will tunnel money into Spain, soon. But their former relations with the Reichenfeld, and maybe also with the Stratten, remain strong. Yet, they are true Belgian patriots.'

'Our world is not painted in black and white, isn't it. Why is it that I find all shades of grey around me? My mission here is getting more complex by the day.'

'I suppose that is how people are, Carter, not all angels, not all devils!'

'I was never a devil, Arlette. I may have been arrogant and careless. I had money, and sufficient intelligence. I believe I also showed courage, but certainly mixed with a lot of stupid dash. Yet, I think of myself as not a bad guy, certainly not as bad a guy as you think I am. I do respect people, especially good-hearted people. I am very sorry matters did not work out between us.'

'We both had veils hanging in front of our eyes, the veils of our conceit, didn't we? I have been a pretty wild creature, too, when I was younger. In our Oxford days, there was nothing I hated so much as being dominated. I did not want to be caged in. I still do! You were too strong for me, too sure of what you asserted, too overpowering. You were weaving too many strings around me. I was afraid and I guess I rejected you for that. I wanted to tear you down from your pedestal, to destroy the strong influence you were exerting over me. You were admired too much!'

'I was admired too much? How about you? A whole gang of braggarts hung around you! You dumped me for some nitwit with more money and more title and more arrogance and less brains than me!'

Arlette chuckled. 'I remember. I did that only to spite you. I regretted it from the first moment, and I hated myself for it. I regretted it from the first moment. But you disappeared before I could sort out my feelings and try to explain them to you. Nobody knew where you had gone to. You must tell me about Spain.'

'After Oxford, I went to Cranwell in Lincolnshire, to the Cadet College of the Royal Flying Corps. I was already at Cranwell, without telling you, when we still met at Oxford. I became a real pilot there, and an officer. I volunteered for the Service. Then, the Spanish Civil War broke out. The Allied Powers set up a Non-Intervention Committee in August of 1936, in which Great Britain was a member. I was the eyes and ears for the British Committee members. I was sent to Spain to observe, but I could not have a right feeling for what was happening in Spain without being involved. I fought therefore in the British companies of the International Brigade in which more than six hundred British fought at one moment, but I wandered from section to section. I met marvellous men, several war poets, men with ideals. I believe all the European ideas of democracy, Fascism, Communism, Anarchy clashed in Spain. The Civil War was a dirty war, with executions of opposing men and women by the hundreds on both sides, not only of armed soldiers but also of politicians, party members, men suspected of the wrong sympathies. In such a war, families are torn asunder and destroyed; suffering beyond belief is inflicted. I fought on the Republican side, and yet I still wonder which side had the most justified claim to lawfulness. The war started when rightist politicians were murdered and when the Republic degenerated in revolution. Spain was very important for the British war industry; Spanish ore was exported for more than fifty per cent to British harbours. Companies like Rio Tinto and the Tharsis Copper and Sulphur Company own mines in the north of Spain. I fought in the Battle at Suicide Hill in February of 1937, I fought in the Battle for Brunete around Madrid in July of that year, in the Aragon Offensive of October of 1937, and I saw the damage done by the bombings in the Battle of Vizcaya. I worked for the chargé in Valencia, but I kept my freedom. The German diplomats tried to lay

their hands on the Spanish ore mines, to have the iron ore shipped to Germany. By the end of 1937, the belligerents in Spain were weary. I flew then in the Air Force of General Hidalgo de Cisneros, which consisted at the beginning of 1938 of about two hundred fighter aeroplanes, one hundred bombers and one hundred reconnaissance and transport aircraft. The last battle I was involved in was the Battle of the Ebro, which lasted from the summer of 1938 to the beginning of the winter of that year. I fought and I saw the horrors, horrors I do not wish to describe anymore. At the end of September of 1938, the International Brigades were used for the last time and then withdrawn from the leftist front. The International Brigade left Spain. At that moment remained only four hundred British and three hundred fifty Belgians under orders, over two thousand French, about the thousand volunteers in all. I returned to Madrid but stayed in Spain, though not anymore as a combatant. At the end of 1938 I knew all was lost for the Republic, so I returned to England in the early spring of 1939. A few months later I was sent here.'

'I am impressed,' Arlette admitted. 'Maybe yes, you learned a lot in Spain. Suffering helps people put their lives in the right perspective. I have not suffered in person, but when you work in a hospital, and I have worked in several, first in Great Britain and then in Belgium, one learns compassion. My Oxford professor told me that was the most essential quality I lacked to be a good doctor. I did suffer when you left, though!'

'Why was that?' Carter asked offhandedly, still poking in the fire.

'Because I realised too late I must have loved you, you dumbass! But I could not find you. You had vanished from the surface of the world. I went to the University Administration, to the Auxiliary Forces of the Royal Air Force, to the Army, to Oxford Town Hall, but you had vanished.'

'Wait, can you repeat what you just said at the beginning of your phrase?'

Carter Ash looked now very seriously at Arlette.

Arlette laughed, 'the part about me being in live with you?'

'Yes that part, the part that sounded wonderful.'

Arlette buried Carter's head in her two hands, one hand below each ear, and she kissed him on the mouth. When she had finished, gently, lightly touching, he wanted more, of course, and the next kiss lingered on and became much more passionate.

They were not aware of the fact that two pairs of eyes spied on them from above the iron platform along the wall.

Later, Arlette whispered, 'we have been so foolish, my love!'

Still later, when Virginie and I were on the verge of returning, Arlette asked, 'what are these aeroplanes? Why are they so important?'

We too were interested in the answer to that question, so we stayed on.

Carter Ash sighed.

'You do are insistent, aren't you? All right, I'll try to explain, but this can get technical. Both of these aeroplanes have been designed by engineers of the Vresele family, a family not known these last years for having built or designed such machines, but the Baron Vresele had new money at its disposal and he invested some in his son, Violaine's brother, and in a cousin. They are young, daring engineers. They had the idea to pack all the goodies that one can find on the most modern aeroplanes together in one new machine, and they also brought a few original ideas of their own in their designs. They talked to many pilots, as well to experienced pilots as to young ones, and then they tried to develop a machine that brought the old and new ideas together. Only for that achievement, listen to what the pilots want, would have made the aeroplanes remarkable, for they make now any engineer think again on what to propose in new machines and not just to continue improving on what already exists.'

Carter Ash let the silence drop in a while, and then he continued, bringing Arlette to under the aeroplanes.

‘The Vresele boys called the single-seat machine the *Fearless* and the twin-seat the *Assailer*. Look at the fine aerodynamic quality of the lines, especially of the smooth way the wings melt into the fuselage with smooth transition. Where do the wings start and where ends the fuselage? The machines have been tried out for airflow in wind tunnels. There exists a unique laboratory with wind tunnels for that in Brussels. The flow of air around every aspect of the aeroplanes has been studied and modified for speed and stability. The wing design is entirely new. Even the latest Spitfires do not have such sophisticated, calculated, tried-out lines! The profile of the machines as seen from the front is simply marvellous, symmetric, stream-lined, almost feminine to the eye. The way the tail planes and the rudder are set is just masterly. The rhodoid cockpit seems to glide into the fuselage too, yet the pilot has a fine view. The way the cockpit makes one line with the fuselage alone shall make it harder for an enemy aeroplane to find the cockpit and to take aim on it.’

Carter Ash let his hand caress the curves of the aeroplane.

‘The undercarriage components of the *Fearless*, the wheels, can be drawn inside the fuselage, of course, to add to the aerodynamic performance. It has four machine-guns in its wings, where ample space has been foreseen for them, because the wings are but the continuation of the fuselage. We can adjust the machine-guns separately in all directions! The wings look extremely solid, therefore, well-balanced, and we tested them at incredible speed. The wings held! The wings are built around a duralumin structure. This is a race-horse, this machine, as I have never flown in. This aeroplane can dive and climb faster than anything in the world. It has a flight variable pitch, three-bladed propeller, the radiator sits under the cockpit of the pilot, and the coolant circuits can work on water, not on ethylene glycol, though the coolant we use on the Rolls-Royce engine remains glycol currently. The machine can be equipped with all types of engines, and the construction is totally modular, making it easy to maintain and repair. Another nice feature are the self-sealing fuel tanks. Most fantastic is that this aeroplane can be built rapidly, which is an extreme advantage in war time, and at a cost that is at least 30 per cent less than the cheapest British fighter! No cloth is used anymore, the shell is entirely metallic, yet light, and the metal plates can be manufactures separately, in other factories, and then simply assembled. This aeroplane is designed for mass production!’

Carter continued, ‘the *Fearless* is equipped with the latest Rolls-Royce Merlin II engine of one thousand thirty Horsepower, but we boosted the engine somewhat higher, here. Max Vinck and I have worked on that feature more specifically. This machine can therefore fly faster and higher than the Spitfire and the Hurricane, and practically any later, faster engine can be fitted into it without major revisions. The structure can withstand enormous pressures of speed. The *Fearless* holds gadgets which will be liked by any fighter pilot. It can be equipped with two cannon guns, which most pilots prefer to machine-guns because the bullets of machine-guns do make holes in the aeroplane of your enemy, but the guns of twenty millimetre or even heavier calibre send shells that explode on impact when they hit, disabling instantly your opponent. We can even install four twenty millimetre guns instead of eight millimetre machine-guns! This is a killer machine! The *Fearless* can also hold a device to eject up to thirty grenades for attacking ground troops. So it is not just a fighter, but also a ground attack machine! It can moreover carry eight bombs under the wings, light bombs, but destructive enough to attack and destroy moving armoured divisions on the ground. An additional cannon, we still call them guns, can be mounted on top of the engine. We tried that

out, too. The heavy engine block absorbs all shocks of that gun, giving it unparalleled precision!’

‘As to instruments, radio equipment, oxygen bottles, brakes in the wheels, the aeroplane has everything a pilot can dream off. The *Assailer* over there is a twin-seat. That aeroplane can be used for bombings, but it is also a fighter with practically all the characteristics of the *Fearless*. It can be used for photographic missions, fly at very high speed and altitudes when it is attacked. It is equipped with a very strange feature of which I am a little dubious. This exemplar you see here, has no cockpit but a pressure cabin. That allows the aeroplane to mount to very high altitudes, to almost stratospheric heights, and still keep the same pressure in the cabin as on the ground, allowing the pilot and the observer to work comfortably without oxygen masks. The pilot and the observer keep total freedom of movement. The jettisonable cabin also protects the pilot from the pressure variations, which tire him down on long flights. The cabin is independent of the fuselage, so it can be ejected from the rest of the machine, parachuted at the touch of a button! I remain a little in doubt about that feature, because it augments somewhat the vulnerability of the aeroplane. One bullet suffices to break the pressure cabin and then the aeroplane may become unmanageable. When a pilot uses only an oxygen mask, the area of vulnerability is lowered to the surface of the pilot alone. But the cabin is armoured, and the pilot can put on an oxygen mask during air battles! Such features are truly novel, and many show the way of the future!’

‘The dashboard looks complex,’ Arlette remarked.

‘It is! The designers have added all the instruments necessary for night flights and for flights at low visibility. The cockpit is heated, because the engine cooling pipes pass on both sides of the cockpit. The rudder is equipped with a Flettner, and the pilot can adjust that in flight to add thrust and air support. The stabiliser is improved and quite large, fixed on top of the structure of the fuselage, but it can be easily dismantled.’

Arlette looked with increasing amazement and admiration at Carter Ash.

‘You do love this machine!’ she exclaimed. ‘I am getting jealous about your men’s toy.’ She drew him to her and kissed him hard on the lips.

Virginie and I estimated it was now our time to sneak down the stairs and to hurry back to the castle.

The flight of the Assailer

Much kissing was going on somewhere else, too. Virginie and I followed Bastien and Irene once more into the woods on the morning of the tenth of January, as we saw them strolling in the domain. Bastien declared his love to Irene, took her hand in his, knelt, and a little later we saw them kissing, too. Irene did not look as happy as Arlette, though. She kissed and embraced Bastien warmly, but the expression on her face remained sad. Her lips might have smiled, her eyes didn’t.

She said, ‘you know nothing of me. I am German. We are at war.’

‘No, we are not,’ consoled Bastien. ‘We are not at war. Belgium remains neutral territory.’

‘It remains neutral but it has mobilised its reservists. From what I heard, Belgium will surely chose the side of the Allies, of France and Great Britain, and that seems only natural after the last war. I understand that. All that is not important. There is more. Can we return to the hangar? I have to show something to you.’

Bastien and Irene walked through the wood to the hangar of the aeroplanes. Max Vinck was still working on the *Fearless*. Irene asked to fly with the other aeroplane, with the two-seater, the *Assailer*. Bastien protested. He argued one flight had been enough. Irene insisted and she became angry. Max Vinck ended the dispute by sighing and nodding in affirmation, and Bastien and Irene put on their flying kits. They stepped to the cockpit, but when Bastien let her climb in, she took the front seat, the pilot's seat. Bastien protested again, but Irene waved him in the back seat. Bastien thought she wanted to have a look at the dashboard, but Irene signalled to strap himself in his seat. Bastien hesitated again, but he complied. He signalled Max to draw away the chocks from the wheels.

Irene pushed the control button, but nothing happened. She turned her head to Bastien, asking how the aeroplane could be started. Bastien told her not to touch anything, but she yelled at him. Bastien cringed. He told her how to start the machine.

The engine sputtered a lot before the propeller began to turn, and by that time Max Vinck stood with open mouth, tool in hand, transfixed. The roaring aeroplane rolled out of the hangar with Irene at the commands. The *Assailer* spit out black fumes when Irene opened the throttle entirely, too quickly, the engine spluttered, but the machine took on speed, raced across the field, and then lifted its nose. The engine bellowed higher. Max Vinck ran out of the hangar and watched the aeroplane soar over the forest in a sharp turn, too sharp, tearing the aeroplane almost out of its air support, beyond the pastures and then leave in a very steep climb, so steep as he would not have dared this aeroplane to pull in at this stage. The *Assailer* tore low over the forest so that its fuselage almost brushed the top of the fir trees. A flight of wood pigeons burst from the wood. The *Assailer* remained all the time flying over the Trioteignes domain. Irene did not fly to Brussels like Bastien had done. The aeroplane continued at first to climb until we could only see a dot. The *Assailer* then entered into a double roll, made a short looping, came out of that to engage a reverse looping, climbed again and dove so fast we thought the wings might be torn from the fuselage.

By that time, Virginie and I stood at each side of Max Vinck, and Max did not seem to notice us. He stood in shocked amazement at what the machine was doing, looking feverishly at the silvery spark that gleamed in the sky, that darted and swung and dived and rolled, climbed and fell in amazing acrobatic figures. Irene flew at only a few meters above our heads at dazzling speed, engine coughing and roaring. She climbed again, continued rolls and loopings, let the aeroplane stall and fall down in a spiral and tore it out of that death roll. She executed every acrobatic figure in the book. She was leading the aeroplane to its limits of manoeuvrability and we recognised her anger in every move, for there was no grace in the figures, only pure rage. Max Vinck stood very pale.

Finally, after less than half an hour of demonstration, the aeroplane disappeared, but it emerged from over the top of the trees. It flew very slowly, the engine backfired, and it almost pancaked right before our eyes on the field, turned and arrived towards us. The machine rolled into the hangar in a perfect movement. Max Vinck tore himself only then out of his fascination and he ran to help bring the aeroplane around, facing the doors. We helped him. Max Vinck let go of a terrible series of curses at us, and I suppose in the first place at Irene, such dirty curses as we had never heard before. He let us push at the end of the machine, though, until it stood in place.

Irene cut the engine then, and she let the propellers stop before she opened the cockpit. Irene climbed out. Bastien remained seated a while longer. He was ashen in the face when he stepped on the floor. Max Vinck's face had taken much colour by then, a very red colour, ready to burst. Bastien held up his hand to stop him from cursing, and something in Bastien's eyes made Max side-step, away from him, and he stopped vociferating.

Irene went to the wall, threw off her flying kit, and walked to the hangar as if she wanted to return to the castle. She stopped there, however, and started to cry. She sobbed with the hurt, little sounds of a blessed child. She wept and stooped. Bastien, face still white as a sheet, ran to her, grabbed her arm and turned her around rather rudely. She flung herself in his arms.

‘So now you know,’ Irene shouted after a while, when her sobbing diminished. She cried with anger, tears still flowing from her eyes, ‘I am a test pilot for the Luftwaffe and for the parts of the aeroplanes our manufactories produce for Messerschmitt. I am a Lieutenant in the Luftwaffe, of course in a honorific title. I can fly better than you pilots who have gathered at the castle of your father. I can fly anything and I have flown anything, Junkers, Heinkels, Messerschmitts, Focke-Wulf, you name it. Yes, I was sent here to spy on you! We got wind of a revolutionary aeroplane being developed by Belgian engineers, aeroplanes that could rival our Messerschmitt Bf109s or even outclass them. A woman would attract less attention. Andreas von Reichenfeld was only the person who had to introduce me. He was a mere clerk, an administrative. He knows nothing about flying, nothing about military aeroplanes. I am an officer in the Luftwaffe, equal in rank to you, sent here for a limited time. I was sent to check on your aeroplanes and to determine whether they might represent a new threat to our Air Force. I just did that. I know now what your machine can do. Yes, your aeroplane can compete with ours, and for a heavy fighter it can outmanoeuvre ours. Are you satisfied now? You know who and what I am now. I have a son in Germany! They threatened my son. I had to do what they asked. What are you going to do about me?’

Irene sunk once more out into terrible weeping, which even embarrassed Max Vinck, but she tore herself out of Bastien’s arms and ran away. Virginie and I looked at each other, frozen in awe. Bastien ran after Irene, and Virginie and I followed. Max Vinck began again to curse and to shout, and he kicked with his foot at the tires of the *Assailer*. He threw his tool as far as it could fly.

Bastien caught up with Irene behind the barns, at the point where the hollow path to the castle began. He turned Irene round, drew her violently to his breast, and kissed her hard, very hard. Irene struggled, hit him with her fists, but then she relented and she hung powerless in his arms. She continued to weep, and we saw the tears flowing down her cheeks and mix with her kisses. When they separated, Irene took her handkerchief, blew her nose, but she continued to cry, then she dabbed at her eyes, and suddenly, Bastien began to laugh. Bastien’s absurd reaction amazed Irene, until she too could smile at the incongruity of the situation, and she leaned forward into Bastien’s arms again.

‘Bastien, Bastien,’ she sobbed, ‘why did this have to happen to us? What am I going to do now? I must go back home, but what am I going to do? What if you go to war?’

‘Later, later,’ Bastien whispered. ‘We have something else more urgent to talk about. I am not having a flirt with you. When I love, I love for marriage, Irene. I already proposed once. You asked for patience. Will you marry me?’

Irene began to laugh hysterically at the utmost absurdity of what Bastien proposed, but she answered between two bursts of weeping in, ‘oh you naïve, innocent, marvellous young fool of a flyer. Why did I have to fall in love with you when so many fine young men hung around me? Of course I shall marry you. You made me fall in love with you from the first moment I laid eyes on you at Christmas, but don’t ask me why. I met so many fine young pilots and business men in Germany, but you were everything I sought. You were my destiny. It was a devastating experience to realise that. I lost my bearings. But what will become of us, my love?’

They started to kiss once more, which made the scene become quite boring for Virginie and I, so we returned to the hangar. We found Max Vinck sitting in the corner sofa, as if stunned, knees trembling. He was muttering ugly things to himself, we saw his lips move.

We went up to him, and he shouted, 'you two brats are just too much for me with Bastien and Irene on one and the same day! Did I not scare you off? Disappear from my sight and don't let me see you again in this place! Hurry back to the castle before I do you some misery I might be sorry for during the rest of my life!'

Max Vinck was really mad and capable of anything in that moment, so we really got scared and darted out of the hangar, into the hollow path, where we ran at full speed past the even more amazed Bastien and Irene, who continued looking at us in despair.

We reached the castle and Grandmother called at us, but we ran to our rooms and shut our doors behind us. We did not come down until two hours later.

Virginie and I have ever since called the night of the tenth of January of 1940 the 'Night of the small Beds'.

We saw Arlette walk in the evening to the barns, and we followed her to the hangar of the aeroplanes, where she was heartily welcomed by a very dirty Carter Ash alias Jef Asten, who wore an overall on which he had just received a sprout of petrol from the carburettor he was tampering with. We saw them hold each other. Carter Ash drew off his overall only later and he brought Arlette to the sofa against the wall, where they entangled in frantic kisses. Virginie became quite ashamed of having sneaked upon the two, so she drew me out of the hall. We did not see Arlette come back to the castle that evening. Virginie knocked at her door late, when night had fallen, and when Arlette did not open her door, she of course opened and had a quick glance at Arlette's bedroom. Arlette was not in, and she did not sleep in the castle that night. Carter Ash had a soldier's metal bed in the hangar, a very small bed, but I suppose a sturdy Army contraption could hold much weight. It must have been used to its limits that night, and the wood stove in the hangar might have melted from the fire, for the air was still very cold and the wind passed through the building as if the iron plates were porous.

We could not catch sleep that night and held our doors ajar. We heard a knocking on the door of Bastien's bedroom and heard for a while more muffled weeping sounds, arguing, and then silence, later other noises that were definitely not suited for our inexperienced ears..

By that time we had been sneaking through the corridor. While we returned to our rooms, we were startled by other noise. We saw a shadow move in the corridor and the shadow proved to be Rosine who went downstairs on slippers, pulled her shoes on at the front door and left the castle. We saw her running in the direction of the Orangerie. The Orangerie was equipped with central heating, but the rooms on the first floor had also only small beds. Max Vinck would have an even more sleepless night than we had imagined. We saw Rosine return to the castle early in the morning, but later than we were at breakfast in the kitchen.

We had no doubts about where Violaine Vresele had spent her night, for she slept in the same bedroom where she had slept since at least five nights, together with Georges Trahty.

Of course, Amandine de Brioges never slept in her own bedroom. Charles and Anne had given a large suite to Léon-Alexandre, and in the suite stood a very large eighteenth century bed.

We did not have the opportunity to check on the two maids, Annette and Mireille, but we would not have been surprised if they too had spent the night at the Orangerie, though I doubt that supposition of Virginie. Nevertheless, the quick-eyed and witty Mireille had sent calflinks at Thomas Drandin, and I doubted Richard Bousanges would have refused the willing services of opulent Annette.

‘We are living in a fucking whorehouse,’ Virginie muttered coarsely that morning, a piece of bread with butter hanging in her mouth. We giggled and sniggered through our breakfast of the eleventh. We wondered how the issues would be solved between Bastien and Irene and between Carter Ash and Arlette, even though what really mattered had already found its accomplishment.

‘Love always precedes war,’ Virginie philosophised wisely, and history proved her very right in that.

The Twilight War

While these events happened in Castle Trioteignes, a war was indeed on, but Virginie and I were scarcely touched by the tragedies that took place in the world beyond Trioteignes Castle. Many years later, I tried to understand how we had been drawn into a new World War and how our country had reacted. I had to go back a long way.

About fifteen million people died in World War I, among which about ninety-five thousand Belgian soldiers, eight hundred ninety thousand British soldiers, one million four hundred thousand French soldiers and more than two million German soldiers. It was therefore normal in my view that when the German Army disintegrated in 1918, and after the Armistice, Germany had been forced to cede about one eighth of her territory, ten per cent of her population and all of her colonies to the surrounding powers. Her territories west of the Rhine were occupied. France annexed once more the Lorraine and the Alsace Regions and also the Saarland came to be governed by France. Poland received West-Prussia with the now famous corridor to Gdansk, Danzig, between East-Prussia and Germany. The German *Reichswehr* was reduced by the Peace Treaty of Versailles to a hundred thousand men in active service, to sixteen thousand sailors in the Navy, no high command allowed, no heavy artillery, no aeroplanes and no armoured tanks. Of course, Germany felt humiliated after Versailles, and one has to recognise the genius of the Austrian Corporal Adolf Hitler to have sensed the frustration of a large part of the German people and to have founded on those feelings in April of 1920 the *National Sozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter Partei*, the NSDAP, the Nazi Party.

In that same year a secret Belgian-French Defence Treaty was signed, which was however denounced by the Belgian Government in 1936, because the Belgian politicians had the delusion to think the country could remain neutral in the conflicts between the great powers. In late 1922, Benito Mussolini marched on Rome in Italy, and he grabbed command over the Kingdom. He came to be called the ‘Duce,’ the leader. Fascism, a new kind of oligarchy, was born in that act.

The year after, the French President Raymond Poincaré had the German Ruhr Region occupied by French troops because the German Nation did not and could not pay its war debts to the victors. This invasion heightened anti-French resentment in Germany.

In 1924, the NSDAP was still only a small political party in Germany. In the elections at the end of that year it won only three per cent of the votes for Parliament and fourteen members of the *Reichstag* out of four hundred seventy-two. Hitler's party grew steadily, however. In the elections of 1930, the year in which the French Minister of War André Maginot created a line of defence works on the French-German frontier, the NSDAP got a hundred and seven members in the German Parliament from six million votes, and in 1932 Hitler more than doubled that score with two hundred thirty representatives in the *Reichstag*. Shortly thereafter, at the end of January of 1932, the German President Hindenburg appointed Hitler as Prime Minister, as *Kanzler*, to form a new government, and Hitler never left power until his death. From 1933 to 1936, the German *Reichswehr* of a hundred thousand soldiers became the German *Wehrmacht* of six hundred thousand men. The *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* or OKW, was held by General Blomberg, but he resigned in February of 1938, from which date on Hitler also assumed the leadership of the Army's Headquarter. His Chief of Staff was Major Keitel; the Army was led by General Heinrich von Brauchitsch, the Navy by Admiral Erich Raeder and the Air Force by Marshal Hermann Goering. In 1933 already, Germany withdrew from the League of Nations.

In October of 1935, Mussolini's Italian forces invaded Ethiopia, defeated the army of the Negus and massacred the population.

That same year, Hitler and his genius tank commander Heinz Guderian formed the first three armoured divisions of tanks, the *Panzer Divisionen*. Each division consisted of two tank regiments of five hundred tanks, which could be used as autonomous attack organs. France at that time, and also Belgium, still dispersed their tanks among its infantry divisions, despite Charles de Gaulle's book '*Vers l'armée de métier*', published in May of 1934, in which he proposed autonomous tank divisions to force surprise attacks on the enemy. Germany developed ever heavier tanks, from the Panzer I of five and a half ton to the Panzer III of twenty-three ton to the Krupp Panzer IV of twenty-five ton, and also ever more different sorts of aeroplanes to support the tank attacks from out of the air, such as the Junker 87 *Sturzkampfflugzeug* or Stuka for dive precision bombing, an aeroplane which gave off a strident noise when it dove to inspire panic in the infantry on the ground. It developed modern fighter aeroplanes, such as the Messerschmitt Bf 109, the Bf standing for *Bayerische Flugzeugwerke*, and bombers such as the Junker 88, the much feared twin-engine Messerschmitt 110 and the Heinkel 111. The new Luftwaffe was led by Goering and announced in March of 1936.

That same year, conscription was re-introduced in Germany, in contradiction to the clauses of the Versailles Treaty, and simultaneously also the Rhineland was re-militarised by Germany. Germany also denounced the 1925 Treaty of Locarno, in which Germany and France had engaged not to use force one against the other.

In June, Great Britain allowed Germany to hold a navy of up to thirty-five per cent of the British tonnage.

In July of 1936, Hitler acknowledged the suzerainty of Austria and a lawyer called Seyss-Inquart, a Nazi-sympathiser, became the Secretary of State of Austria, but Hitler had already his eyes on that country.

In that same month of the summer of 1936 started the Civil War in Spain. The Spanish Republic was very much leftist oriented; the left obtained election victories for Parliament. The Spanish Left, the Socialists, Communists and Anarchists believed they had realised a revolution. Churches were burned down; political opposers such as the monarchist politician Calvo Sotelo were murdered. The Army revolted and took power in the western and southern regions of Spain. Leadership was offered after a while to General Francisco Franco, who

became the '*Generalissimo*' of the rebels. From October 1936 on began the Battle for Madrid and the nationalist rebels, the Generals of the Army, arrived at the end of that year at the outskirts of the capital. Their troops were checked very close to the capital by the Republican forces and the Communist-organised International Brigades. The battle raged through December of 1936, and then again in the spring of 1937 outside the city of Guadalajara north of Madrid and along the Jarama River south of Madrid.

In October of 1936, King Leopold III of Belgium proclaimed the neutrality of his country in any conflict of war. His Catholic Prime Minister for Belgium was Paul Van Zeeland.

In June and July of 1937, the Republican Army of Spain tried to break through the Nationalist lines west of Madrid by launching a massive attack around and towards the town of Brunete, north-west of the capital. The Republicans made some advance despite heavy losses, but they were stopped at the end of July. About forty-five thousand men died on both sides together and one hundred thirty aircraft were lost, of which only about twenty-five on Nationalist side. Henceforth, the Nationalists gained air superiority in the war. During these battles, for the first time, the Nationalists used their tanks in concentrated waves for realising tactical thrust-points behind which the infantry could advance. The Generals of Franco were advised to use this tactic by the German General von Thoma.

Málaga fell in that spring, too. During a campaign in Vizcaya from March to June of 1937, Bilbao was surrounded and Vizcaya was captured by General Mola's forces.

The German bomber Condor Squadron flattened the Basque town of Guernica. One thousand civilians of the seven thousand inhabitants of Guernica were killed in the successive raids of the Condor Legion, in which the ruthless German pilots such as Wolfram von Richthofen and Adolf Galland served. Guernica was a symbolic site for the Basque people, the place where their sacred oak tree grew. Forty three German aircraft left the town destroyed and burning after their passage, but the famous oak, which stood far from the centre, was left untouched. The Spanish painter Picasso represented the horrors of the war in a large mural for the Spanish Government building at the World Fair in Paris. The painting was exhibited in Paris in 1937, and later sent to the Metropolitan Museum of New York.

The encyclical '*Mit brennender Sorge*' was delivered by the Vatican against the Nazi ideology and read in the German churches in March of 1937.

From August to October of 1937, Spanish Republican forces attacked the Nationalist front of Aragon in the direction of the towns of Huesca and Saragossa. This offensive also failed in the end and the front line remained almost as before. At the same time, a battle raged against Asturias that had remained Republican, east of Oviedo, where the Nationalists went in the attack. Asturias fell end of October of 1937. All the lands bordering the Atlantic Ocean and the Bay of Biscay were henceforth in Franco's hands. With the Basque country, the Nationalists won the largest part of Spanish industry, and especially the main part of her armament industry.

In August also, Italian submarines increasingly attacked merchant ships that brought supplies to the Republic from around Gibraltar to the Republican inner Mediterranean harbours. Mainly Soviet Russian steamers, which supplied the Republicans with arms, were sunk. Sir Anthony Eden persuaded the British Government to send more destroyers of the Navy to control the Non-Intervention agreement.

On 15 December of 1937, the Republic launched an offensive against Teruel, winter blizzards whining, snow falling, and without much artillery preparation. Franco's counter offensive began at the end of the year and the Nationalist troops advanced their front to over Teruel, which they re-captured at the end of February of 1938. This battle left about fifteen thousand dead on either side. In January, many air raids were sent against Republican Barcelona.

The Caudillo Francisco Franco consolidated his power by liquidating the power of the Carlist monarchist movement and also of the Fascist Falange. Franco seemed to be something else than a Fascist still, for he imprisoned the Falangist Fascist leader Manuel Hedilla that year, and he made the Carlists understand that the return of Spain to a Kingdom would lay in the far future.

In 1938, the Spanish Nationalist Army could count on five hundred thousand men at arms, which made it one of the largest armies of Europe, and the Republicans brought about seven hundred fifty thousand men into the field. Among the Nationalist regiments were probably forty thousand Moroccans, and as many Italians, and five thousand German soldiers. From March to July of 1938, the Spanish Nationalist Armies advanced in campaign after campaign in Aragon, whereby they drew from the front of Teruel to Huesca over Saragossa towards the sea in an effort to cut the Republican-held territory in two and isolate Catalonia from the rest of Republican Spain. The campaigns succeeded, and the Nationalist troops occupied all the territory from north of Valencia to Tortosa, Lerdia and up to the French border. The Condor Legion had begun to use Messerschmitt Bf109 aeroplanes and bomber groups equipped with Heinkel 111 and Junker 52 bombers. Franco's troops broke through the Republican lines over a broad front. Franco soon held over one hundred fifty kilometres of Mediterranean coast. The Republican front in Aragon collapsed.

In the summer of 1938, the Republican forces launched an offensive over the Ebro River. That river marked the front between the two enemies north of Tortosa. The attack began on 25 July and it lasted until November of 1938. The death-toll was heavy, but the Republican Army advanced and pushed the Nationalists westwards. Franco staged counter-attacks in September.

The Battle of the Ebro was an exercise in endurance, and though the Republicans advanced, they could not force a major redrawing of the map of the occupied territories. It would be their last major offensive. On both sides fell fifty to sixty thousand men in that Battle of the Ebro. The Republicans were pushed back to the Ebro. The Army of Franco counted by then over one million men, and as many probably stood on Republican side.

Germany had at that moment become again a powerful country with a large army. The German people cried out louder to set right the injustices done to their nation by the Treaty of Versailles. The feeling that the army had not been defeated in 1918 by arms but had given up the war because of social unrest grew. In February of 1938, Hitler presented a long speech to the *Reichstag* about the unity of all German-speaking peoples. A little later, in March of 1938, he ordered the Generals to propose a plan for the invasion of Austria. Revolts were then organised in that country by the Nazis, and Hermann Goering delivered a message, an ultimatum, for Seyss-Inquart to become the new *Kanzler* of the country. That same month Guderian's tank divisions arrived in Vienna and Austria signed her *Anschluss* with Germany. The union with Germany became a fact after a referendum in which ninety-nine per cent of the Austrians voted for the *Anschluss*.

Not long afterwards, Germany directed her attention to the Czech Sudetenland, a region in which lived three million German-speaking people of the thirteen million of Czechoslovakia. Revolts broke out in the Sudetenland, and in September of 1938, at a congress in Nürnberg, Hitler demanded publicly for the region to be annexed to Germany. That same month the Czechoslovakian President Benes accepted the proposals of the French Prime Minister Edouard Daladier and of the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain to cede the Sudetenland to Germany. Hitler did, however, not accept the plan of gradual transition, whereupon in that same month of September 1938 Czechoslovakia mobilised its army. Also France called up reservists of six hundred thousand men and Belgium equally partly mobilised. At the end of September then began the Conference of Munich in the *Führerbau*, the central offices of the Nazi movement on the *Königsplatz* of that town. Daladier and Chamberlain agreed to hand over the Sudetenland immediately to Germany, hoping to secure a lasting peace by satisfying Hitler's appetites.

Czechoslovakia practically disintegrated in October, for not only did Germany grab the Sudetenland but also Hungary took six hundred seventy-two thousand people and nineteen thousand five hundred km² of Ruthenia away from Czech territory and Poland occupied the rich Silesia or Teschen territory. Moreover, Slovakia declared its independence in February of 1939. In March of 1939, Germany invaded Prague, so that the former Bohemia and Moravia Regions became effective protectorates of Germany, German provinces.

In March of that same 1939, Hitler himself led an expedition to capture the town of Memel, a former Teutonic town of Lithuania, also separated from Germany by the Versailles Treaty, showing his attention was now drawn to his north and eastern borders.

The day before Christmas of 1938 began the Battle for Catalonia in Spain. The Republic was disintegrating already by then. It took Franco's troops only one month to conquer Catalonia, so that by the beginning of February of 1939 his army stood at the foot of the Pyrenees. Barcelona fell on 26 January of 1939. About four hundred fifty thousand leftist Catalans, among them mostly Anarchists, passed the frontier of France to go into refuge and exile, and they were received in large camps in the south of France, a human tragedy of unheard-of proportions. Belgium accepted three thousand Spanish Republican children.

In Madrid, the Republican Colonel Lopez Casado staged a coup. He was secretly in favour of an agreement with Franco, and his aim was to save the Republic from Communist dominance, but Casado's negotiations with Franco broke off. The coup became the death-blow for the Republic. Franco's armies marched forward from March of 1939 on. The Republic abandoned battle everywhere. Madrid was taken on 27 March. By the beginning of April of 1939, the Republic had ceased to exist.

Franco was only intended on unconditional surrender. On 1 April, the United States recognised the Nationalist Government of Spain. The Texas Oil Company and Standard Oil of New Jersey had helped Franco with substantial supplies of petrol. All the other powers had by then already done so, the Soviet Union excepted. The Non-Intervention Committee dissolved itself.

The total number of casualties in the Spanish Civil War amounted to over five hundred thousand people dead, of which two hundred thousand approximately were combatants.

Mussolini, who had sent much war material of aeroplanes and tanks and up to forty thousand men to Spain, then attacked Albania, which was an independent country under King Zog I since after the war of 1918. Albania was rapidly captured, its King fled from the country.

At the end of April, after enflaming speeches of Winston Churchill, conscription was also organised in Great Britain. The British Army would soon consist of two hundred thousand professional soldiers plus the conscripts, but those numbers remained puny compared with what the Fascist regimes could bring to the battlefields.

In August of 1939, the French Army was brought to a state of alert on its eastern front with Germany.

At the end of that month, a secret pact was signed between Germany and the Soviet Union to divide Poland among them. The official pact was a Treaty of Non-Aggression, which gave Germany free hands to attack Poland.

Belgium mobilised in that month, but the Belgian soldiers were sent to the French border to guard Belgium's neutrality! All active Belgian Army units were brought to a state of alert and the first reservists were called in. In September, Belgium continued to mobilise and called in further units of reservists.

At that time, the armed forces in the region included about eighty German army divisions, ninety French divisions, forty British divisions, twenty divisions in Belgium and ten in the Netherlands. A division held about ten thousand soldiers.

The German Führer sent his ultimatum to Poland in the month of August of 1939, demanding the Danzig Corridor and the port town to return to Germany. When Poland refused, the German invasion of Poland began on 1 September of 1939. Germany launched forty divisions and three thousand aeroplanes against the country. Half of the Polish aeroplanes were immediately destroyed on the ground in bombings. Guderian's tank divisions were hurled fast and deep into Polish territory, supported by Stuka dive bombers to disorganise the enemy infantry. Two days later, on 3 September, France and Great Britain declared war on Germany. The ultimatum of immediate withdrawal from Poland by Germany had not been answered.

After the declaration of war, neither France nor Great Britain tried to invade Germany. As a result, a strange period of war began in which no army attacked in full force. Winston Churchill called this period the 'Twilight War'. The French journalist and writer Roland Dorgelès called it '*la drôle de guerre*', the phoney war. It would last until 10 May of 1940, a full eight months.

Great Britain sent support troops to the continent in the form of two divisions. This force came to be called the British Expeditionary Force or the BEF, under Lord John Prendergast Vereker Viscount Gort. The BEF remained posted around the city of Lille in the north of France. The BEF was added to later, to its ten divisions in May 1940. The German *Wehrmacht* in May 1940 consisted of one hundred seventy-five divisions, of which ten were *Panzer Divisionen*. Germany had by then about two million seven hundred fifty thousand soldiers in active service, whereas France could throw two million three hundred fifty thousand men on the battlefields. Great Britain counted to have ready by 1941 only fifty-six divisions.

Belgium had only a handful of armoured tanks and aeroplanes. The Belgian tanks were mainly Vickers T.15 equipped with machine-guns. Her twelve heavy Renault tanks of 16 tons bought in 1937 remained in their storehouse, their crews untrained, because the Belgian Government and Parliament regarded the tanks as offensive weapons, not in accordance with the statute of neutrality. Luckily, the Belgian Army had excellent artillery at its disposal.

From 6 September on, the Belgian Air Force had to defend the Belgian airspace from intruders. Foreign aeroplanes were forbidden to fly over Belgium. This was very hard to guarantee, for the Belgian observer aeroplanes were among the slowest machines of Europe, certainly when compared to the modern fighter aeroplanes of the three great Western-European powers. The *Aéronautique* used mostly Renard R.31 and Fairey-Fox reconnaissance aeroplanes, which were no match for the British Spitfires, the French latest Dewoitines or the German Messerschmitts. German reconnaissance aeroplanes photographed the Belgian and French defences.

British bombers flew to Germany and dropped propaganda tracts, but preferred to return over Belgium. On 9 September, a Belgian Fairey-Fox forced such a British Whitley bomber to land near Nivelles, and another Fox was shot down by such a Whitley near the town of Mons. From November to December of 1939, four British Hawker-Hurricanes landed at several places in Belgium due to defects, and these machines were confiscated by the *Aéronautique*. On 2 March of 1940, three Belgian Hurricanes intercepted a German Dornier 17, a reconnaissance aeroplane, but the Germans shot at them with their machine guns. One of our Hurricanes, hit by bullets, had to make a forced landing near Ciney and one other hurricane crashed whereby its pilot was killed. On 12 March, another such Dornier was seen, but escaped. On 2 April 1940, three of our Gladiator aeroplanes hunted and brought down a Heinkel 111 bomber. A few more Dorniers, hit by allied fighters, landed in the Ardennes in Belgian territory in the month of April. In all, during the Twilight War, sixteen foreign aeroplanes made a forced landing on Belgian territory, among which nine British machines.

In Poland, Krakow fell on 6 September 1939, and on 7 September the French Army advanced a little into German territory toward the Siegfried Line, but only in a meagre effort to straighten the front line and make it less long.

On 17 September, the forces of the Soviet Union entered Poland to capture Vilna, Brest-Litovsk and Lwow. By the 19th, the Polish Army was virtually annihilated. By the end of the month, Warsaw surrendered.

Four hundred fifty thousand Polish prisoners remained in German captivity and two hundred fifteen thousand in Soviet occupied territory. German casualties numbered over the thousand dead and thirty thousand wounded. Germany annexed the provinces of Danzig, Thorn, Posnan, Lodz and High Silesia, with nine million people. The rest of independent Poland, thirteen million people, were left in a country with as capital Warsaw, governed by a German *Gauleiter* or Governor. The death camps of Auschwitz, Treblinka and Majdanek came to be organised.

The Soviet Union held among its two hundred fifteen thousand Polish prisoners also about fifteen thousand five hundred officers. While we were feasting Christmas at Trioteignes, these officers were murdered by neck shots at Katyn, about fifteen kilometres off Smolensk.

During the Twilight War, a truly hot war was also being fought at sea. In September and October of 1939 already, German cruisers and submarine ships sunk many allied merchant ships, among which a Japanese merchant ship and a Dutch passenger ship. By mid-October, the U47 submarine of Lieutenant Priem attacked the British fleet inside its Scottish basis of Scapa Flow. The 'U' stood for *Unterseeboot* or submarine. The U47 torpedoed and sunk the British battleship *Royal Oak*. Afterwards, British cruisers protected rather efficiently the merchant ships that sailed in convoy and British and French anti-submarine ships decimated the German *U-booten*.

At the end of November of 1939, the Soviet Union turned its attention to Finland after Poland. Finland had been a Grand-Duchy under the Tsars, but the country had gained its

independence after the Russian Revolution. The Soviet Union invaded Finland and bombed Helsinki. On 12 December, the Finns defeated the less well prepared Russian troops at Toljaviari. The Finns took more than a thousand Soviet prisoners, and the Russians left several hundred dead on the battlefield. The Finnish troops even crossed the border with the Soviet Union.

December was marked most by the Finnish war for us, and also by the sinking of the German battleship *Graf von Spee* at Montevideo in Paraguay. Both these events happened very far from Belgium, so that we knew these were acts of war, but we all hoped the real war would stay far from our territories.

The *Graf von Spee* sank many British ships from October to December, but British and French ships took a hunt after her. Three light British cruisers, the *Exeter*, *Ajax* and the *Achilles*, found her on 13 December in the South Atlantic and opened fire. The *Exeter* got heavily damaged in the ensuing sea battle, but the *Ajax* and the *Achilles* continued the attack. The damaged *Graf von Spee* escaped inside the Rio de Plata in neutral Paraguay, in front of Montevideo. On 17 December, the *Graf von Spee* sailed out of the Rio de Plata, unrepaired, and the Germans sunk their ship. The *Spee* burned for four days in the Bay of Montevideo and her Captain Langsdorff shot himself in the night of 19 December. Our sympathy at Trioteignes went clearly to the British Navy, but we talked little about the sea-battles.

On 10 January 1940, a German staff Major of the Seventh German Air Division had to bring a set of documents to his headquarter in Köln on the Rhine. Major Helmut Reinberger flew in a two-seater Taifun Messerschmitt aeroplane piloted by Major Erich Hoenemanns. In the dense fog, the pilot erred, and he had to land because of lack of petrol in what he thought was German territory, but which was in fact a place near the small town of Maasmechelen in Belgium. The pilot had mistaken the Maas Stream for the Rhine.

Major Reinberger was arrested by three soldiers of the Belgian Thirteenth Division. When taken to the barracks, the German officer tried to burn his papers in a stove, but the stack of documents was recuperated by Captain Rodrigue, who burnt his hands in the effort. The papers contained detailed plans for attacks by the Second German *Luftwaffe* on Belgium, the Netherlands and the north of France, including precise directives for the Seventh Parachute Division to capture bridges over the Maas in the *Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse* region of Wallony. The German Major was released, and the partially burnt papers were sent to Brussels, Paris and London. There could be no doubt left that the Germans planned to invade Belgium, but still the Belgian Government chose to believe in the neutrality of their country, and Belgium did not invite allied armies on its territory. The Government concluded that the papers held maybe a plant to give Hitler arguments to invade Belgium.

A little later, the Belgian King had to report to France and Great Britain that it was probably better to have the onus of breaking the Belgian neutrality rest on Germany, but the Belgian politicians knew now that Germany prepared an act of deliberate aggression against the Dutch and Belgian Kingdoms. The Reinberger papers suggested the same movements as in the German invasion of 1914.

On 13 January, Colonel Goethals, the military attaché at the Belgian embassy of Berlin announced that Belgium would probably be invaded on 15 January in order to remain ahead of Belgian decisions after the finding of the Reinberger papers. Due to this warning and the remarked approach to the Belgian frontier of the German Sixth Army, the Belgian Government called the general alert of all forces on 13 January 1940.

Chapter 3. From 13 January to 28 January

Alert

Virginie and I had to return to school from Monday, 8 January on. Usually, Grandfather Charles drove us in the morning to our Catholic College in his car, a ride of about fifteen minutes. It happened in that month of January that one of the officers proposed to drive us, or even one of the ladies. In the afternoon, we returned by bus because we preferred to come home among our friends of the village. The return by bus lasted about half an hour or more, for the bus stopped in all the villages between the town and our Trioteignes, but we laughed a lot more in the afternoon, so the bus trip seemed shorter. The bus dropped us off at the Church Square of Trioteignes, almost at our gate, and we still had less than ten minutes on foot from there to reach the castle bridge. Four of our best friends stepped off the bus in the village with us. The other boys and girls were sons and daughters of the baker, butcher and the farmers of the neighbourhood. We had less time to spend with the pilots, but in that first month after New Year homework was light.

In the late afternoon of Saturday, 13 January, Grandfather Charles who had been sitting in the library with the radio on, ran out of his room shouting and gesticulating like a madman. The telephone rang ominously almost at the same time and its ringing reverberated through our old walls. Virginie sat in our rooms and we ran downstairs. The members of the families emerged from doors over the entire house. Grandfather Charles shouted that the Belgian Army had been declared to be in a state of urgent alert. All military personnel on leave was called to their units immediately. These orders had been given over the radio, and they were being repeated regularly.

My father, Jean-André, stood the closest by the telephone. He unhooked the horn and listened to the message. The call came from Bastien's squadron, asking him to drive to his air base as quickly as possible. A little later the telephone rang again, with the same message for Georges Trahty. Bastien would have to drive to the airport of Evere, and he would take Jan Sinnagel with him. They both flew in the 5/III/3 Aé, the fifth squadron of the third group of the third regiment of the *Aéronautique Militaire*. Georges de Trahty was a pilot of the 3/II/2 Aé, the third squadron of the second group of the second regiment, which was based at Nivelles, a small town south of Brussels. At the same time the telephone rang in the Orangerie with similar messages and it did not take long before we heard cars humming in the garages. Richard Bousanges and Thomas Drandin drove by. They were pilots in the 11/V/1 Aé, the eleventh squadron of the fifth group of the first regiment, based near Liège at Bierset. Three cars left at great speed, Bastien and Jan were bound for Evere, Georges for Nivelles and Thomas with Richard for Bierset.

Bastien and Jan flew in Fairey-Battle bombers, as well as Max Vinck, but Max did not leave Trioteignes. His orders were to remain at Trioteignes together with Jef Asten, who should have accompanied Georges de Trahty, for his assigned squadron was equally the fighter aeroplane squadron based at Nivelles. Richard and Thomas flew in the reconnaissance aeroplanes Renard R.31.

Grandfather Charles, Léon-Alexandre and our father Jean-André, Virginie and I watched nervously how the men packed their kits and drove off in a few minutes' time. No time was taken to say goodbye, no hug or kiss comforted the men when they left the castle.

We did not see Jef Asten and Max Vinck, for they had probably run to the hangar to prepare the aeroplanes for an urgent departure. At that moment, in the manor, we all believed the German Army had attacked Belgium. We expected German aeroplanes above Trioteignes any second.

When the cars disappeared out of the castle domain, we remained very silent. Great-grandmother Claire and Grandmother Anne wept in silence when our Blue Flowers left, but we saw the tears fall along their faces. Rosine, Violaine and Arlette stood in a group and Irene waited awkwardly a little further, until Arlette drew her into their group too, and the four women huddled together, close to tears. Grandfather Charles and Uncle Léon-Alexandre whisked everybody back into the castle, but their mood was not much better. Virginie and I ran back to the castle, to the radio of Grandfather Charles and we hoped to catch other news, but none came, except for the repetition of the general mobilisation and the alert of all forces. We heard no warnings of German attacks, nor of English or French troops entering the Belgian territory. German bombings had not taken place and no German regiments of infantry, artillery or of motorised divisions had passed the Belgian border. What was happening?

We imagined how the pilots would arrive in the middle of the dark evening in their squadrons. They would burst in on aerodromes in chaos of shouting and running soldiers, pilots and technicians. The aeroplanes would be rolled out of the hangars and placed along the terrain from which they would have to mount into the skies. The most needed supplies and tools, machine-guns and spare parts would be loaded onto trucks, waiting for orders to move to other, hidden aerodromes. We imagined the roaring of the engines when the first aeroplanes rolled over the airfields and took off in search of the enemy. Belgium was at war!

Bierset

Richard Bousanges and Thomas Drandin drove on in silence. Thomas sat at the steering wheel. They were not in a mood to talk. They had driven so many times already by this splendid road along the River Meuse, that Thomas could have driven his eyes closed. Richard's eyes were not closed, but he slumbered beside Thomas, dreaming, lost in thoughts. His body sat in the car, but his mind replayed the years of his youth.

Richard was a nobleman. His parents were Baron and Baroness, and Richard could use this title too. He did not live in a real castle, for that had been inherited by his elder uncle. Richard's father was a University professor. The family inheritance amounted to a large square farm with a fine manor that was as large and comfortable as castle Trioteignes' living quarters. The farm was managed by Richard's mother, who though a Baroness, had lived all her life in the country. Richard's mother was a woman with a fist. She was stern and commanding with her labourers. She was a tough administrative manager and a keen entrepreneur too, for she was always on the lookout for new grains to try in her crops, for new bulls and cows in her stables, for other means of distribution of her products. She had even begun a butter and cheese factory, which though still quite small, showed much hope and she enjoyed her first successes in selling to shops in the large industrialist town of Liège. The farm of the Bousanges stood at the outskirts of Ans, near Liège, and also not very far from the airport of Bierset. The farm looked like a fortress in the fields. Richard might have

stayed over at his home during Christmas and New Year, but he had two brothers and two sisters who occupied the place with much noise of offspring. His mother, nearing sixty, also had become too bossy on him. She insisted all the time he should marry, and Richard hated being pushed on that subject. So he had preferred to follow his best friend Thomas, to Trioteignes. Thomas lived far from Bierset, in a town of Flanders, and he too was still a bachelor.

Why had he, a Bousanges d'Exenaerde, wanted to become a pilot? His mother was a farmer, his father a professor, Richard could expect little comprehension from his parents for his calling! Richard's father had wanted him to study brilliantly and to aim for a University career like himself, maybe become a doctor, but certainly not a man dedicated to manual labour, as driving an aeroplane was. Why, was a pilot much more than a bus driver? Richard had stubbornly persuaded his father to let him choose his own way and to let him sign a contract with the Belgian *Aéronautique* to become a pilot. He had to pass an examination to be allowed into the *Aéronautique Militaire*, and he had taken that examination in 1928, eighteen years old, at Evere. He had passed the exam at which four hundred applicants toiled, passed also the strenuous physical tests, and then he signed a three-year contract to become a career voluntary in the Belgian Army.

Richard knew he had not at all been born into flying! His father had shown not the least interest in the skies, and also not his mother, and none of his brothers and sisters had the least inclination for flying. Richard, however, had been fascinated by birds from his first year on. Later, he saw the aeroplanes that flew over Liège and Ans, the first bombers of the World War that attacked the rich industrialist city, and even the German Zeppelins that moved like white cigars in the blue sky, either dropping bombs over the town or gliding silently farther towards the west. The machines in the air had intrigued him to the utmost. At ten, whenever he had the time, he had taken his bicycle and he rode to nearby Bierset to watch the aeroplanes climb and land. Bierset was a military airbase, but also a few civilian aeroplanes were allowed there and an occasional aeroplane meeting was organised at the base. At sixteen he had flown twice, once on a paid trip for which he had begged a little money from his father and mother separately, and once allowed in the cockpit by a distant relative who was a Pilot-officer and who had taken him up in another, small aeroplane for a few minutes. He remembered on that second flight they had passed over the smog-clad air of Seraing, over the Cockerill blast furnaces and over the cokes ovens. He had smelled the acrid, sulphur-loaded fumes of the town, and he had felt a strange pride in seeing how smart and industrious his compatriots were.

The wealth of Liège depended on the hard working people of Liège, on its engineers and inventors. Had not Zénobe Gramme invented the dynamo? Had not Liège given world-famous artists to the world, the violinist and composer André Grétry in the eighteenth century, and so many others, up to the very energetic group of painters, sculptors, architects and composers of his own times? Liège had long been an independent state governed by a Prince-Bishop, a state in which the French dialects were spoken, as well as the Dutch dialects of the County of Loon, of Belgian Limburg. This land had not been subservient to France but been part of the German Empire until the French Revolutionary troops conquered it in 1794. Much of the old pride of independence, and also much of the ideals of freedom and brotherhood continued to live on in the region of Liège. The men and women of his town were nice, gentle, immediately intimate and familiar with strangers, open-minded, but also often hot-blooded and headstrong, ready to stand up from a chair at the first cross word. They also liked a joke. When a few pals of Liège got together in the Army barracks, some form of innocent mischief

was bound to happen every week. Was their idol and symbol not the giant hero of effrontery Tchantchès?

After his examination, Richard had first been sent for a couple of months to the Aviation School at Wevelgem in Flanders, near the town of Kortrijk. He had walked the seven kilometres from the railway station to the aerodrome on foot, wearing his heavy sack. An Adjudant had welcomed him quite warmly. He had not been alone. He had walked with a few other recruits he had met on the train, ten in all. A Sergeant brought them to their room where they slept a dozen together on hard, steel beds and old mattresses. In the first two months at Wevelgem, they did not fly much.

The aerodrome of Wevelgem consisted of not much more than a few barracks where the recruits slept, a few hangars for the aeroplanes, a hangar for supplies and a villa for the officers. The soldiers' barracks stood at the other end of a road. They were long, low blocks, which looked all similar and equally gloomy. The compound consisted also of storerooms, an armoury, and the mess for the soldiers and for the non-commissioned officers, the NCOs. One learned the elementary rules of the military at Wevelgem first, some common drill, to march and to salute, the basics of handling guns, and one had of course to fly a couple of times with an instructor in an old aeroplane. These few flights were tests, actually. The instructor executed a roll or a looping, and the recruits who panicked got sent away instantly. Richard had passed that test brilliantly, whistling and shouting of joy at every looping. Even the instructor had enjoyed the flight. Richard became known as a craze about flying, a youth who shouted his joy as well in a roll as hanging at his straps upside down.

The most important new thing he learned at the pilot's school in those first months was how to cope with the mafia, and that too formed his character. The mafia was the gang of clowns made up of old-timers who harassed all newcomers in Army barracks. In Wevelgem, the mob would enter the bedrooms of the unsuspecting new recruits at night, dressed in white sheets as if they were ghosts, cry out loud 'attention!' in the middle of the dark and turn over all beds in attention position, that is vertically, before anybody could react, and then leave as quickly as they had come. Nastier jokes happened when water, or worse, was involved. The mafia would ask a recruit to walk to the storehouse of the barracks and ask for a litre of latrine-oil. Few of the newcomers realised what the word latrine meant. They would come back from the Quartermaster with a pint of dirty water, telling that the latrine-oil was up but that wisdom-water would serve as well, whereupon that pint was duly poured over the head of the innocent recruit. Other jokes were less harmful, and all part of the rites of passage. Richard had been served his share by some of these gangs also, later on, until he came to detect the jokes before they were played on him, and then, he being a guy from Liège, he counter-played the jokes on his older comrades. That stopped the really bad-tasted jokes on his friends. The soldiers who originated from Liège were masters of imagination in such games. How many times had he heard the shouts of 'alarm, alarm, everybody out,' in the middle of the night, to find the end of his trousers stitched together with a hundred threads? He had learnt to hang a very sturdy lock on his cupboard where he left his reserves!

After two months of military instruction, Richard had been promoted to Corporal and he was sent to one of the three civilian centres of flying schools, which were situated at Gosselies near Charleroi, Deurne near Antwerp or Saint-Hubert in the Ardennes. Richard had asked for the Ardennes, and he was sent to Saint-Hubert. There, he learned a few lessons in aerodynamics, and especially how to fly. He flew a lot at Saint-Hubert. Much less military discipline was imposed at the private school, and the site held no Adjudants and Sergeants to pester him. The men who were instructors knew how to keep the recruits in check, though.

The recruits slept and ate at the local hotel, which stood close to the airfield, and which was considered heaven as compared to the barracks of Wevelgem.

The aeroplanes on which Richard learned to fly were Belgian machines with engines of a mere ninety Horsepower, built by Renard-Stampe-Vertongen, called after the names of the three engineers who had designed and built the machines in the Renard Manufactories of Brussels. The RSV90s were sturdy, forgiving machines, which almost never spiralled down, however bad one handled the stick and the flaps, and which could be straightened horizontally after only a short, hopeless dive. The machines were biplanes and two-seaters with two commands, so that during the first lessons when the student pilots flew, the instructors could override what the new pilot did. That had hardly been necessary for Richard, for the instructor had explained the few basics well. Richard had listened attentively, and shown a natural talent and inclination to flying. He did not have to use his mind to control the flaps and the stick, he flew by instinct. Even if he had it difficult to keep a straight course in the air, he could land very nicely and graciously, and that was the only thing that mattered according to the instructor. The sky was wide, you could do the stupidest things in the air, all was fine as long as you could make a perfect landing. Richard had been allowed at Saint-Hubert to make his first solo-flight, and that also had been concluded to a fine success. Only six candidates out of ten succeeded in the tests organised at the end of the three months.

From Saint-Hubert, Richard had to return to Wevelgem. He had to demonstrate and repeat several more landings there, to prove he had learnt something in the Ardennes. His instructors were satisfied. It was at Wevelgem he had experienced his first feeling of belonging to a group, to the group of the pilots of the *Aéronautique*, with their own rules of chivalry and ribaldry.

The commands of the aeroplanes in which he flew were rudimentary. His hands and feet were in complete control of the machines, and the aeroplanes reacted immediately. Richard compared that to riding on a bicycle instead of driving a car. The RSV90s were machines easy to handle. They came to form part of the man in the air, and once one had the hang of them they seemed even a bit slow in reacting. Richard also learned to fly in the Caudron G3 biplane, which would react quicker and more nervously to slight movements of the stick. The RSVs and the Caudrons could fly at a little over one hundred kilometres per hour, only a little faster than a steam train. Nobody flew in those days wearing a parachute. After the Caudron, he flew on Avro504K aeroplanes and still later on the French Morane ARs. He learned to plan an itinerary, to read maps and to find his way over the landscape and to return to the same airfield in one piece. The most nervous machines he had flown were the Fokker D.VIII with Mercedes engines, leftovers from the German Army after the World War. In these, he had learned the treachery of clouds, especially of the cumuli-nimbus draughts that could sweep you out of control ever higher until you couldn't breathe anymore and until even your engine could not get enough oxygen to burn fuel. Those clouds had given him the frights of his life. He had also learned to fly on instruments alone, but only after artificial horizon instruments had been installed.

Richard had known his first deaths too, at Wevelgem. One of the candidate-pilots had not succeeded in his examinations and hung himself in the barracks. Another one suffered a blocked engine right at the moment of landing, drove at full speed into a line of trees, shot off his wings and crashed against a willow trunk.

After Wevelgem, Richard had been sent to a squadron at the aerodrome of Bierset. There, he flew in DH4 and DH9 aeroplanes, old 1917 models with Rolls-Royce engines, ugly un-

elegant biplanes, and on those he also received a few lessons in bombing and in flying in platoon formation. At that time, the *Aéronautique* thought that only by flying in formation, in a platoon of up to nine machines in three triangles of three aeroplanes each, good bombing could be realised. Formation flying was difficult, for one had to follow a leader who might give gas and then suddenly drop gas, yet you had not to fall behind nor shoot past the leader! Exercises of bombing were effectuated above the military domain of Beverloo in Limburg. The DH4 and DH9 had been supplanted rapidly by French bombers, the Bréguet XIX with engines in V-form produced by Hispano-Suiza of five hundred Horsepower. These could fly about hundred sixty kilometres per hour and they climbed very rapidly.

The Bréguets had been fitted with a gyroclinometre, an artificial horizon. Richard received his first lessons in flying through cloud blankets without any visibility using this instrument. First, he had received black cloth on the glass of his cockpit so that he could not see anything in front of him, but the co-pilot behind him could also steer and get him out of dangerous situations. Richard had hated that kind of exercises, but he had gotten the hang of it and after a time he dared to use the instruments to fly a circuit entirely in the clouds, without any visibility.

He had been taught how to use his machine-guns over the North Sea in the channel, near the Belgian coast. Another aeroplane drew a board in the air, and Richard had to shoot his guns at the board. That was the only training in shooting he received.

Richard had obtained his military pilot licence early, and been made a Sergeant. After five years of squadron life, he had been promoted to Adjudant, and then he had asked to be allowed to follow courses in Brussels and obtain his certificate of officer. Everything he had accomplished so far had been obtained easily, and also his courses for officer had not at all seemed difficult.

At Bierset, Richard mostly flew Renard R.31 observer planes. He thought with affection of his machine. He liked the R.31s.

The R.31 had been built on the 1931 plans of the Brussels' engineer and entrepreneur Alfred Renard. The prototype had been built to answer a call for aeroplanes launched by the Belgian Air Force. The first prototype flew in October of 1932 and in 1934 a first delivery of twenty-eight machines had been made in replacement of the older Bréguet machines of the Ninth and Eleventh Observation Squadrons of Bierset. These two squadrons wore the name of the Sioux of the Blue Circle for the Ninth and the Sioux of the Red Circle of the Eleventh. Of the twenty-eight Renard machines, twenty-two were built in the workhouse of SABCA, the '*Société Anonyme Belge de Constructions Aéronautiques*' of Brussels, and six in the workhouse of the '*Renard Constructions Aéronautiques*', the own enterprise of the designer. In August of 1935, seven more aeroplanes of this type were delivered. Production stopped in 1938. The engine of the aeroplane was a Rolls-Royce Kestrel. Another, French engine had been tried out, but abandoned for various reasons among which issues of injection at higher altitudes.

The R.31 could climb to eight thousand metres in about twenty minutes, but the pilots rarely flew higher than four thousand metres so that oxygen masks were generally not necessary. It was a monoplane made entirely of a duralumin structure and of steel bars, but the wings were covered by cloth. It had been conceived as an aeroplane for reconnaissance, so its wings were placed on top of the machine, allowing the pilot and the observer full sight downwards. Pilots called this type 'parasol' machines. The wings, long and wide, were supported by four tubular bars that rose upwards from the wheel carriage. Brakes, activated by a bottle of compressed air, were installed on the wheels.

The cockpit housed a radio set and a photographic device. The radio was no good at distances beyond a few hundred metres. The radio could provide for telephony and telegraphy, but it was rarely used except for interphone, on-board communications between pilot and observer, and even then manual signals were preferred and exchanged between the pilot and the observer. Messages to the ground were mostly written notes, placed in metal cylinders, a flag or a piece of cloth added for visibility. and dropped at pre-agreed places. These methods of communications were rudimentary, of course. Usually, an observer aeroplane flew to watch, landed and the observer telephoned his message from his base.

The pilot and his observer could shoot from two machine-guns, one for the pilot, situated to the right of the fuselage, which shot through the propeller and which was synchronised with the propeller. Another machine-gun was directed to the rear side from the observer post, and mounted above the fuselage. The synchronisation of the machine-gun of the pilot and the propeller blades was formed by the traditional 'Constantinescu' system, called after the Rumanian engineer who had invented it. Constantinescus were installed since many, many years, already on the biplane fighters of the World War. The Constantinescu brought impulses from the engine to the machine-gun by a series of cog-wheels, so that the bullets passed through the air to the propellers and did not destroy the propeller blades while the machine-gun shot. When that synchronisation was lost, which happened sometimes, the propeller blades became a sieve. Both the guns were made by Browning. The pilot's machine-gun could fire from a box of three hundred fifty bullets. The pilot had to draw on a handle for every one hundred shots to arm, and then he could shoot by pushing down a button on his control stick. The observer's machine-gun was exactly the same as the one of the pilot, but it was equipped with five boxes of one hundred bullets.

The R.31 could also be used as a light bomber, and then bombs were placed under the wings. They could be released by an electric control.

The cockpits remained open, they were not entirely covered, and only a transparent plastic windscreen, made of a material called rhodoid, protected somewhat the pilot and the observer. To augment the visibility, two plastic windows were placed on either side in the fuselage, through which the observer could look down to the ground. The pilot seat could be lowered allowing the pilot to see under the wings, or the seat could be brought higher, allowing the pilot to see above the wings.

On the ground, the aeroplane stood with its nose high, its large propeller of two blades high above the soil, its front wheel carriage robust and its wheels protected by metal caps. Behind, it stood low to the ground on a small wheel. Two additional small tail wings added to its stability, under the rudder tail.

The wings were elliptic in shape and very large, allowing the aeroplane to fly at low speeds. These wings also limited its manoeuvrability in the air. The pilot started the propeller with a magneto starter. The aeroplane needed a long stretch to get into the air and also to land, which made it difficult and dangerous to land on short tracks. The R.31 had not been built to perform acrobatics by, and a few very daring, cocksure pilots had torn off the wings during too brave dives, causing a few to be sent away from the *Aéronautique*.

Pilots and observers wore parachutes by then. They also wore heavy, wool-lined clothes. Since the cockpit was open to all weather, it could become very cold in the aeroplane at great height and in winter. Of course, the R.31 disposed of a system to heat the cockpit by air circulating around the radiator that cooled the engine, but that warmth did not suffice for the entire body in winter. The pilot and the observer wore therefore fur-lined boots and woollen, fur-lined jackets. A few men, who were either married or had girlfriends, wore nylon

stockings under their helmets, but many considered that a trophy rather than protection against the cold.

The cloth that covered the wings was made of linen. Linen was a product of the valley of the Leie River in Flanders. The rear, tail wings and the rudder were covered by linen. The aeroplane could be flown and controlled by the pilot and by the observer, but the stick of the observer could be dismantled to give him more space to move and observe.

The Renard R.31 had two reservoirs of petrol, a principal of four hundred litres and a reserve of twenty litres. On reserve, the pilot had still about fifteen minutes of flight, in which time he could find a place to land. The main petrol reservoir could be dumped out of the machine. The pilot had a lever to his left to that effect. Dropping the petrol tank was a radical but very interesting feature when the pilot had to crash-land or when the engine was on fire. The aeroplane consumed from one hundred and five litres per hour to one hundred seventy litres per hour, so it could stay three to four hours in the air.

The pilot had several controls at his disposal to the left of the dashboard. He had there the double contact for the two magnetos and the magneto for starting, a control handle for allowing the petrol to flow from the tank, an indicator of the pressure of the bottle of compressed air for the brakes, an instrument that counted the number of revolutions of the propeller, a warning of fire on the engine, and a small lamp to give the pilot light to read a map. On the dashboard he had a clock, a thermometer for oil and one for the temperature of the water in the radiator, a manometer or a meter of the pressure of the oil circulating around the engine, a manometer for fuel, an instrument that let him know how much petrol was left, a triple manometer to indicate the pressure of the air in the brakes, another lamp. Higher up, the pilot had an idea of the speed of the aeroplane, an indicator of bends of the wings, a variometer, and lower he saw an altimeter, his gyro compass and the artificial horizon. A magnetic compass was placed lower still.

The Rolls-Royce Kestrel II engine could deliver four hundred eighty-seven Horsepower. It was a horizontally placed engine, around which oil circulated for lubrication of the cylinders that were placed in line. The engine was cooled by water, which flowed to an air-cooled radiator.

The propellers of the R.31 were of wood around which linen was drawn. The propellers turned clockwise as seen from the pilot, and the drive of the propeller was protected by a bronze cone. The motor was fuelled by a compressor which blew air into the carburettors. The Rolls-Royce carburettors mixed air and petrol to ignite in the cylinders. The pilot could control the arrival of petrol to the carburettors in function of the altitude of the aeroplane, but a system adapted the intake of fuel to the desired speed of the aeroplane. Richard could control the arrival of fuel by the throttle, as well as the degree of the mixture of air and petrol. The R.31 could develop a maximum speed of two hundred ninety kilometres per hour, and it could climb to four thousand metres in ten minutes. It could get off from the ground in two hundred metres and needed about as much to land, minimum.

The air intake for the cooling of the radiators, an opening beneath the fuselage and in front, under the engine, showed a series of metal plates, giving the impression of teeth of an animal, as if a flying shark or tiger were ready to bite an adversary. It was a feature that appealed to the imagination of the pilots and that gave the aeroplane an organic, life-like impression.

‘Yes, you can bite, my tiger,’ Richard thought, ‘but will the Germans know that you are more of a nice kitten than of a tiger?’

He smiled with his pun in the car.

While he drove on in the late evening, Richard thus passed over the technical details of the aeroplane he would fly with. He did that as a lover would have remembered the face and curves of a beloved. Many pilots, however, checked thus on all the features and details of their machine, as if obsessed. They checked and re-checked on the instruments, on the flaps of the wings and of the rudder, and they checked their armament. The best pilots did that, the ones that left nothing to chance. Maybe it was a sign of nervousness, certainly of obsessive attention for the least tiny detail.

Compared to what Richard Bousanges had flown with at the Aviation School, the Renard R.31 was an elegant aeroplane of which Richard thought with love. It was a race-horse for him, a nervous machine that needed the pilot to control every aspect of it. Yet, Richard also found it a stable and reliable machine, though not one to play with. The R.31 demanded to be respected, to be cajoled, to be loved, and to be handled with delicacy. Richard loved his aeroplane as much as he would have loved a girlfriend. Only, he had no girlfriend!

Richard had remained a bachelor. Maybe he had loved flying and aeroplanes and his comrades in arms too much. No, he knew, there was something else that had withheld him from seeking the company of women. First, he did not like to frolic with the girl of the cafés. And then, a very long time ago, when he was no more than six or seven years old, he had played with a girl who lived in a villa close to his parents' farm. He had no other friends or playmates then, and neither had she. This girl, Arlène Paslot, had been nice to him and they had had a good time for a few years, as long as they were allowed to go to each other's house. When they had to take their studies more seriously, they lost sight of each other, and new friends presented themselves, naturally. When he had come to fifteen years of age, he had seen Arlène again. He rode in the neighbourhood on his bicycle in the hope of meeting her. She had become a very fine, extremely beautiful slim young woman then, lean in legs and limbs with a delicate face, very regular features, still as gentle and polite as ever, inspiring Richard with the image of an angel or a Saint Mary. He had fallen in love with her the first time he had seen her again, but she walked near her house with another boy at her side, and that boy seemed to Richard twice as handsome and thrice as intelligent as he was. He spoke to her when he met her alone in the road, but he detected no particular interest for him in her eyes, just much shyness, and it had dawned to him he had better forget about Arlène forever. Only, he couldn't, and he didn't till this day! She represented to him the real image of perfect, calm, divine beauty. He was aware he probably idealised her too much, and the absence of other women might have enforced this image he nourished of her with tender feelings, but he could not push her out of his mind. How could other women, then, compete with an ideal?

Richard rode on in the darkness. Sitting next to Thomas, he promised himself to return to the Paslot house and ask what had become of her. How awkward, however, the situation he would create when he rang at the door of her parents! For all he knew, Arlène was married and had children. Why hadn't he looked for her much earlier? He lacked courage! How could one seduce an angel or the Virgin? Richard felt ridiculous and very sad. Anyway, if this was really war they drove to, although he had it hard to believe something like a war in which one ran the risk of dying could be waged over Belgium, if this was really war, he would face death each day and he had better not think about love and about someone of a dream-image as elusive as Arlène. Nevertheless, she continued to represent for him everything he would want to fight for. He hadn't given much of a fight so far!

'You're a coward, Richard Bousanges,' he muttered.

Tomas had also been musing and he heard now something from behind the steering wheel. He asked, 'did you want to say something?'

‘No, no, I was just dreaming,’ Richard replied.
The car sped on until Thomas announced, ‘we are arriving at Bierset.’

Chaos reigned at Bierset. Men ran in all directions on the air strips. Aeroplanes were being drawn out of the hangars and readied for take-off. Pilots ran in flying kits between the machines, climbed in cockpits, adjusted their parachutes and straps, put on flying helmets, goggles, gloves, and started the engines to warm them up. Behind the hangars, the technicians continued to load trucks with the last spare parts and tools and with everything else that was needed to keep the aeroplanes in good flying order on the campaign airfields. Thomas parked the car next to the barracks and the two men leapt out of the car, already dressed in their flying kits. They picked up a parachute, helmet, gloves, a few personal belongings, and ran to the hangar where their Renard R.31 stood. Their machine was ready. They ran to the Information Centre, where the Commander of the Sioux Group gave his orders. Orders were simple. The aeroplanes had to be brought to the campaign aerodrome of Hannut-Thisnes. Bierset was expected to be bombed; Thisnes might have remained unnoticed by German reconnaissance aeroplanes. Richard Bousanges would have to fly; Thomas would have to ride in a truck with the riggers and fitters. Richard had a Sergeant as co-pilot and observer, on this trip merely a passenger.

Richard walked to his aeroplane. The strange atmosphere of the night suddenly gripped him. He thought about the German aeroplanes that might already have taken to the air by now, in the night, to reach Liège and their targets at dawn. He would have to clear out of Bierset too, even before the first light broke the darkness. The lights on the aerodrome were all switched on and the long shadows gave a weird life to the machines that stood in the field, noses smartly tilted up. Richard suddenly thought of the machines as of a rare breed of metal animals, animals that would separate brain and body. The body stood there before him, and soon the animal would receive its brain, the human being, Richard. The capabilities of the brain would be multiplied by a thousand, by hundreds of Horsepower, and then the monster would react to the brain and begin to move. The monsters of iron and flesh would begin to fight in the air like ancient giants or articulated dragons. Why had man created such monsters to augment his powers? Richard felt a sudden aversion to bring the monster before him to life, for he would be the monster. The joy of flying left him at that moment, and the image he now saw and comprehended clearly began to revolt him. His attitude to flying would never be the same in the future. Nevertheless, he stepped to under the aeroplane, brushed aside his odd feelings, no doubt inspired by the eeriness of the lamplights and shadow of the night, by the play of shadows on the machines of Bierset.

The squadron counted about double as many pilots, professional aviators and reservists together, than it had aeroplanes, about thirty people in all. Richard climbed in his cockpit. He started the engine. The oil pressure and the engine temperature were fine, the fuel gauge marked okay. He waited a while until the engine was warm enough to roll forward, gave a sign to his observer, and then he opened the throttle to fire his machine on. His stomach fluttered as he was thrown into action. Soon, he felt the familiar hobbling of his machine over the airstrip give way to a calm flying as the nose of his R.31 tipped upwards. As always, he felt elated to leave the ground. The aeroplane flashed over the fields and pastures of Limburg.

Hannut

Richard had to fly only a quarter of an hour to reach Hannut, which lay not much more to the west than Bierset. The airfield of Thisnes was not illuminated, but well prepared and luckily quite flat, so that all the landings of the Renards went successful, without crashes. Close to the airfield, spaces had been dug out and the earth piled up around, to form at least some form of alveole, protection for each aeroplane. The emplacements for the machines stood at the beginning of a line of trees and bushes, which formed a fine camouflage against enemy bombers. Richard and his co-pilot helped the technicians and the soldiers of the Group a little later to push the aeroplanes under the trees. Then, he walked to the Headquarter of his group. He saw the last trucks arrive.

At Headquarters, Richard found the Group Commander, who told him to wait for further instructions. The Information Centre was situated in a fine, old mansion belonging to two elderly sisters. The sisters forced a hearty breakfast of coffee, milk, jam and bacon on the pilots. The Captain who assisted the Group Commander gave Richard the address of a house in Hannut town where he would sleep. The soldiers and technicians of the Sixth Group were lodged in the cinema of Hannut, and the field kitchens placed in a large, empty house in the middle of the town. Richard and Thomas went together to the address provided, which turned out to be a villa in the outskirts of Hannut. The officers of Headquarters knew Richard and Thomas were close friends, so they had kept them together. The villa belonged to a young couple. They were lively young people, who made the two pilots feel at home. They also prepared a fine dinner for them in the evening of that Sunday, 14 January.

During the night from 14 to 15 January, it began to snow over Belgium. The snow fell heavily, without much wind, but it fell steadily, thick and sticky. It kept on snowing, so that a white cloak of fifty centimetres thick covered the landscape of Hannut and also the aeroplanes that stood in the open. The snow froze to ice. Richard suspected at that moment that a German attack would not come at all, for the German divisions would have it very hard in this weather to advance through the Ardennes. He relaxed, but when he visited the aeroplanes, he got worried.

It seemed impossible to take off from the campaign airfield through half a metre of snow! The wheels of the Renards disappeared in the tapestry of snow. If ever this aerodrome was indeed bombed, as some still expected but which seemed unlikely, for the German bombers near the Belgian-German frontier must have the same issue with the soft snow, then the Belgian soldiers would have to scrape off the ice from the wings, shovel a two hundred metres long free lane for the aeroplanes. All that might take hours, during which period the bombs could fall plentiful on the machines and on the men.

The Group Commander had an ugly decision to make, for shovelling an air strip open might also mean providing the perfect indication that this area was a new airfield, and thus attract bombers. He decided to do nothing, and to rely on the camouflage of the trees and bushes and of the white carpet. He too did not believe the war had begun in the middle of winter. He preferred to keep his campaign airfield a secret as long as he dared to risk.

The war did not come that time in January of 1940.

After a few days of anxious waiting, the machines seemed to be frozen in place and as much part of the landscape as the wood in which they were hidden. The waiting lasted. Richard and Thomas lived in the cosy house of their hosts. They sat together for long hours in the cosy

conversation room, told stories of their schooling at Wevelgem and Saint-Hubert during the long evenings, and pulled out of their sleeves all the old anecdotes of professional aviators. They listened to records of classical music and sang songs themselves, accompanied by a piano Thomas played upon. The waiting was dreadfully boring, however, and Richard regretted lively Trioteignes, which he almost had come to consider as his second home. The pilots heard nothing of an invasion of Belgium. Richard wondered why Belgium kept to her neutrality since everybody seemed to expect anyway an attack of the German Army.

By 25 January, after ten days of waiting at Hannut without any new alert or news about the war, the pilots supposed the Germans had postponed sine die any plans of invasion. It seemed time to return to Bierset. The Twilight War held on. The squadron would have to solve two issues, however: how to take off from out of a thick layer of snow with aeroplanes of which the commands might be frozen or clogged with snow, and how to land at the snow-covered Bierset.

It was decided to send a group of men to Bierset to ascertain the state of the aerodrome. Richard and Thomas were part of that group of men, and they discovered that not only as much snow had fallen as at Bierset, but the wind had blown hard there and formed high heaps of snow on the landing fields, heaps of over a metre high. An aeroplane that landed at Bierset would get its landing gear caught in those heaps and topple. Richard and other officers decided for the only practical solution they could think off, which was to shovel the snow aside and to free a strip of fifty metres wide by three hundred metres long, to allow the incoming aeroplanes to land harmlessly.

At Hannut also such a strip was cleared from snow. After two more days, the airstrips were ready and the first Renards stood with circling propellers, warming up their engines, the pilots checking on every instrument and commands. One aeroplane left and landed half an hour later at Bierset. The pilot phoned to Hannut that the flight and the landing had passed well, despite the heavy load of ice and snow on the machine. Richard returned back to Hannut by truck.

The Group Commander decided to leave Hannut the next day in the morning, and the Renards took off without haste. Richard Bousanges stepped in his machine, warmed the Renard for fifteen minutes, checked on the commands, and then he rolled to the cleared airstrip. His flight was uneventful, the landscapes below marvellous. He descended to a hundred metres above the terrain. He looked attentively at the state of the airstrip, calculated how he should land, memorised the exact position. He mounted again to four hundred metres height, lowered his speed while coming down to one hundred kilometres per hour, and landed perfectly on the thin layer of snow and ice amidst high banks of white snow on both sides of where he rolled. Several machines skidded on the strip and ended nose in the snow, but those were the only accidents that happened. No damage was done to the aeroplanes, only a little damage to the pride of some of the pilots.

Return to Trioteignes

The pilots returned after 28 January to our castle. Nobody believed anymore by then that Germany would yet attack this winter, or even ever at all. The Allied Powers could have done the same already many months ago, but hadn't moved either. Fighting was going on at sea and a little in the air, mainly to stave off observer machines, but the really great battles did not come. Our hearts relaxed and beat more regularly. Each pilot was warmly welcomed and we could laugh again. The pilots remained more or less on alert so that we only saw part of them

at the same time, and then mostly on weekends. They told us how their stay at the campaign airfields had passed, and they told all more or less the same story, in which the snow played the greatest role. Only Richard Bousanges remained more silent, garrulous and withdrawn than he had been before.

Virginie and I continued our routine of driving to school, submitting to our courses until about four o'clock, and then taking the bus back, joking with our friends until we arrived at home around four thirty. We usually received a piece of cake and coffee then, and took an hour at most to do our homework.

A few days after the pilots had returned, our bus passed through the village. We saw the familiar Mercedes car of Baron Andreas von Reichenfeld drive slowly to the village. It was a Friday afternoon, so we supposed Baron Andreas paid us a visit during the weekend. We thought at that moment already that Andreas was quite courageous if not provocative, for he would not be welcomed warmly at Trioteignes after the false alarm of the thirteenth of that month. A second car followed Andreas's car, a large black Citroën, which was not a diplomatic car. In that automobile sat two grim-looking men dressed in black leather coats. When the bus and Baron Andreas arrived near the village church, near the centre of the village and near our castle entry, the second car drove into a side-track that led to the south, to our neighbouring village. This village was twice as big in houses and people than Trioteignes. We knew several fine, new villas had been built there in the last years. I supposed the Citroën brought to that village new inhabitants, and I gave the car not further thought. At the edge of the next village also stood two other castles, as in many villages of Wallony. In fact, most of the villages of our region had been developed around castles or abbeys. At their origins, many of these villages simply housed the servants and the farmhands who worked in the castles and the castle domains.

I wondered for a moment on what we had learned at school about the times when one per cent of the population counted for ninety per cent of the country's income. Those times were gone, luckily, and though very probably also much of the fortune of the Trioteignes had gone up in smoke, enough was left for us to live comfortably on. I knew we belonged to a still privileged class of society, but I found the example of the pilots who stayed over at our castle hopeful, for I had detected no difference in the way the pilots talked among themselves. Bastien de Trioteignes, Georges de Trahty and Richard Bousanges were noblemen of old aristocratic families, but they received the same lack of reverence and the same easy-going camaraderie as the other friends of the Blue Flowers. Thomas Drandin spoke no different to Richard as he spoke to Max Vinck. They were all good friends, irrespective of title or wealth. Besides, their families must of course have been as old as ours.

Jan Sinnagel, to whom we got naturally attracted because he was more the good-hearted father figure than the younger men, once told us that pilot officers were like artists, like poets or ballet dancers.

'They hate discipline, even though they serve in the Aéronautique, and they offer their lives in the same innocent, casual way of artists.'

Because of what happened at Trioteignes, and because of how closely I now knew the aviators, I held throughout my life greater respect for soldiers of all kind and for policemen than for the politicians and other grandees of society. I remarked that respect in the people of other countries. I think soldiers are more respected in almost any country of the world, and not just because they offer their lives to protect others. The pilots possessed a quality civilians did not. They were purer, maybe more naïve and idealistic, certainly less envying of what others had realised or possessed, because they probably could fly and therefore feel detached from the money and the belongings of the earth that obsessed other people. Our pilots were

easily hurt and easily deceived. When they found out, of course, their reaction was sudden and violent and they never reacted alone, for their friends stood up for them. They might marry, but many only married at later age. They enjoyed the company of comrades more while they were young, and they did not take love too seriously. They were never a lonely lot, brothers in arms and brothers in death. They knew how to face death better than most men because they never died alone.

Jan Sinnagel told us about death, for death was always associated with soldiers, and his words made our smiles leave our faces, although death remained a very mysterious and distant concept for us. We did not know what death was.

Jan said, 'death is always present with soldiers, and especially with pilots. People don't realise how much the aeroplanes can be dangerous. An aeroplane is not much more than a steel and aluminium structure of bars around which some cloth and the lightest possible zinc plates are hung. An aeroplane gets shaken terribly in the tiniest cloud you see hanging in the sky, and we are completely lost in the rain clouds or in the grey carpet that hangs in the air and clogs the sky. We try to remain under those clouds to find our way. Communications with the ground are impossible. We find our ways by recognising church towers and railways or rivers, and we make mistakes in that more than often. We suffer engine defects in the air, blocked commands, large birds destroy our cockpits and propellers, our petrol tanks catch fire, or we suffer from lack of fuel and fall, whirling down. We have to land on small, bumpy terrains, dive under telephone and electricity wires, if we see them in time, and avoid hills and trees. Every one of us, pilots, has been forced to make a crash landing to find obstacles of barbed wires or bushes and trees advance to us at tremendous and ominous rapidity when we land at the speed of a locomotive without tracks. Yes, death is with us constantly, and we need to believe in our good luck to avoid the worst. We all fly with a mascot, a charm of some kind to stave off ill luck! Pilots are the most superstitious men on earth. We all hide one or other small object in our pockets, our luck-charms, when we take off. Hairy rabbit legs are popular, as are images of saints or small medals that hang on our breasts. We refuse to speak of those charms, but we all wear them! Forgetting them on a flight is a catastrophe! When a pilot escapes death miraculously, we have to touch that man's shoulder before we take off! Maybe because death is so close to us, we laugh louder and more often than other men. We are also very serious about our craft. We are maniacs about our machines, check and check again on our engines and cables and controls and instruments. We yell at the mechanics when something is not in order. Although we realise how frail and vulnerable we are in the air, we adore to fly and a wonderful bliss comes over us once we are in the skies. We are proud then, and we feel as if we were the rulers of the universe, for whom nothing counts anymore of the lower, viler possessions such as houses and land and money. Such is the joy of flying!'

Jan Sinnagel emerged out of his musings then, and he looked somewhat surprised at our open mouths, for we had stood in awe at what he told us.

He grinned, 'it is marvellous to fly, but don't believe too much in the epic and heroism pilots try to impose on you! Every profession or trade carries its dangers. Accidents of flying happen, but they remain rare. It is true that each pilot makes mistakes, and one or other accident always befalls on us, but we are trained and sufficiently smart and dexterous to cope! We are no sissies ... oh, sorry miss Virginia!'

Virginia found it beneath her dignity to react.

Council

Baron Andreas von Reichenfeld arrived indeed that evening at the castle. The welcome he received was openly cold, as was to be expected. The pilots and also Grandfather Charles, in fact all the people who stayed at that time in our domain, knew by then what had happened with the German Major who had landed with invasion plans on the wrong side of the border. Grandfather Charles did shake hands with Baron Andreas and offered him a room, but I remarked he avoided looking into the German's eyes, and his lips did not smile. Andreas insisted, and took the room. I guess I would have turned back immediately. It was very clear to us all now, that Germany was a threatening country to Belgium, a source of hatred and violence. Germans were definitely not the good guys, and certainly not the guys to which wrongs had been done after the last World War. We increasingly thought they had merited the humiliations of Versailles. Germany was definitely not the country that sent out messages of peace for mankind. We realised that clearly.

After the evening dinner, the pilots wished us rapidly a good evening and they left the table earlier than usual. Conversation had been minimal and reserved. Nobody addressed the Baron. Grandfather Charles, Jean-André, Léon-Alexandre and Arlette de Trahty went into the library to drink a Cognac, leaving Andreas with the other ladies in the parlour, not inviting him in. The ladies and Andreas drank tea in the parlour. We stayed up with them, but we were sent to our rooms only a little later. Baron Andreas was not deemed good company for us. We remained a while in the entry hall, and then we sneaked to the door of the library, to hear what the men and Arlette discussed. We heard Baron Andreas leave the parlour, which sent us hurrying up the stairs, and we saw the Baron also enter the library. We sneaked down again, to the door. We knew a concilium would be held.

‘The Reinberger papers were merely a trap, a provocation organised by *Wehrmacht* officers acting on their own initiative,’ tried to explain Baron Andreas. ‘I cannot believe our Generals and our Führer intend to attack their neighbouring countries without being provoked to the extreme.’

‘There lays much logic in the plans of the papers,’ Jean-André ventured. ‘The German *Wehrmacht* will find it much easier to gain terrain by attacking the weaker twenty divisions of the Belgian Army than the elite eighty French divisions that stand behind the Maginot line. The plans found were but a variation on the 1914 von Schlieffen plan. It is the shortest way to Paris for Germany. What on earth goes on in the head of that man Hitler to launch tens of thousands of soldiers to bring destruction and death over peaceful Belgium and Holland? For what purpose? Yes, a war is on, but the Allied Powers do not attack, and as long as there is no attack, there is hope for peace. Germany has her German-speaking people all back now, so why would she still attack? There is no sense in a more extensive war. Why launch tens of thousands, maybe millions of soldiers to bring destruction and death over peace-loving countries? Can you imagine what a chaos Germany would create once more when the refugees begin to flee the battlefields and to clog the roads? No doubt, German bombers and fighters will harass these people like they did in Poland! I am sorry, Andreas, as much as we liked to deal with you, what kind of people are you, Germans, to bring such horrors on us? Why has Germany become once more a bag of hatred, revenge, violence and death, all the medieval foes strung together? Aren't you ashamed, can you truly still be proud of that Germany?’

Grandfather Charles coughed, as if he not entirely agreed with these words of his son and found them rude, but Virginie and I thought it very decent of our father to shake up Baron Andreas's soothing explanations once and for all. This was the way we all thought at Castle Trioteignes!

Andreas did sound a little embarrassed.

'I can understand how you feel. Germany has had to endure too many humiliations in the past. Yes, much hatred and sentiments of revenge have accumulated in our people. How could it have been otherwise? A new cataclysm is probably needed to redeem the wrongs done to us after the War. I believe that after a quick victory of limited dimensions, peace shall settle soon.'

'I have stopped believing that,' Léon-Alexandre stepped in. 'It is the duty of a Government, of the wiser men that rule over a country to seek peace. Everything can be solved in conferences with good arguments. But Hitler made the Germans believe they are a superior race. His past victories have led the Germans into becoming intoxicated with glory. I have news for you. The Germans are not superior! You may be somewhat more powerful and smarter and better organised than the rest of Europe for the moment, but Germany will unleash the powers of the rest of the world against her, not with her. You know, this may sound ridiculous to you, but I believe in a sort of eternal balance between evil and good in the creation, and evil never wins in the end, for the balance must be preserved. The balance is baked into the creation. The creation seems to have been formed as a sort of mathematical system of equations to realise the equilibrium, never resolved, always maintained, between good and evil. Evil never wins. I remarked that principle in the overall politics of all countries, and also in the minor events of our individual lives. Business partners who cheated on me and on others, have been punished harshly for their deeds. Great wisdom lays in the common saying that what is just lasts the longest. I have used that saying a lot in my business negotiations at the crucial moment, and it has cost me sometimes a lot of money, but it also gave me great satisfaction, personally, and it has brought me friends and honest business partners at the strangest moments and from out of the oddest corners. These men showed me they had confidence in me and they brought me more business, reliable business and sound profits. Evil does not win in our universe, Andreas, tell that also to your father from me. If Germany invades Belgium, she may kill and destroy and she may unleash un-heard of forces, but she will call for far more destructive forces to rise against her, for all men want to live in freedom and peace, and these last, God-supported forces, will prevail in the end.'

We heard no answer from Baron Andreas, no doubt he remained pensive, but Arlette Trahty remarked, 'I thank you, father! I am now ashamed I began to doubt what you and Charles had been doing these last years and especially these last months!'

Léon-Alexandre flared.

He thundered, 'how dared you doubt us, my daughter? Charles and I are Trioteignes and Trahties! We are men of honour! We are also patriots. Long live the King and long live Belgium!'

Léon-Alexandre and Charles stood, clank their glasses and drank.

Baron Andreas admitted, 'I am truly sorry about the turn of events. I can assure you that no one in our family wishes to harm your countrymen. We do not wish war, and Germany did not declare war on France and Great Britain, though I agree Germany called the anger of these nations upon her by not responding to the ultimatum. We should have refrained from entering Poland and we should have negotiated more on that subject, taken more time, have been more patient. If the true war will be waged between us, with invasions and killing, I must confess that I and the members of my family will stand on the side of Germany, for good and for worse. You cannot reproach us for wanting to ease the pain of our own countrymen. We shall

fight with our men at arms. I am sorry, but I shall leave Castle Trioteignes tomorrow. I did not imagine I could cause you such distress as I perceive now in you. Good evening!’

Nobody had said one word about Irene Stratten that evening. I wondered what would have happened had she confessed there and then openly she had come to our castle as a spy for the German *Luftwaffe*. Her name was simply not mentioned. I suppose Grandfather Charles and the others believed she had changed sides by showing her cards.

We hurried away from the door of the library, for Baron Andreas would open it any moment now. We ran to under the marble staircase and we heard indeed the door being thrown open. Heavy steps ascended the stairs. We saw Andreas’s sad, yet determined face as he disappeared upstairs. He seemed much older than before.

We sneaked back to the library, where the Trioteignes and the Trahties still held their council. Such family councils happened spontaneously but frequently. Here, the affairs of the men were discussed. Georges de Trahty was still on duty this day, so he could not be present, but we were astonished to hear Arlette being allowed into family councils. Things were definitely changing in the world if women were allowed. I did not say that to Virginie, of course. She would surely have hit me.

‘Well, that awful moment is over,’ we heard Grandfather Charles conclude. ‘God be thanked! We still have a lot of investments in Germany, Léon.’

He sounded worried.

‘I have pulled out lots of funds and sluiced those over to Switzerland these last few weeks. I propose Jean-André to get out the rest, though some is tied long-term. Do you agree?’

‘Of course,’ Charles acquiesced. ‘We must consider Germany once more as an enemy. We should buy gold and precious metals and stones, now. A war shall come, I am pretty sure of that. Even Germany will need a country to trade from, a neutral country for her dealings with the rest of the world. That shall increasingly be Switzerland. How about Spain? I believe Franco will stay out of the war. Spanish businessmen that are close to him told me so. Franco is a pragmatist, not an ideologist. He refused to get tied down by the Carlists and the Falangists. That man wants and will guard total power, mostly to stop anarchism, but he has promised the monarchists a throne, given time. The new Spain must be craven for investments. She has mines and an industry. Portugal would be fine too, but Portugal is less well developed.’

‘We should try Spain, yes,’ Jean-André nodded to Léon-Alexandre, and Léon-Alexandre seemed to agree.

We heard a silence creep in.

‘What are we going to do with Irene Stratten?’ Jean-André wondered.

The word was finally out, we thought behind the door.

Grandfather Charles spoke before anybody could proffer an opinion. ‘I have spoken with Irene, and also with Bastien. Irene seems to like Bastien a lot. Bastien tells me she is in love with him, and he is for certain in love with her. Irene is confused. She is a German woman, with two families to care for, and factories to manage. She seems to be the family leader on whom everybody in the Stratten and the von Schillersberg rely on. The Nazis blackmailed her. They told her they would lay hands on her families’ fortunes and on her son. She will have to return to Germany, but she wants to stay on for a few weeks here. That gives us the time to concoct a story with her, a fitting story she can tell in detail in Germany. The story will have to prove that even if there had been aeroplanes at Trioteignes, there were none while she stayed here. Irene spoke of having her son come over to Trioteignes, but if the Germans roll over Belgium, that move will not help her much. Irene and Bastien have a lot to think about

and more to talk about. I want to give them that time. Irene, I think, is not a bad woman, and she is clever, but if she is truly in love, her love will prevail. Love always prevails in women. They turn soft when they love. Sorry, Arlette, but that also is common wisdom! I believe Irene talked to me honestly, exposing quite candidly her issues. She is no professional spy, no fanatic, and she has something of the purity of the soldier in her. We have to be patient with her.'

'Irene remains a danger for the aeroplanes and for the pilot officers each day,' Arlette remarked. 'If she takes the side of the German invaders when Trioteignes falls in conquered territory, people of Trioteignes may be murdered. Do you realise that? She is a danger for us all!'

'She is,' Grandfather Charles mentioned coldly, 'but I don't want her hurt, and Bastien will certainly react badly if somebody tried to do harm to her. We both have to hold back your Englishman.'

'What Englishman?' Léon-Alexandre asked suspiciously.

'Carter Ash alias Jef Asten,' Grandfather Charles informed his friend. 'I told you an Englishman would come to work on the aeroplanes. The Englishman has come, and he has been working here for several months under the false name of Jef Asten. I apologise for not having told you the entire story, Léon. I did not think it necessary to tell you. You have something to tell us too, don't you, Arlette?'

'What does Arlette have to do with this?' Léon-Alexandre screamed.

'I too hid a secret, father,' Arlette whispered. 'I met Carter Ash, who is in fact a British pilot officer, many years ago in Oxford. His real name is Carter Ash, not Jef Asten, and his mother was a de Brioges, so in a way he is family, half Belgian. He is a nephew of Charles's wife Anne, and also a nephew of Amandine. Anne's and Amandine's sister disappeared to England when still young, married an Englishman, and then died about ten years later, as you probably still vaguely recall. You lost contact, but she had a son when she died. I am in love with Carter Ash. We are very much in love. I shall not leave him again. I shall go with him. If he doesn't want to take me in one of the aeroplanes here, I shall have to travel by boat from Ostend or Calais, but I shall follow him. I am a doctor. I will be needed in Britain, too.'

A stunned silence fell in the library.

Léon-Alexandre puffed, 'well I ever! I would have thought you would never have fallen in love! And now you tell me we have family in Britain and that you are going to follow an Englishman, a Brioges at that! What am I going to do with you, Arlette? I love Georges, of course, and I am proud of him. He is a fine man and a good son. I relied on you, however, for the brains and the staunch good sense in our family. What am I going to do without your advice in the matters of life?'

'I shall always be there when you need me, father, you know that!'

'Have you talked about your intentions to young Ash?' Grandfather Charles wondered.

'No, he doesn't know it yet,' Arlette laughed, 'and he may say no to me a thousand times, but I am going with him, whether he likes it or not, if not in those damn aeroplanes, then by any other means. He shall not get rid of me!'

'I suppose you can earn your living there, too,' Léon-Alexandre remarked, 'and I'll never leave you wanting. You will not go far on his officer's salary, but you'll have enough to live on in dignity.'

'You are nice father, I thank you, and yet money is always on your mind, isn't it? You shouldn't worry, though! The Brioges, like the Trioteignes and the Trahties always smelled money from far. Carter's family possesses more land and houses and money than the Trioteignes and the Trahties together. He has two sisters, but he is the only son. He did a few

things his family did not agree with, such as volunteering on an assignment in Spain, and probably also for falling in love with a non-British girl, but those issues can be solved. They seem to have been proud he has entered the Service. His family now enjoys a great reputation for having served King and Country, and Carter met a few very influential people during his assignment in Spain and later, people who are currently part of the Government. We shall do!’

Léon-Alexandre was stunned. He leaned back in his chair and exclaimed, ‘how did all of that happened right under my nose? Why have you all kept so many things from me?’

‘These are hard and strange times, Léon, my friend,’ Grandfather Charles said. ‘I have told you most of what I thought important. Everything does not work out like we would have wished. Bastien loves Irene, and I would have wished Arlette for him. Georges loves Violaine and I would have liked him to have thrown an eye on Rosine. Bastien is in love with a German woman, Arlette with an Englishman. I have seen Rosine glance at that pilot, Max Vinck. Do you think I knew much more than you about what was going on under my roof? I found out late! Too late!’

Grandfather Charles and Uncle Léon-Alexandre sat there as two old men, silently, but we imagined they were also quite satisfied despite nothing had turned out as they had wanted, for they held the young men and women who resided now at Trioteignes in high regard.

Léon Alexandre began to speak after a while, ‘we talked of Switzerland and of Spain. Belgium becomes a dangerous land. Our sons will become involved in the war, my daughter shall fly to Britain, your daughter will not want to leave Trioteignes. Maybe we should send Jean-André and his family to Barcelona for a while. As for the rest of our children, we can only hope for the best. My business hopes and yours also, Charles, lie now with Jean-André, and God knows I consider him like my son, too. I tell you, my hearts constricts when I think of what might happen to our sons, to Bastien and to Georges, and I suppose also to Carter Ash and to Max Vinck. Rosine seems equally to have gone out of her head, yes.’

Charles answered, ‘I propose, Léon, that you and Amandine come to live with us. You’ll be safer here than in Brussels. It is high time you proposed to Amandine, though whether you do that or not is your decision only. You can conduct your business from out of the castle, and drive to Brussels when need be. I shall feel lonely here soon, when our children leave. We must support each other during the war. Two heads can think twice better than one. We should do that until the war ends or talk of it abides.’

‘Yes, I shall do that, thank you, Charles. I do need a friend at close hand, and also another brandy. Pour me one more glass from that old Armagnac of yours, will you? If I am to marry again, I may as well have one more glass for courage’s sake.’

All laughed.

The last we would hear that evening were bottles and glasses that clank.

Chapter 4. From 28 January to 9 May

Peace

On Sunday morning of 28 January, Baron Andreas von Reichenfeld zu Gandsen left Castle Trioteignes early without saying goodbye to anybody. He did not ask to see Irene, Irene avoided him and stayed with us. The pilots seemed to be happy he had left. We gathered for breakfast, but Thomas Drandin and Jan Sinnagel had been kept on alert in their barracks. They would be with us the next weekend. In some strange way, the pilots had become members of our family, and we longed to have them all with us. The clan of the Blue Flowers belonged to Trioteignes.

Bastien and Georges talked a lot with Richard Bousanges about how they had fared at their campaign airfields. We laughed, for the alerts had given many a fine anecdote about the chaotic way the *Aéronautique* had scrambled for their aeroplanes and trucks. The exercise had been interesting, maybe even necessary, and much had been learned.

Our father and mother listened, but their mind was elsewhere. They did not know we were aware of a move to Barcelona. Now, they were preparing to leave for Brussels. We wondered how long it would take them to come to a decision about us. I suppose there existed schools for French-speaking children in Catalonia, Barcelona being situated not far from the French border, but we feared being placed in a boarding school somewhere in the French Pyrenees, maybe at Perpignan. Virginie and I had already looked up the possibilities in an atlas of the library. We definitely did not want to leave Trioteignes. We would fight being withdrawn from our schools and our castle and our friends. We felt all right with our grandparents and uncle and aunt. We talked it over in a council of our own, and we decided to fight tenaciously being transferred to Spain or to a French boarding school. Grandfather Charles and Grandmother Anne would not mind us staying in the castle. We were no difficult children. Léon-Alexandre and Amandine could help them, and Rosine and Violaine would not leave soon. We waited *pie'd ferme* for our father and mother to announce to us what we already knew. This would end in a *no pasarán!*

At lunch, we asked Carter Ash how much we were family.

‘My mother was a sister of your Grandmother Anne, and also of Amandine,’ Carter explained. ‘So your grandfather is an uncle of mine. Anne and Amandine are my aunts. I am a cousin of your father. I don’t know how one calls such degree of family, but if you want to call me uncle, be free to do so, I would be delighted.’

We were indeed delighted, and told him so.

Then we asked Max Vinck to explain where the dragons housed at Trioteignes, and Max had to confess he had thought up the entire story to prevent us from wandering into the woods near the hangar.

‘Nevertheless, a dragon does eat at Trioteignes,’ he told us, ‘the dragon of time! We all grow old and all manors such as Trioteignes Castle suffer from that monster. The monster of time eats at iron and at stones. Therefore, we must care for the things we want to preserve.’

We agreed with that, and the table laughed at how futile the stratagem of Max had proved, for, as we said, no Trioteignes would ever be afraid of dragons, however fiercesome. We attracted applause for that saying and we reconciled with Max.

After breakfast, we worked in the library at our homework. We lunched all together, after which our parents indeed announced with many introductory hints they would leave for Brussels. They did not yet break any news about Barcelona, and we looked as innocent and smart and sweet as new-borns that afternoon. Later, we said goodbye to them, honey-tongued, hugged them warmly, and we were very glad to remain at Trioteignes. Everybody came out of the castle to see them off. Also Georges Trahty returned to his airbase a little later. We ran back to our rooms, performed a jig of joy, and we dressed in warm wool. We ran downstairs to roam once more in the woods. Much of the snow still remained, so we drew on our heaviest coats and gloves and headdresses.

The plot

We sneaked through the wood to the hangar and the barns, where we supposed some action might be on, for the pilot-officers had disappeared and some of the women too. We saw nobody in the barns, but many traces of steps showed in the snow around the buildings. From the barns, we sneaked to the hangar. We crept on all fours along the walls, to the place in the hangar where our grid hung. I pushed against the grid, avoiding the slightest noise, and then once more we slid in. The hangar's sliding doors stood wide open, all the lights were on. We supposed not much could happen to us if we were found out. The officers were not of the kind that would hurt innocent-looking, frightened, sorrowful children. We waited for a moment below the iron staircase and then, seeing nobody close around, we climbed up the stairs to have our now usual panoramic view over what happened in the aeroplane hall. We heard voices at the other end, the familiar voices of Carter Ash and Max Vinck. We saw them still working at the *Assailer*. The engine plates stood plied open and Max Vinck once every while fired the engine, then stopped it again to inspect the engine and the pumps with Carter. We tried to ease ourselves as best as we could on the platform, and we watched and waited. We wondered what Carter Ash and Max Vinck could still tinker at the engines and at the aeroplanes.

After a while, Arlette Trahty entered the hangar. She called out to Carter, and both he and Max left the *Assailer* to come to the cosy corner for tea, where they sat in the sofa. Arlette kissed Carter unceremoniously, which also did not seem to astonish Max Vinck in the least. Arlette and Carter nestled in the sofa and Max drew a wooden box close to the stove. He kindled the fire and went to a cupboard to handle over mugs to Carter and Arlette. He set a pot of tea, and poured the hot liquid in Carter's and Arlette's mug. Arlette warmed her hands around the mug. They said little, but enjoyed the moment.

The quietness lasted only a few moments until also Bastien and Irene entered the hangar, holding hands, faces red from the cold. Irene unwound a thick shawl she had thrown around her neck. They too received a cup of tea from Max. The corner really became cosy at that point, and the two couples and Max really liked sitting thus together. Rosine should have been here too, but she and Violaine were shopping in Namur. We crept forward to their side to overhear the conversation.

Arlette asked, 'what do you still have to work at on the aeroplanes? They must be nearly finished, no?'

Max answered before Carter, who was blowing over his second mug of tea, and warming his hands around his cup.

‘Yes, in fact we are finished. We are now merely tinkering for pleasure. We could bring the aeroplanes to Great Britain or to wherever the Army and the Vresele family would like us to do so.’

Carter continued, ‘we should go, soon, now. We must take into account the newest information we have. From the alert of 13 January, we know the Germans will invade Belgium. They will do that probably in spring. It does not really matter whether they attack to the north, the centre or the south. They will come, and they will come rapidly, with the violence of their bombers, dive bombers and armoured tanks and parachutists. We must leave. The next week I shall have to face a decision, or return to Britain by my own means. I have nothing more to do here. I cannot postpone any longer my staying here, although I would of course like to linger. My love remains here.’

He looked with affectionate eyes at Arlette, who smiled gently, smartly, back.

He continued, in the same matter of fact manner, ‘we know why you were sent here, Irene, and you know about the aeroplanes. They have nice features, but they will not make a decisive difference in any war. You know that. What do you intend to do?’

Bastien craned his neck, but Irene began. ‘I am not a professional spy. Bastien and I have discussed what we will do. I shall stay here, in the castle, until you leave. Do not wait too long, however, for I have to return to Germany and report, and I believe indeed the danger of a German initiative is imminent. If you leave, I can state in truth that the aeroplanes are gone. I shall have to describe the machines, but I can easily understate the importance of what I saw. Our specialists in Germany did not believe in unconventionally new aeroplanes being developed in Belgium, though we knew quite well Belgium had excellent engineers working at new concepts of flying machines. I do not underestimate the two prototypes of Trioteignes, though. Some aspects of them can make a difference in a long war! I know what our industry is working at, and that is at least as modern as what you have here and can possibly be working on in Britain, so I would say we are about at even strength and advance in technology. Something revolutionary new would be reaction engines, and I am almost certain Rolls-Royce must be working at that kind, but reaction engines are not being designed in Belgium, and I shall tell them that. What I tell them should take the tension off Trioteignes. They will believe me. I rehearsed many times already in my mind what and how I shall tell them about the Vresele aeroplanes. Do not overestimate the importance of what you have, here. The Spitfire and the Dewoitines can be bettered with some of the innovations I saw at your machines, but our Messerschmitts and especially the new Focke-Wulfs that are being designed, are as good as or even better than the *Fearless*. I shall have to live alone for a while in Germany, quite some time probably. Maybe I can get back now and then to Trioteignes to meet with Bastien, but he will not be able to come to me because he is a soldier in the Belgian Army. We shall have to make of patience a great virtue. If a war comes, Bastien and I may get separated for a long time, but we will meet again. I would like to get married before I leave, in the village church.’

Bastien looked astonished at Irene, for they had not yet talked about marriage, we could tell, but he hugged Irene as if the most emotional moment of his life had been announced to him. The others laughed, for it was not usual for women to propose marriage to men.

‘I did not propose,’ Irene laughed. ‘Of course we would get married! I do not fall in love to play about!’

That brought more hilarious laughter, and also Carter and Arlette looked at each other. We could tell they liked the idea the practical German had brought up the first.

‘Until the aeroplane leaves, I would like you not to communicate in any way with Germany,’ Max Vinck tried.

‘I shall not do so,’ Irene promised. ‘If you do not trust me, you can lock the two telephones you have in the castle and in the Orangerie, or even confine me to my rooms when Bastien isn’t around,’ the practical Irene replied.

‘That will not be necessary,’ Carter Ash decided rapidly, looking at Max. ‘Your word will suffice.’

Max Vinck nodded.

Irene said, ‘you have my word!’

‘Good! We have no Champagne in the hangar, but I drink to that!’

Carter Ash took his mug and drank from his tea.

‘Oh, the English and their afternoon tea,’ Max Vinck exclaimed. ‘You must acknowledge, Carter, our habits are but barbaric compared to English tea for two in the afternoon!’

The men and women laughed, and then they began to chat on inconsequential matters, Arlette and Irene considered marrying the same day.

We felt the threat of war hanging above us all. When war came, it would happen suddenly, violently, and these men would fight, and in the fight they might perish. They were pilots and soldiers. They could also die of accidents with their aeroplanes.

Bastien asked, ‘what will come of you two, Arlette?’

Arlette grabbed the occasion.

‘Didn’t you know? I am going to live in Great Britain! I’m flying overseas with Carter and Max. There is a spare seat in the *Assailer*, and my bags are packed.’

‘What?’ Carter Ash cried. He had been paid by the same money as Bastien.

‘Of course, my dear, you heard,’ Arlette continued as if she had decided on the most normal thing on earth. ‘You shall not so easily get rid of me, and if you don’t allow me in your aeroplane, then I shall take the first ferry to England in Ostend and beat you to the distance. And if you hide again, I’ll find you in whichever hole you hide this time. You are mine, you know!’

‘Carter, Carter,’ Max Vinck shouted, ‘that is how Belgian women are! They are possessive, bossy and authoritative. Beware if you have them against you, but if they are for you they are truly wonderful! I am afraid already of how I and Rosine will do. You are not going to escape marriage, my friend! We should drink to that, too. We definitely should get those few bottles of Champagne we still have in the Orangerie and drink to your marriages!’

Carter Ash leaned back in the sofa, too stunned to move. The others laughed him down.

Carter Ash would not have been allowed to get out of the sofa either, for at that moment the attention of me and Virginie was attracted to a movement on our right side at the entrance of the hangar. Through the open doors stepped Baron Andreas von Reichenfeld, a revolver with a long barrel in his hand. Two other men, dressed in long, black overcoats followed him, and these also wore guns in their hands. Andreas came to the corner where the men and women sat. Everybody froze, because Andreas called out loud, ‘nobody moves! Keep your hands visible.’

Virginie and I were equally astonished, and we drew our heads more behind the iron bars of the platform, closer to the wood of the floor.

‘I am sorry to have to interrupt your nice little conversation,’ Andreas continued. ‘You kept a secret here, one directed against the German state. You are conspiring with countries allied against Germany, with countries that are at war with Germany. We shall have to thwart your intentions. The German authorities shall of course have to be made aware of the fact that Belgium is not so neutral as she seems. We shall do you no harm unless you resist us. We

must take one aeroplane, the fighter, and our pilot shall take off in that machine and bring it to Germany. The other aeroplane we must destroy. Irene, get ready to take off!’

All eyes went to Irene, who made no movement to get out of the sofa. She crossed her arms on her chest, shivered, but she did not move.

When Irene saw everybody look at her in astonishment, she muttered, ‘I shall not leave the domain, Andreas. I cannot and shall not pilot this machine.’

Bastien admired Irene, and the emotion showed on his face. He grabbed Irene’s hand.

Andreas remarked that gesture, and a grim understanding came over him.

‘You shall have to fly, my dear. Your son and your family are in Germany. Have you any idea of what can happen to them if you don’t comply?’

‘You bastard,’ Bastien growled, and he began to stand up from the sofa, his face contorted with anger. The man who stood to the left of Andreas shot Bastien in the right shoulder, and Bastien sagged back in the sofa, where Irene and Arlette shouted in fear. Blood oozed out of Bastien’s shoulder, and his face grew very pale.

Max Vinck and Carter Ash moved, ready to jump the Germans, but Andreas shouted again, ‘I told you not to move, fools! We have arms, you don’t! Keep quiet, all of you, stay where you are. Irene, come over here!’

Bastien sagged more on the cushions. Irene brought her hands on him, the blood soaked his shoulder. He leaned in shock against the back of the sofa. Arlette tore at his sleeve and she used part of the sleeve to dab and push at the blood. Hatred and anger appeared on Carter Ash and Max Vinck. Irene ignored Andreas.

At that moment, Virginie tapped on my arm and she made wipe open eyes looking past me to the wall of the platform. I followed her eyes, and they led me to the two sub-machine-guns, to the army weapons that hung on nails planted into the board set against the iron plate.

I shook my head to ‘no,’ but Virginie insisted on ‘yes.’

Virginie knew I had handled firearms. Grandfather had taken me hunting, though he never let me take aim and shoot. He had explained to me how guns worked, and what I always should do to handle a gun safely. He had taught me about safety catches, about bullets and how to hold a gun. I had read books on guns, also for a time on machine-guns, but my interest had waned.

I made ‘no!’ again with my lips and I shook my head, but she drew an angry face, wrinkled her forehead and nodded of ‘yes!’

I relented, close to despair of seeing what happened downstairs, so I crept to the board and took the two sub-machine-guns off the hooks. I placed one on the floor, kept the second in my hands. I knew the guns were loaded, for I had checked on them in some awe during a previous visit. At least twenty bullets were in the long, rectangular charge. The only thing I had to do was to draw on the lever to cock the guns, to compress the spring that would allow the first bullet to be detonated, and the rest of the bullets would fire by the power of the first shot. I knew how sub-machine-guns worked. All guns had a safety-catch. I had also to draw that down and hold the barrel in firing position. To cock the guns would make a noise, so I worked very slowly. The spring was tough and old. I laid the gun down on the platform with my back to the floor, and I drew very slowly on the lever, which took all of my strength, until the spring was tightened and until I heard distinctly the click that fastened it. I brought the safety down and handed the first sub-machine-gun to Virginie. Virginie knew the only thing she had to do was to point the gun and pull the trigger. I showed her to keep the gun close to her shoulder, and let the barrel rest on the railing. I was not sure she would hit something, and I did not really dare to think about hitting something or someone. Then, I did the same with the second gun and held that one in my hands. I looked down again.

Only a few seconds had passed. Baron Andreas still stood, waiting for Irene, a revolver in his hand, and also the German on his left held a gun to his side, but the third German, the one to the right, wore a sub-machine-gun too, one of another type than the ones we had now in our hands, but still a machine-gun.

I sensed something else. A shadow appeared at the entrance, and I saw Richard Bousanges' head pass the corner of the door for a moment, but then disappear again. Richard would bring help.

Meanwhile, Andreas and the two Germans shouted angrily at each other. They were very nervous, and I saw the one with the sub-machine-gun pointing his weapon at the pilots and at Irene. An angry dispute was going on beneath us.

Virginie nudged impatiently at me, and I saw her lips with growing fear and apprehension make 'one,' then 'two,' as she used to do when we hid somewhere and made ready to leap. When the 'three' came, Virginie stood up behind the railing of the platform, she pointed the sub-machine-gun downward, rested the barrel on the railing, and pulled the trigger. I had expected her to shout something, but she just shot!

I too stood up and beside her by then, and estimating the German with the sub-machine-gun the most dangerous man of the three, I directed my firearm at that man. The hall suddenly exploded in the noise of the rattling shots. I saw my bullets hit the ground in front of the feet of the German, and throw pieces of cement at him, cutting in his legs, and then I drew my weapon up until I sprayed bullets from the legs to the head of the man. Sharp lumps of grey stones flew all over the German, hitting him with sharp projectiles, and I was sure my bullets hit the man several times.

I could then not stop my sub-machine-gun, my fingers cramped too tightly on the trigger, my sub-machine-gun continued its upward movement, too strong for me, and my bullets tore to the ceiling where they hit a series of lamps which exploded in a rain of glass particles and sparkles of fire.

I heard someone shout 'Max,' and I saw something black flying down next to me, but I shot until the sub-machine-gun stopped because all my bullets were gone, though by that time I had forced the machine back down again, on the same German I had been aiming at.

I looked in amazement at what followed.

Somebody else was shooting, in short staccatos of a sub-machine-gun, but the shooting was not by one of the Germans but by Max Vinck, who stood now also with a machine-gun in his hands. Max knelt somewhat in front of the sofa, and he shot bullets at Andreas. The third German turned around and ran behind the aeroplanes, not before he shot at us, who stood on top of the platform, but he missed his target and I heard a bullet whistled harmlessly past my head. The German ran to the entrance of the hangar, through the open doors. Max did not dare to shoot straight on, for the German headed right next to the aeroplane, and Max did not want to run the risk of shooting into the machines. I saw the German run, however, he did not turn, and I wanted to shoot again from above, but I realised I had run out of bullets. When the German reached the opening, I saw him suddenly being hit squarely in the head by a large piece of wood. A last shot was fired, and Richard Bousanges appeared and hit again with the piece of half-rotten wood at the German. The wood broke in a hundred pieces, and the German's face burst in blood. Richard and the German sank both to the ground. The German revolver clattered to the floor. Richard had been hit by the last bullet. Richard grabbed his left arm.

Suddenly, there was only silence in the hangar.

I sank to my knees on the platform, behind the railing, and I looked at Virginie. She was still standing next to me, trembling like a reed, with large, very wide open eyes. She stood in shock. I drew her down and took her in my arms. She buried her head on my chest. She kept shaking. I had dropped my sub-machine-gun from which fumes continued to whirl, but she had no gun anymore. She had fired a couple of bullets, but the strain was too much for her, and she had had the presence of mind to throw the gun to Max Vinck who had picked it out of the air, bruising his fingers, but using the gun to better aims than Virginie might have done. Virginie had cried out for Max, and the black thing I had seen fall downwards out of a corner of my left eye, was the sub-machine-gun Virginie had thrown at Max.

Virginie and I remained on our knees on the platform. We did not move for quite a while, until Arlette and Irene found us and drew us up, asking whether we were hurt. We were not hurt. We were only frightened and utterly appalled by what we had done. I guess I had not really thought about what exactly would be the result of my shooting until I saw the bullets fly into the body of the man below. Now I knew. Virginie, who had only sobbed a little until then, started to cry out loud. She wept, and Irene hugged her, while Arlette drew me down the staircase. I looked at what had happened in the hangar.

The German who had brandished a sub-machine-gun to the sofa lay in a pool of blood that widened. The man did not move anymore. Carter Ash and Max Vinck stood around Baron Andreas, who also lay on the ground and who held his arms at his belly, from where much blood now oozed. Andreas still moved, and he murmured a few words to Max Vinck, but then I saw his head sag.

Arlette was shouting to Irene and also to the men, that they had to bring us to the castle, and she and Irene dragged us out of the hall. When we went through the doors, I saw the third German groaning on the cement floor. Irene kicked the man's revolver with her foot to Carter Ash and to Max Vinck. Richard Bousanges sat on his knees there too, holding his arm from which blood dripped. The German must have shot Richard in a last effort, but Richard still held on to his piece of wood like a to a bludgeon. Arlette looked for a few seconds at Richard's wound, but she said he was not severely harmed. She wrung a piece of white silk from under her dress and bound that around Richard's arm above the wound.

Irene then shouted at Arlette, 'you are a doctor. You must take care of Bastien and of Richard. They are wounded. I shall lead the children to the castle!'

Arlette released us and Irene took us by the hand. She led us out of the hangar, to the hollow path. Virginie continued to cry all the way, but we ran and reached the castle quickly. Irene shouted very hard in the courtyard, so that she unleashed instant pandemonium. We were brought to the parlour, and dumped on the sofa.

Irene explained in a few words what had happened. Grandfather Charles and Léon-Alexandre ran out, accompanied by André Degambe, leaving us to the women. Later, we heard they had armed their hunting guns and they had run with these loaded weapons in their hands to the hangar.

Irene proposed we should be given something warm to drink, so the maids prepared hot chocolate and tea, and Jeanne Frameur brought us cake. By then, what had happened so quickly still seemed a dream to us. Virginie stopped crying after a while. Half an hour or so later we heard another commotion at the door of the manor. The men returned. André Degambe and Alain Jacquet wore a stretcher on which lay a very faint Bastien Trioteignes. Bastien fixed his eyes on Irene. She cried out and walked beside him and held his hand. Behind them walked Richard Bousanges, who was held just a little by Max Vinck. Carter Ash

followed, and then came Grandfather Charles and Léon-Alexandre wearing their engraved hunting guns.

Bastien was brought to his bed. Arlette ran to the kitchen to order water to be boiled and clean towels to be brought upstairs. Rosine and Violaine ran with her. Amandine helped Grandmother Claire who was weeping and who trembled from the shock. Grandmother Anne tried to bring order to the turmoil. She shouted what each maid should do.

The men gathered in the parlour, where they sat around us. They remained silent, drank a cup of tea, but it lasted a long time before someone said anything.

Carter Ash was the first to use his head.

‘How did the Germans get in the hall?’ he asked.

I could answer that question. ‘We saw a big black Citroën car roll in front of our bus on Friday afternoon. The car drove on, beyond Trioteignes, but I recognised the man at the wheel. He was the man with the revolver. Only two men sat in that car. They have been around for a few days.’

‘You say the German agents have been around here since Friday?’ Irene exclaimed.

‘I am certain of that,’ I nodded.

‘They needed time to check on that part of the domain,’ Irene reasoned, ‘but they must have found the hangar only since a few hours. They could not bring in more men.’

She turned to Carter Ash, ‘have you checked on the hangar and the aeroplanes?’

‘Not really, not so far,’ Carter said. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘The German agents may have planted bombs. I had to bring with me from out of our factories two explosive systems. We produce no explosives, but devices for depth charges and devices that react on pressure, any pressure, lower or higher, whether it be for depths of heights. We also manufacture miniaturised timepieces, which can set off a time bomb. You must go back to the hangar and check, also inside the aeroplanes! Be careful!’

Max Vinck and Carter Ash, and also Richard Bousanges though he was limb at one arm, ran out of the castle. They came back less than an hour later with the two pieces of electrical devices in their hands.

‘We found a bomb in each aeroplane,’ Carter cried triumphantly. ‘They were no time bombs, but height charges. The explosive is of a new type, probably very powerful. The bombs were placed under the seats of the pilots, at hands’ reach. They might have killed us though the charges were small. The bombs would have torn sizable pieces out of the fuselage. We would have spiralled down over the Channel. You just saved our lives, Irene. I guess we can now be absolutely certain you belong to the clan of the Trioteignes,’ he laughed.

Irene did not laugh but grabbed for her heart, and the next moment her two cheeks got crushed with kisses from Uncle Léon-Alexandre, who realised what danger his daughter Arlette had escaped from.

‘We must find the car the agents arrived in, and also the car of Andreas. Reichenfeld came back, so he must have left his car in the neighbourhood. We must make certain not more Germans wander around in the domain.’

‘They must have left the cars somewhere on the road between Trioteignes and the next village,’ Max Vinck argued. ‘We did not see the cars in the wood. I suggest we look for the cars first and drive them back to a place near or in Brussels, just park them in a quiet spot very far from here. While we look for the cars we can also search for whether more Germans are around. We must take one of our own cars to get back in, so we need a third driver to bring the other two back.’

‘Get rid of the cars in Brussels would be best,’ agreed Carter Ash. ‘Me and you, we can drive the cars of the Germans. Maybe that stable boy, Alain, can serve as third driver. He seems to be a tough youngster, and quite devoted.’

‘Yes,’ Max agreed. ‘This Alain can also roam the woods and the roads on horseback to find the cars. We must go back and bury the three corpses, and hide them well.’

‘The third German was only knocked unconscious by Richard,’ I muttered. ‘What have you done with him?’

Nobody answered, but Carter and Max lowered their heads.

Nobody else mentioned then who had shot the last German who had brandished the revolver and who had shot Richard, so that it remains till this day a mystery who had actually dispensed with that agent. The third German as I always called him, had been alive when I left the hall, but no doubt been cool-bloodedly executed by Carter or Max, or Grandfather Charles, Uncle Léon-Alexandre, or André Degambe. I didn’t blame them for the killing.

Nobody also mentioned who had killed the second German, the one with the sub-machine-gun, but I was pretty certain I had done that. I had seen the bullets thud into the man’s breast, and I had to fight back not to become very sick when I thought of that. I had not seen whether Virginie’s few bullets had stricken Baron Andreas, but they might have, although Max Vinck certainly had shot multiple times at Andreas. Both these men were lying in a widening pool of blood when we were led to the castle.

‘We shall have to leave in the aeroplanes very soon now,’ Carter Ash continued. ‘Baron Andreas may have told the embassy where he went to. The German embassy may urge the Belgian Authorities to hold an investigation. We must get the aeroplanes out, as well as all proof of activity on the machines. We can leave a few tools in the hangar, and place a few cars there to make believe someone worked there on automobiles. We must clean and repair the cement, pour old oil over the bloodstains. We can bury the three corpses deep in the ground, in the forest. I do not believe Belgian inspectors will push their investigation far. The German embassy can prove nothing! They may also keep very quiet about the disappearance of their agents to not have to admit publicly they staged an espionage mission on Belgian soil. I propose we work at that tomorrow, and leave on Tuesday. Richard Bousanges is only slightly wounded, and we can hide Bastien until he gets well. If somebody asks questions about him, you can tell he shot himself while he was cleaning his gun. As soon as he is better and if the investigators have not yet visited you, he should be moved out, either to Brussels or to a military hospital.’

‘The village doctor is a friend,’ Grandfather Charles interrupted. ‘The doctor will gladly take Bastien in and care for him if necessary. We can also hide him in a farm for some time.’

‘What about Irene?’ Max ventured.

‘Irene proved she is on our side,’ Carter answered rapidly, ‘but she is indeed an issue. We must ask her what she wants to do. If she still wants to help, she might come in handy if ever any investigation gets here. It would be good to have a German lady state she has seen no Germans in the castle or around. I suppose she will want to stay awhile with Bastien. She will have to return to Germany, to her son, sooner or later, but she has no good reason anymore to talk about what happened here, for she too was involved in the shooting. After that, heaven only knows what shall happen to all of us!’

By that time, I too was shaking all over my body.

Max Vinck noticed me and he reacted, ‘we should burn a thick candle in the chapel to our heroes of the day! I dare not to think of what those Germans would have done to us if Paul

and Virginie had not intervened. I do not doubt for one moment the Germans would have killed us all after their work. They would have forced Irene. The *Assailer* would have been destroyed, the hangar and us with it, in a flaming inferno. They had a real issue when Countess Irene refused to fly, but they would have blackmailed her into it. They could not have let us live after that, for the incident would have grown into an international scandal. It was us or them. I heard the shots of the machine-gun above, looked up, saw little Virginie give a burst at the feet of Baron Andreas, and immediately after toss the gun to me. She remarked I was looking at her. That was one cool, clever girl! The Baron was hurt by the cement fragments in his legs, I saw him twist in pain and that kept him busy, so I almost cut him in two with the remaining bullets. We had real good luck also that Richard stood in waiting at the entrance, in ambush, with a piece of wood in his hands.'

'You have done well, kids,' Carter Ash added. 'We owe you eternal thanks. You are an example for us all. You have been brave. How the hell did you get in the hall without us seeing you?'

I blushed like a ripe apple when I answered, 'we were there. We thought the Germans wanted to kill you, but we did not have the time to think much. We are Blue Flowers, are we not? We just did what we had to do, without much thinking. We pulled the trigger. As to how we came in, well, we found a grid over a hole in the iron wall. We opened that and sneaked inside.'

'Well I never!' Max exclaimed. 'And I thought we had scared you off with our dragon stories. How many times have you been hiding in the hangar?'

I evaded with a short, 'a few!'

'I bet you have! Let this be a lesson to you. Never put your nose in a hole where it can be bitten off. Nevertheless, I am glad you were there and saw what happened. You did the right thing, no doubt about that. You saved us. I suppose you will have a few nightmares, though!'

Arlette and Irene came back into the parlour.

Arlette announced, 'Bastien will be all right. I got the bullet out and disinfected the wound. He is weak from the loss of blood and from the shock, but he will be all right. His bones did not shatter. They will mend. I gave him some morphine, but we will need more. I can get that. Rest is all he needs now, new bandages each day, and somebody must examine the wounds now and then to check whether it keeps clean and does not begin to infect. If he stays quiet for a few days, he will be up and dancing and laughing in a week. It may take two months or more, however, before he will be able to fly an aeroplane. Richard has suffered only a flesh wound, the bullet sliced his arm in a long line. I closed both their wounds, and knit the flesh together. Luckily, I always carry what I needed to care for them in my doctor's kit, including some morphine. I must get more disinfectants tomorrow. The pharmacy in the village will have that.'

'We shall be leaving in two days,' Max Vinck announced.

Arlette waited a few moments, then she asked Grandfather Charles, 'do you know a reliable doctor here? A good doctor, and one you can trust with a secret? I would like to leave with Carter.'

'What?' cried Léon-Alexandre, 'are you going to abandon the son of our best friend to his fate?'

'Nothing much can happen to him, father. A nurse would suffice for now, of course some surgery might be needed if infection sets in, but for the precautions I took I believe that to be highly improbable. Bastien will be fine!'

Uncle Léon-Alexandre calmed down and Amandine courageously helped him to regain his countenance. Léon kept grumbling through his teeth, though. Grandfather Charles nodded and repeated he could find a doctor, and a nurse too, the daughter of a farmer, a girl who worked in the hospital of Namur.

Darkness set in. The pilots returned to the hangar to prepare the hall and the burial, as Carter Ash had proposed. Grandmother prepared a dinner, but Virginie and I could get nothing through our teeth. Grandmother Anne and Amandine brought us upstairs, to bed.

Aftermath

Alain Jacquet found the German car of Baron Andreas and also the black Citroën in a clearing of the Trioteignes domain near the road to the next village. He hurried back to announce the news, looking out all the while for other Germans. He roamed wide, but saw none other. That same evening, Max Vinck and Carter Ash brought the vehicles by small roads to near the airport of Evere. Jacquet rode Max and Carter back to Trioteignes. On the road to Brussels, the convoy of three cars met no surprises. They drove in the night. The place where the cars of the Germans were left might induce any investigator to believe the Germans might have left the country in a civil aeroplane of Sabena or of the Lufthansa, but the cars stood also in a quiet, dark corner, and might not be noticed there for months, as many cars came and went around the parking place.

During the time the pilots and Alain were on their journey, André Degambe closed the heavy doors of the castle and he patrolled in the courtyard wearing a shotgun. In the morning, André Degambe and Alain Jacquet dug a very deep hole and the three corpses of the dead Germans were unceremoniously dumped into it and covered with stones and earth. Max Vinck searched the bodies and found their papers. We knew the three names of the deceased men. The place of burial was then covered by half-rotten leaves, and André planted young trees around the spot, trees he dug out in the forest. The pilots, included Georges de Trahty and Thomas Drandin, who had returned from his airfield that same day, held a moment of silence over the improvised grave. Grandfather Charles and Uncle Léon-Alexandre each read a prayer from the Bible and from the New Testament.

Carter Ash and Max Vinck continued cleaning the hangar. They brushed away the blood. They repaired the cement in the floor as well as they could. Then they poured old oil over the spots, cleaned that away only with a brush, and they thus worked away any indication of shooting. They inspected the machines for impacts, found a couple but none serious, and they repaired those damages too. They filled the tanks of the aeroplanes with filtered petrol and began to discuss their flight plans. They decided to wait no longer for any permission, and to bring the aeroplanes to Britain. Carter Ash knew best the ways to the aerodrome of Duxford in Cambridgeshire, but an alternative to land, on the other side of London, might be Biggin Hill. Carter Ash warned his superiors in Britain of his arrival, and he asked not to be considered around these aerodromes as hostile intruders, although the machines would harbour the Belgian colours. When all that was done, the pilots returned to the castle, for the women did not want to let them fly without a farewell lunch.

At lunch, I asked to Max Vinck what the Baron Andreas had whispered at the moment of his death.

Max answered, and I believe he answered truthfully, 'I was amazed at what the Baron said. He murmured with his last breath how sorry he was at this turn of events, and he assured that his death was some form of Justice. He had been forced to return to the castle, even though he wanted to leave us in peace. He wished us luck in the war, which he told would surely come, and he said he was glad not to have to witness the destructions that would be fought on us. He

continued repeating how sorry he was, and he did not seem to hate us or hold bad grudges against us. He died, it seemed to me, quite serenely and at peace. I told him we forgave him.' Max Vinck said this quite loud and clearly, and everybody at the table kept silent while he spoke, also Virginie.

It was then and there, that noon of the 30th of January of 1940 that Virginie and I for the first time in our lives understood that there existed in the universe dark forces of hatred and envy which could take possession of men and women, and which could bring one person to want to kill another. Such feelings had been alien to us up until that moment, for we had been surrounded by people who lived tranquilly and who wished no harm to one another. Not only the families of Trioteignes and Trahty were calm, peaceful, reasonable people who did no harm to others, but also the pilot officers and the men and women who worked in the castle wanted nothing more than to protect their beloved ones. I could not imagine they would have wished to harm anybody.

Henceforth, a terrible secret mystery hung over Castle Trioteignes. We all of the castle knew three bodies were buried in the woods, and with time the story was also told to the villagers, to the priest and to the doctor. The ones who might not have believed Grandfather Charles believed what André Degambe and Alain Jacquet and the maids told was true. The names of the dead were whispered, but nobody would have ventured to look for the graves, and nobody in Trioteignes village would have uttered a word to the police or to investigators. Any German who would have been searching in the neighbourhood would have been dispensed with by hunting guns. The farmers placed guns on their tractors and the butcher wetted his choppers. Trioteignes was a patriotic village and it protected its own. The Trioteignes family and the villagers were bound by the secret, and nobody of the farmers and artisans grumbled the castle had acted wrongly.

Arlette Trahty had been staring at Virginie and me while Max Vinck spoke, and she understood the best how we felt.

She tried to explain, 'not only good is in the world, but also true evil, and the evil is in certain people. Always ask yourself whether something you experience is good or evil. Always interrogate yourselves. If you sincerely think you recognise evil, which ends always by hurting other people in feelings or physically, then you have no option but to refuse that, and even to fight. We should not tolerate injustice and hatred. Fight evil is a duty, because otherwise it will humiliate you and gnaw at you and change you for the worse, destroy your dignity and your humanity. It must be fought and defeated. So what you did in the hall was right, not evil, and it was justified. You should not regret that. You stood at the place and at the moment in which only you could have reacted and saved us. We love you and we are grateful you defended us. Carter is of course very sad and angry because you, children, had to fight his war. He would have wanted to spare you the trauma. Max Vinck also blames himself much for that.'

I must have looked back at her with a sad but thankful look, and I saw how also Carter Ash was touched by what she said, and how much he loved her for having said it.

We did not have to go to school for two weeks. Arlette wrote us a doctor's certificate and Grandfather Charles brought that to the headmaster. We were not the only pupils in those weeks suffering from a bad cold.

It took Carter Ash not two days but three to obtain the final permission from the Baron Vresele and from the Generals to take the aeroplanes to England and to land at Duxford. Violaine convinced her father to let the *Fearless* and the *Assailer* leave Belgium.

Max Vinck considered talking to his superiors, to tell them he would fly to England, but he finally refrained from telling them. He might be charged with treason, but he decided he would explain later if he were found out. He said he wanted to come back as soon as possible to Belgium, and that consoled Rosine a little.

Arlette declared Max Vinck suffered from a terrible attack of a dangerous flu, so that he could remain for a few weeks at Trioteignes, away from his aerodrome.

The events had forged very strong bonds between us all, and Grandfather also seemed not to mind anymore Rosine's and Max's bonds. The priest, Jean Wastier, and the *Bourgmestre* of our village, a tenant-farmer of Grandfather Charles, married Carter Ash and Arlette Trahty officially in the chapel of Castle Trioteignes in the morning of 2 February. They defied the Belgian laws a little by allowing the usual announcements of the marriages not to be published beforehand. They had needed little persuasion. Bastien and Irene married the same morning, Bastien still lying in his bed. Rosine declared herself engaged to Max, and Violaine and Georges began seriously to talk of marriage, but their marriage would have to happen with great feasting in Flanders, and much later.

Carter Ash and Max Vinck decided to fly very early the next morning. They wanted to be in the air at the first light over the horizon. We stood outside the hangar from where the aeroplanes would take off. The machines were warming up their engines at the edge of the gliding doors. We saw Max Vinck in his green flying kit and helmet, oxygen mask dangling on his breast, parachute on his lower back, climb in the cockpit of the *Fearless*. Carter Ash and Arlette de Trahty stepped into the *Assailer*. Carter had to help Arlette, and she managed to giggle nervously while he pushed her in the back seat. Then he too climbed in, and he immediately slid the rhodoid cockpit close. He gave us an affectionate thumbs up, switched the starter and pulled open full throttle. The engines roared together, as also Max Vinck brought his propeller to turn. Max rolled out of the hangar, ever and ever faster, and then the nose of the *Fearless* tipped upwards and his aeroplane flew into the first rays of the sun. When Max's plane was flying over the fields, Carter Ash rolled the *Assailer* forward, and Arlette waved a last goodbye. Carter took off in a burst of flames from the exhaust pipes of the *Assailer*. We saw the two aeroplanes turn in a salute over Trioteignes, come over us low, climb again, and take a westerly course. The aeroplanes disappeared over the tips of the trees side by side.

The silent spring

When Carter Ash and Max Vinck flew away from Trioteignes and from the sun, we realised how much the pilot-officers had become members of our family. Our clan consisted not anymore just of the Trioteignes, the Trahties, the Brioges and the Vreseles, but also of the Vincks, the Sinnagels, the Drandins and the Bousanges of the Blue Flowers. Moreover, the Degambes, the Jacquets, Frameurs, Beckx and Lémonts would have a special place in our hearts, as these were already family of our neighbours. In this group also the Stratten and the Schillersberg would be included, but the tying of these relationships would have to wait until after the war with Germany. We all shared a terrible secret, of course, and we all had played a part in the tragedy that brought three human graves in our wood. With time, we would share more secrets.

We were actually not at war with Germany that spring, but at Trioteignes we were more than ever convinced the real war would come soon in the spring of 1940, and we thought about,

discussed and planned accordingly. By 'we' I mean the entire village of Trioteignes. The women began to hamster. Our cellars got filled with imperishable consumables. Grandfather Charles and Uncle Léon-Alexandre bought wines in large quantities to last several years, and also beer, tobacco and books. They often discussed heatedly about which items they should buy. They installed large petrol tanks in the barns, enough to heat us and provide fuel for our cars for at least five years. Grandmother Anne and Aunt Amandine bought salt and sugar and entire cases of vegetables in glass pots, to conserve for years. The kitchen was activated to sterilise whatever legumes the women could lay their hands on, which was not an easy task at the end of winter when legumes were scarce. They bought jam pots and in our driest cellars hung many, large smoked hams.

The word spread. The farmers of Trioteignes prepared too from what they heard was going on in the castle. Our kitchen steamed for weeks when glass pot after glass pot was prepared and stored. The old habit of preserving meat in salt was reinvented. Grandfather Charles and Uncle Léon even tried their hand at *Sauerkraut*, but they were quickly disgusted at the process and gave up. Virginie and I helped, as the kitchen turned into a manufactory. We had interesting days. André Degambe and Alain Jacquet came up with a proposal to raise pigs, sheep and goats, but though the idea was taken up, Grandfather Charles relegated the animals to his farms, where an arrangement was made with two of his tenant-farmers to hold a number of pens and stables exclusively for the castle. We paid for the growing of chicken, pigs and sheep. For a few years we would have our supply of meat, and the farmers expanded their livestock accordingly. Trioteignes money was put to good use. Of course, when the war did come, our stock of everything dwindled more rapidly than we had expected, for the castle provided the hungry of the village. Father Jean Wastier, our parish priest, was our go-between for that. Later, when the food became scarce for everybody, the Trioteignes money served again, but secret stocks surfaced at every farm in the village.

During that time also, Grandfather Charles and Uncle Léon-Alexandre talked with the pilots who had remained at Trioteignes. The men were practically never together at the Orangerie and the castle in those months, the reason why we called this period the 'Silent Spring'. The months were calm for us despite the bursting activity. The Belgian Army and the *Aéronautique* were practically constantly in a state of alarm and the pilots had to remain at their airbases for weeks on end. They all returned to Trioteignes whenever they could, however. Among the pilots, only Richard Bousanges was an aristocrat, but that word had fallen out of fashion at Trioteignes Castle. We cared as much for Thomas, Max, and Jan as for Richard, Bastien or Georges.

Richard healed in a few weeks. Bastien got better slowly, and after a few weeks we could not hold him down in his bed anymore. Irene left for Germany then, with a car of Trioteignes. She left at the end of February. She stayed two months in Germany, but at the end of April she rode again through the domain, her car loaded to the brim with sweet white wine for Grandfather Charles and Uncle Léon, and with other German goodies for the family. German agents had interrogated her in Germany about the aeroplanes of the Vresele engineers, but she wove away too detailed and angry questions with the right answers, and by using fully her relations and authority as the head of an important complex of factories that helped in the war effort. She downplayed the importance of what she had seen, and she was believed. No questions were asked to her about what had happened to Andreas von Reichenfeld.

Grandfather Charles could of course not meet a man without probing for connections. With Richard, the Trioteignes would have names and entries in their address book of the University

of Liège, and of the web of industrialists who hung around the engineering institutions and laboratories of the town. Thomas Drandin had useful contacts within SABENA, the *Société Anonyme Belge d'Exploitation de la Navigation Aérienne*, Belgium's civilian aviation company. Max Vinck came without connections, his family was very poor, but in that early spring of 1940 it became very clear to everybody that he would be part of the Trioteignes family soon, for Rosine and he became inseparable. There was something endearing in seeing those two walking and working together, in seeing Rosine hang on the telephone when Max was at his aerodrome, and in never seeing one without the other when Max returned in the domain on rare Saturdays and Sundays. Max had been tamed by Rosine and probably, suddenly, discovered in his own self unfathomed reserves of affection for a woman he sincerely loved. We guessed he had just been storing those reserves until now, to be released plentiful in our silent spring.

Grandfather Charles and Uncle Léon-Alexandre had only still to turn to Jan Sinnagel. Jan did confess what they had already guessed, he was of Jewish descent, and his family lived in Antwerp. When one hears the words Jew and Antwerp mentioned in one and the same breath, one thinks immediately of diamonds, so Grandfather Charles's ears grew instantly a few millimetres. No, Jan Sinnagel's family members were no wealthy traders in diamonds of the *Pelikaanstraat*. They were merely the happy owners of a workshop in which diamonds were cut to the forms that reflected at best the light of the sun and more often the light of the most luxurious candelabras of evening receptions to a myriad of white rays that attracted the attention of the male audience to the well-formed necks, ears, arms and hands of the matrons and beauties of the world. The Sinnagels knew everybody with a name in the diamond business of Antwerp, however, and Grandfather Charles and Uncle Léon-Alexandre had understood in the cradle that business meant first reliable relations. The relations of the Sinnagel family were rock-solid, within Antwerp families of at least five generations deep, exactly what decent businessmen preferred.

We asked innocently why the Jews had specialised in diamonds. Jan Sinnagel explained patiently that the Jewish race had been pursued for ages in Europe, from Spain to Russia and back, so when the when the Jews wandered and had to flee they could only take with them what was valuable but of little weight, and could easily be hidden.

'That is why,' Jan Sinnagel stated, 'our people know all about diamonds and violins.

Diamonds carry the highest value per gram, and have you ever seen a Jewish musician flee from his home with a pianoforte on his back? A violin is light. The best violin players of the world are Jewish! It is inscribed in our genes!'

We smiled, and Grandfather Charles and Uncle Léon-Alexandre smiled from Trioteignes to Antwerp with us.

After a few weeks of probing, Uncle Léon-Alexandre made frequent visits to the beautiful town of Antwerp. Alain Jacquet drove him. Alain Jacquet had not been mobilised because he had a heart defect, but he could do any work in the castle and refused nothing we asked of him. He was a courageous man. Alain had become a confidant of Grandfather and Uncle, and he served them now as a kind of bodyguard or trusted companion most of the time. He would have his home at Trioteignes for the rest of his life, though he married a girl in the village.

Our Uncle returned from Antwerp with a very grim and serious face, and we saw mysterious bags change hands. The two conspirators, our Charles and Léon, sneaked then to the darkest cellars of Trioteignes Castle, to places even Virginie and I had not yet discovered nor visited. Diamonds were a fine and reliable investment in times of war, better than stock in enterprises!

Grandfather Charles also talked about his son to Jan Sinnagel.

‘Bastien is my best friend,’ Jan stated, ‘I like him very much, and he is a good friend. Of course, I will look after him when the war starts. I will do what I can to protect him. I am calmer than he, I will keep him out of trouble. That is, if I can help it. I have a question for you too.’

‘What is that?’ Grandfather asked.

‘I have a wife and two children in Antwerp. If I die in the war, my family will not lack in money. My parents have passed away, and my heritage is sufficient to nourish them. My wife, actually is the one who continues to manage our workshop and when I die she shall continue to lead the men we employ. She is a better manager than I ever was! If ever someone or something threatens my family, could you please watch out in time, warn her and maybe help her and the children?’

‘I shall do that,’ Grandfather Charles promised, ‘rest assured of what you ask. I shall do that not only for your family, but for you too. I pray to God, who must be the same God as your God, that he may see you safe through this war and bring you back at the same time as my son.’

Thereafter, Grandfather and Jan exchanged a few sentences about the terrible persecutions of the Jews in Germany. Jan Sinnagel, my Grandfather and Uncle were men who lived in the future rather than in the past. They foresaw the same errors and horrors for Belgium under Nazi domination as happened in Germany.

I almost forgot to tell you what happened to Carter Ash, Arlette de Trahty and Max Vinck. They flew in the *Fearless* and in the *Assailer* to the Belgian coast unchallenged and probably unseen, for they flew very high. Then they passed the North Sea, followed the Thames estuary and they flew on to Cambridgeshire, to Duxford. The alarm was given over South England, but the foreign aeroplanes had been announced and they were welcomed warmly. After the successful landing, the machines were rolled immediately into a secret hangar at Duxford. Our three heroes slept the first night in the barracks and the arrival of a beauty such as Arlette inflamed many an English officer’s heart.

Carter Ash and Max Vinck were interrogated by the Service, which took three full days. Later, Carter Ash was told he could join the Royal Air Force and his airbase would be the aerodrome of Biggin Hill in Kent. Arlette left Cambridgeshire with him. They settled in a cottage at Westerham, not far from Biggin hill, and also not far from Winston Churchill’s domain of Chartwell.

A few eyebrows went up in England for the second pilot, for Max Vinck. Max was at first considered a Belgian deserter by the British, and deserters were not much liked in Great-Britain, but Carter Ash explained. After the explanation, the authorities gave a smart smile to Max Vinck, which he returned with a broad wink and a joke. The English Service placed him on a small fishing ship bound for Ostend under a false name, and the sailors smuggled him off the ship in the harbour. A week and a half after having taken off from Trioteignes, Max Vinck walked whistling through the entrance gate of Trioteignes Castle and Rosine leapt in his arms. He had been announced by then, for Arlette phoned after her arrival and explained how their escape had fared.

Until May she phoned regularly to Uncle Léon-Alexandre, and she and Carter Ash sent long letters, which Uncle Léon read to us solemnly in the evenings, standing in front of the open fire in the parlour. Arlette found a job as a doctor and surgeon in the hospital of Orpington near Bromley of South London.

In this way, the months of March and April of 1940, the last months of the Twilight War, passed in feverish work but very agreeably at Trioteignes Castle. We prepared for the coming war.

The Twilight War continued

In the beginning of February 1940, the British and the French Ministers discussed the necessity of an expedition to the Norwegian harbour of Narvik. Narvik lay very high in the north of Norway, and it was not important for anything Norway had to offer, but for what Sweden possessed to its east. Very large iron deposits lay in Sweden and the iron ore could not be brought to Germany over the Baltic Sea in winter because its coast was closed with ice. The Swedish iron was therefore brought by train to the harbours in the west, harbours such as Narvik, which were warmed by the Gulf Stream in the Atlantic and therefore stayed open in winter. Germany relied heavily on Swedish iron ore, and hence on ports such as Narvik. If the Allied Powers could not attack Germany directly, they might bring it to its knees in its economy. Winston Churchill desired to show some initiative from the side of the Allies, and he thought taking Narvik and mining the access to the harbour was a good move on the chessboard of war to show Hitler the Führer could not have everything the way he wanted. France and Great Britain decided to wait for the right moment with an attack on Narvik, and they prepared for a limited invasion of Norway.

In the middle of February, the Soviet troops attacked the Finnish positions fiercely, and the Finnish Mannerheim Line, which protected the Finnish coast from Communist invasions, yielded.

A little later the *Altmark*, the supply ship of the destroyed *Graf von Spee* was spotted by British observer aeroplanes in front of the Norwegian coast. The *Altmark* hid inside Jossing Fjord near Egersund. Norway wanted no diplomatic incident with Germany, but the Captain of the English ship *Cossack* boarded the German ship and liberated about three hundred British prisoners.

Almost at the same time, the German Führer ordered his *Wehrmacht* to prepare plans for the invasion of Norway, for his Headquarters too realised the importance of harbours such as Narvik.

The Soviet armies advanced in Finland meanwhile, capturing Viborg and threatening Helsinki, the Finnish capital. In the middle of March, an agreement was concluded for a cease-fire between the Soviet Union and Finland. Finland handed over territories in Carelia and Laponia to the Soviet Union, left Hango, a very northerly port town in the Baltic to the Soviet Union for thirty years, and allowed the Soviets rights of transit to Sweden and Norway.

At the end of March, the French Prime Minister Daladier resigned after a cabinet crisis, to be succeeded by the former Minister of Finance, Paul Reynaud. Daladier became Minister of Defence of France.

At the beginning of April of 1940, a sea battle took place between British battleships and the German ships the *Gneisenau* and the *Sharnhorst*. The battle remained indecisive. Great Britain occupied the Faroer Islands, which had been Danish until then, and Iceland declared its independence.

On 9 April, Germany invaded Norway. Its army advanced on the capital Oslo, and at the same time naval operations were launched against major Norwegian harbours. Kristiansund, Egersund, Bergen, Stavanger, Trondheim and Narvik fell rapidly in German hands. The Norwegian King, Haakon VII, 68 years old, the Norwegian Parliament and its Government, fled to north of Oslo, to Hammar. The head of the Norwegian Nazi Party, Vidkun Quisling, was installed as the leader of the Norwegian State.

German and British warships fought relentlessly at sea, also in front of Narvik. Germany lost many ships in the first two weeks of the invasion, in the sea battle of Narvik, but a force of about two thousand German soldiers captured and held the city. France and Great Britain thereupon sent divisions to attack Narvik by land. The first allied troops landed on 14 April at Harstadt, fifty kilometres north of Narvik. In the following days, the Allies also landed troops at Andalsnes, Alesund, Molde and Namsos. The Allies had to fight against a numerical superiority of forces in the following days, so that they had to evacuate from Lillehammer, Namsos and Andalsnes. The French Brigade-General Béthouart arrived, however, near Harstadt and Narvik, and under very heavy artillery fire and bombings from out of the air, the allied troops advanced on Narvik.

On 19 April of 1940, the Norwegian King Haakon VII stepped aboard the British cruiser *Glasgow* at Molde to sail to the extreme north of Norway, to Fromsö.

In the beginning of May, Colonel Ortes, a Colonel close to the German Admiral Canaris, head of the Army Intelligence branch of the German *Wehrmacht*, warned Pope Pius XII in the Vatican, and also Brussels and Paris, that a major German offensive would start very soon in Belgium and the Netherlands. The Belgian Government and Army did not react with new measures of alert. The Netherlands merely heightened the state of alert of the Dutch Navy.

The war in Norway around Narvik raged on unabated, but the Allies were definitely pushed out of Alesund, Andalsnes and Namsos. General Béthouart received the order to attack Bjervik, very near Narvik, on 7 May.

At the same moment, both the French and the British Governments faced crisis meetings. In Great Britain, Neville Chamberlain still won the votes of confidence, but on 9 May the French Government and also the French supreme leader of the Army, General Maurice Gamelin, were virtually considered as deposed. Finally, the French Government remained in place for the time being, much weakened in authority.

On 9 May of 1940, French and Luxemburg armed forces noted heavy engine sounds on the German side of their border. Paul-Henri Spaak, the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs received a ciphered telephone call from his military attaché in Berlin, stating that the German invasion of Belgium was foreseen for the next day.

On 10 May of 1940, The Belgian Air Force, the *Aéronautique Militaire*, could bring about two hundred eighty aeroplanes in the air. Among these, one hundred eighty only were flown in operational squadrons. The rest, one hundred machines, were in use at the Aviation School and at the Instruction Centre for Sub-Lieutenants, the School for Non-commissioned pilots who applied to become officers and for Army officers who wanted to become pilots, and also in the Aeronautical Enterprise, a service for testing and constructing military aeroplanes. Of the one hundred eighty aeroplanes that were in active service, the great majority were Fairey-Fox machines of different types, among which thirty-two of more recent models

equipped with Hispano engines of eight hundred fifty Horsepower, who could fly at over three hundred kilometres per hour. The Fairey-Fox aeroplanes were mostly used as observation aeroplanes. The observation squadrons received their mission orders from the Belgian Army. Aeroplanes were considered for the most part as a tool for the Army, and the Group Leaders received their mission orders from Army Commanders. Further observation aeroplanes were nineteen Belgian produced Renard R.31.

For missions of bombing, the *Aéronautique* could send thirteen Fairey-Battle light bombers, which could hold a maximum of eight bombs under their wings. These bombers were not equipped with any modern aiming devices, so that the bombs had to be dropped on sight by the observers, the second men in the cockpit.

The *Aéronautique* also had fifty-one fighter aeroplanes, of which fifteen were the biplane Gloster Gladiators, old and slow machines. The only really modern fighters were the eleven Hawker Hurricane fighters and the twenty-five Fiat CR.42, which though biplanes, could be compared in characteristics to the Hurricanes. The Italian Fiat fighters had been delivered to the Belgian Army in March of 1940 only, and their main drawback was the lack of synchronisation in their Constantinescus, so that many a fighter would come back from missions with holes in its propellers.

These figures must be compared with the approximately four thousand aeroplanes the German *Luftwaffe* could throw into battle. If only half of those machines were fast fighters and bombers, Goliath really faced David, but one could not down a Messerschmitt Bf109 with a stone's throw.

Belgium had declared itself a neutral country, a position dear to Parliamentarians and to the King, so the bulk of its aeroplanes were reconnaissance aircraft, the Fairey-Foxes and the Renards R31. Only sixty-four machines, the Hurricanes, the Gladiators and the Fiat CR.42 as fighters and the thirteen Fairey-Battle bombers could be called offensive weapons. The Fairey-Battles were only light bombers, and though they had been excellent machines when designed, they were old and very slow in 1940 compared to the British and German fighters, so they could be intercepted easily and blown out of the air.

The *Aéronautique Militaire* consisted of three operational regiments, each organised in three groups of in principle two squadrons each with a dozen aeroplanes.

The First Observation Regiment consisted of six groups and of only as many squadrons, which had been given the uneven numbers from one to eleven, probably in the hope they would have been added to in each group. The first three squadrons flew in the slower types of Fairey-Fox with Rolls-Royce Kestrel engines. One squadron flew with Fairey-Fox equipped with the faster Hispano engines, and the two last squadrons had the Renard R.31 aeroplanes at their disposal. The first squadron was based at the aerodrome of Deurne near Antwerp; the squadrons numbered three, five and seven, were based at Goetsenhoven near Tienen, and the last two, the R.31 squadrons, had Bierset near Liège as their bases. Thomas Drandin and Richard Bousanges flew in one of these last squadrons.

The Second Regiment was a fighter regiment of three groups, each with two squadrons. The first group consisted of a squadron of British Hawker Hurricanes and of a squadron of Gloster Gladiators. These were based at the aerodrome of Schaffen. The other groups, two squadrons of Fiat CR.42 fighters, in which flew Georges de Trahty, and two squadrons of Fairey-Foxes equipped with Hispano engines, were based at Nivelles, south of Brussels.

The Third Regiment was a combined observer and bombing regiment, consisting of three groups also, of two squadrons each. These aeroplanes were based at the aerodrome of Evere

near Brussels, the largest airport of the country, next to which was also based the main civilian airport of Belgium. The first two squadrons flew in older Fairey-Fox machines. The second group of two squadrons each was a phantom group in May of 1940, a group without aeroplanes at the outbreak of the war. The third group of squadrons had at their disposal Fairey-Battle bombers for the fifth squadron and the faster Fairey-Fox-Hispanos for the seventh squadron. Bastien de Trioteignes and Jan Sinnagel flew in the Fairey-Battles of the fifth squadron and also Max Vinck fought in this squadron.

Chapter 5. From 10 May 1940 to 28 May

Alert

At midnight of 10 May, the telephones rang once more loud and almost simultaneously in Castle Trioteignes and in the Orangerie. In the castle, Grandfather Charles and Léon-Alexandre sat drinking their last Cognac of the day. Grandfather Charles took the horn from its socket and listened. The Squadron Leader of Bastien called the alert and ordered Bastien to drive as rapidly as possible to Evere. As soon as the horn was laid down, the telephone rang again with a call from Nivelles for Georges de Trahty. In the Orangerie came calls from Evere for Max Vinck and Jan Sinnagel, from Bierset for Thomas Drandin and Richard Bousanges. By then everybody was up in the castle and running around in pyjamas and long bathrobes. We suspected this was the real thing!

Less than half an hour later, a car rode out of the domain with Thomas and Richard for Bierset, one with Georges for Nivelles and one with Bastien, Max and Jan for Evere. They had given a very short, sad goodbye and they sped to their aerodromes in the night. They would reach their bases within the hour at the latest.

When the last car drove out of Trioteignes, all of us who remained in the domain decided to assemble in the chapel and pray for half an hour to beg Christ and Mary to bring our friends and sons safely home. Then we returned in silence to our beds. Castle Trioteignes would feel sad and gloomy without the Blue Flowers.

In the following chapters I have tried to narrate what happened to our pilots. Getting to know what they had seen and experienced was not an easy matter, for they refused at first vehemently to tell anything whatsoever. Their memories were still too fresh, the humiliation of the short war still hung too crisply in their mind. Virginie and I talked with them for many hours, sometimes in conversations of only a few minutes, for few talked long about what they had seen. They were also not very coherent, for on one day they would talk about what had happened on 20 May for instance, and a few days later they would come back to 11 May. We listened to them, patiently, and we came back often on what we thought we had not fully grasped. When I sat in my room, sometimes late at night, I took notes and later brought the pieces together into a more or less coherent narrative. Their stories were told by men who had suffered, not always in their flesh but certainly in their mind, and often we heard only bits of phrases and had to keep our silence when the emotions became too much for them. In a way, we found ourselves very much akin to them. The incident in the hangar had impressed us very much, and we too suffered in our mind from the atrocity of the dead German agents. By hearing from the pilots, we learnt how every human suffers when he or she lives through traumatic events. That too comforted us and helped us to overcome our fears and nightmares. The pilots sensed we understood what they meant and told us. It is strange how close the pilots and Virginie and I then were in mind and understanding. Maybe that was because these young men had just like us been thrown in torments they had not been prepared for. They had been the beautiful Blue Flowers of an Army the aim of which seemed only to exist and serve as some form of deterrence. War was an abstract concept, the realisation of which laid in the far of an hypothetical future. Nobody dared to think much about the real war. Another feature we discovered in the pilots of Trioteignes, in the Blue Flowers, was that they all, without exception, showed a high degree of empathy for the sufferings of other people, even for their enemies. This may seem trivial and natural for human beings, but I found it remarkable in a

period in which men murdered each other without the least hesitation. And then, could any human being have been prepared for the atrocities of the second World War?

Fairey-Battle Bombers

Bastien, Jan Sinnagel and Max Vinck sped in the night through the deserted roads to the main Belgian aerodrome of Evere. Bastien still ached in his shoulder from the shot, the wound he had received a few months earlier, but the village doctor had cared well for him. No infection had set in, and the wound healed rapidly so that in March already he had joined his regiment of the Air Force. His squadron was the 5/III/3 A^é, the fifth squadron of the third group of the third regiment, called 'Egyptian Wings' because the squadron wore that insignia on the aeroplanes. His squadron used eight Fairey-Battle aeroplanes, but the Commander of the group had told over the telephone that five more Battles could be added to the squadron, with five pilots from the ninth squadron, which was a phantom squadron in which only personnel had been assigned but no aeroplanes. That squadron would probably never be constituted now. The alert had been declared a real alert. German troops had entered Belgian and Dutch territory. Germany launched its attacks first against the neutral states, without warning, to attack France to the west of the strong Maginot line, which ended at the frontier of France with the Grand-Duchy of Luxemburg.

Bastien could not believe this was really war. He did not know what war meant, and he could not conceive even for a second how such aggression of war with weapons on peaceful people could be waged. While he sat in the car that Max Vinck drove, he tried to imagine what the war would mean in the air, his aeroplane flying among enemy bombers and fighters. He became very much afraid, because the type of aeroplane he flew was old and slow, slow in pure speed and slow in manoeuvring. The Fairey-Battles would stand no chance at all against the main German fighter aeroplanes, the Messerschmitts, who flew at twice his speed. They might have a chance against the Junker 87 light bombers, against the Stukas, and against the Heinkel 111 bombers, with luck, but he would be shot out of the skies by the German fighters in a nick of time. His machine was an observation aeroplane first, and a light bomber only next. There was something comfortable in having an observer sitting in the same aeroplane, for many observers were also pilots, so that if the pilot was wounded the observer could also bring the machine to the ground.

For armament, Bastien could use the Browning machine-gun in front that shot through the propeller circle by a Constantinescu mechanism, and his co-pilot and observer could manipulate the Vickers K type of machine-gun from out of his turret. That rear machine-gun stood outside the cockpit, directed backwards, but the gun could also be swivelled to the left and right. This armament proved very inadequate compared to the German fighters who shot from four machine-guns and two light cannon of twenty millimetres. Bastien's aeroplane had no cannon, and a cannon only could inflict greater damage to an enemy, for its twenty millimetres shells exploded on impact, tearing greater parts out of any machine.

Bastien, Jan and Max reached Evere around one o'clock. The men left their car near the barracks and they ran to the Information Centre. They had already drawn on a flying kit, but they grabbed their parachutes in a corridor of the barracks and slung them on while they ran. A meeting was being organised in the Information Centre, where the Commander of the squadron, Captain Charles de Hepcée, explained to the men what was happening. Their orders were to bring the Fairey-Battles as fast as possible to the campaign airfield of Belsele-Waas

near Sint-Niklaas, to the airstrip number 37. Belgium had forty-two airfields on which military aeroplanes could land. Belsele was far to the west, in Flanders. The orders were brief, not much information was given on the advance of the German troops, for apparently not much of such news had been given to the Commander.

After half an hour the men ran to their aeroplanes, to take off at the first light of dawn that passed over the horizon. Bastien would fly in a Fairey-Battle with Jan Sinnagel, who would serve as observer, rather as passenger on this trip. Max Vinck would fly another Battle. The men opened the doors of the hangars, the ground personnel drew the aeroplanes to the airstrips. The pilots climbed in their cockpits and began to warm up the engines of their machines. The machines had to be drawn out and pushed forward by the ground troops. That happened in haste and in some chaos of running men. Everybody was equally nervous. Many mechanics ran in the hangars. Trucks were being loaded with material and tools and spare parts, too, so the men ran with their arms full.

The engines of the Battles roared. Right in front of Bastien, the wing of a Battle passed under the turning propeller of another Battle and the result was catastrophic. The first aeroplane had its propeller plied, so that it would not be able to take off, and the second got its wing damaged. The two pilots and the two observers of those machines would have to ride in the trucks of the squadron and join Belsele by the road. Maybe the two aeroplanes could be repaired and fetched later.

In the hangar of Max Vinck's aeroplane, two other Battles could not be activated. These two also would have to be left behind. The squadron of thirteen Battles was already down to nine machines in those first hours.

Bastien felt very nervous. He looked at his watch. It was almost five o'clock, and dawn began. One might expect German bombers any moment now. Why was there still so much activity on the aerodrome of Evere, and so many people around. Did they not realise that in all probability this airfield would be the first target of German violence? It took much too long for Bastien's nerves to drag the damaged aeroplanes out of the way!

Finally, the hangars were cleared, and his aeroplane could be moved out, after which time he rolled on the track. He drew on the throttle to inject into the carburettor of his engine as much petrol as he dared, providing forward thrust to the propeller. The engine roared deafeningly and the machine soared on the airstrip. Bastien made the Battle roar and roll.

He heard Jan Sinnagel calling in the interphone, 'take it easy, boy, you are going to rip off the wings!' and he grinned, but held on to maximum power.

Again he heard Jan Sinnagel shout, 'here they come! We have visitors! Danger, danger, bandits above us, diving from the east! Get out of here!'

Bastien climbed sharply into the skies. He was very glad of the hilarious feeling from being in the air, and he climbed and continued to climb to the west, over Brussels. He did not look around to see what happened at Evere. It was only when he was at the height he wanted to reach that he dared to look over his shoulder and down, to see a group of Heinkel bombers with black crosses lined by white on their fuselages drop strings of high explosive bombs on the hangars of Evere. He heard the thuds of the impacts, and he thought he felt in his heart the vibrations of the displacement of air made by the explosions, but with each second his aeroplane fled faster to the west. The last sounds he heard were of a few C.40 anti-aircraft cannon shooting at the enemy.

'Oh my God, oh my God,' he heard Jan Sinnagel cry, 'Evere is being flattened! We got out just in time. Poor men! Poor men!'

Jan Sinnagel referred to the technicians and other ground personnel that had remained at Evere, in the barracks and the hangars. Bastien found some satisfaction in having seen long lines of trucks loaded with the spare parts and tools they needed drive on the road in the streets of Brussels. The men they knew intimately had escaped, unless they too got attacked while on the road. No, bombers only attacked Evere.

The Fairey-Battles were beautiful, even elegant aeroplanes, thought Bastien Trioteignes, and he was quite proud to fly on these machines. The Fairey-Battle were twin-seat monoplanes made of duralumin and steel with a long, slender profile. The machines had been designed for the British Air Force by Fairey Aviation Company, and that from plans drawn by the Belgian engineer Marcel Lobelle. They were equipped with powerful Rolls-Royce Merlin engines, which were also used on the latest fighters.

The Battle was a heavy aeroplane, however, and it could hold a load of bombs, with only one such engine, which was bit meagre for a bomber. The Battle was therefore a slow aeroplane. It also lacked an armoured cockpit and features such as self-sealing petrol tanks. Its cockpit was built in one piece, and the glazed canopy melted with the fine curves of the slim fuselage. In the Belgian versions, crews remained limited to two men, to the pilot and observer, but British versions existed with three crew members of pilot, observer and gunner. The British Battles were built first at the Fairey Hayes factory in the middle of 1937. Later models were manufactured at Heaton Chapel near Manchester. The Battles of the *Aéronautique* had been assembled in Belgium by *Avions Fairey* of Gosselies, near Charleroi.

The Battles were relatively new machines; the eighteen Belgian Battles had been delivered in 1938, but they were already outdated. The Battles were no match for the German fighter aeroplanes, which flew at least one hundred fifty kilometres per hour faster, so the Battles had better keep close to the ground to escape from high-flying German fighters, but low in the air they were exposed to fire from the ground troops, not only from German Flak or *Flugabwehrkannonen*, but also from the anti-aircraft guns and from the machine-guns of friendly troops, which shot at any aeroplane without distinction.

The bombs were carried in cells inside the wings. The Battles could normally fly at three hundred twenty kilometres per hour, with a maximum of up to four hundred and ten kilometres per hour, and landings happened at around one hundred kilometres per hour. The machine could be used for bombing missions at night.

Bastien and Jan Sinnagel flew away from the sun, from Brussels to the north of Flanders, to the *Waasland*, south of the small town of Sint-Niklaas-Waas. He found the airfield easily and made his machine dip its nose to land. He found the airstrip, a fine grassy field, and he noticed other Fairey-Battles already being dragged in camouflage already to under the trees of a wood. He made his aeroplane lose speed and height. He positioned to land.

Three Heinkel 111 German bombers appeared at that moment from the south, straight in Bastien's path, but flying much higher in the skies than he. He thought the German bombers flew at two thousand metres, but to his horror he saw also strings of bombs drop from under them, while he was landing. Belsele was being bombed while his landing was in progress! Bastien was on the ground, and he made his aeroplane halt slowly. Bombs crashed open the earth right and left from him, in ear-bursting violence.

Belsele was defended by twelve light Maxim machine-guns of an old model. Firing farther than four hundred metres was not at all precise with these toys, and the German aeroplanes flew at least two thousand metres high.

After the first three German bombers, more waves of bombers attacked the aerodrome.

Jan Sinnagel continued to shriek, 'bale out, bale out!'

Bastien did that, and he bumped into Jan Sinnagel who did not take the time to jump but let himself fall unceremoniously to the ground. Bastien sprang after him, and then the two men ran to a small wood beside the grass field. Bastien heard an enormous explosion when a bomb hit his aeroplane squarely in the middle and turned it into a flaming ruin. He was thrown to the earth by the deflagration, and more bombs exploded on all sides. The only thing he could think off was that he wanted to remain lying there, as close as possible to the ground, but Jan Sinnagel who laid next to him, stood and grabbed him by the collar.

'We have to get out of here, away from the grass, come on!'

Bastien got to his knees, then on his feet, and he followed the racing Jan Sinnagel, who ran in a straight line directly to a set of trees. A little later, he and Jan threw themselves side by side behind a thick trunk of a poplar tree, hands still over ears, while bombs continued to explode a little farther. Shrapnels, metallic pieces of the bombs tore at the leaves, higher up in the trees. Each of these shrapnels might have killed them, but they were lying lower than the airfield in a kind of old, dried-out ditch, and the metal scraps flew over them and behind.

Suddenly, the explosions stopped. Bastien and Jan waited a short time and then they stood, looked at the sky, and detected no more bombers ahead over Belsele. So much for the secrecy of the campaign aerodromes! Not only had Evere been bombed, but also the airfields where the *Aéronautique* should have been safe, at airfields never used in peace time. Who knows, maybe a few German bombers that had been present over Evere had followed the Battles to here, to Belsele.

Bastien and Jan trod back onto the aerodrome. Many pilots and observers stood there now, fists on their hips, looking at the devastation. Large craters had been formed in the field. Those holes would have to be filled in the next hours to allow any aeroplane to fly! Jan Sinnagel pointed to a road next to the airfield, and Bastien remarked at that moment the trucks of Evere arrive and halt at a nearby villa. The two men walked over to that place. They were as dirty from the mud that had been thrown over them by the explosions as making them unrecognisable. They entered the corridor of the villa.

In the villa, they heard their Group Leader, Major Piot, shout in the telephone, 'I tell you the airfield of Belsele is unsafe! The Germans have located it! We rode into a damned bombing! The airfield is as dangerous as Evere! Get us out of here! Where can we fly to next, General?' Piot was talking to General Major Hiernaux.

Bastien and Jan remained standing close to Major Piot so that they heard the General answer, 'fly as quickly as you can to the airfield 26, to Aalter. Move the trucks and the men to there too! Leave Belsele!'

That was a wise decision indeed, but Bastien and Jan had nothing to fly in anymore.

Behind them, Bastien heard a familiar grin, 'I knew you boys would bust your machine! You boys are such dirty little toy-breakers! Those expensive machines should be given exclusively to mature men, to men who know how to fly. Farmers should not fly aeroplanes. Have you guys been playing in the mud?'

Bastien made a fist, Sinnagel grinned back with sleepy eyes. They had not slept for a minute that night.

Max Vinck stood there, laughing and joking.

He slapped his observer on the shoulder, 'come on, man, the merry-go-round turns once more. To Aalter! Let's get the hell out of here!'

'You'll have to flatten the holes first,' Jan Sinnagel gnawed.

‘We leave the hole-filling to the ground guys, the ones that haven’t got an aeroplane anymore.’
‘We’ll help, of course, don’t worry,’ Jan replied soothingly.

It took about four hours to bring in sufficient earth to fill the yawning bomb-craters in the airfield of Belsele, and a few courageous farmers helped with tractors. By 10h45 the first Fairey-Battle took off for Aalter, fifty kilometres to the west still, an airfield east of the town of Brugge and south of Maldegem in Flanders. While the craters were being filled, many a pilot looked to the skies, expecting new bombers to drop their deadly loads. The farmers did not seem aware of the danger.

Bastien and Jan helped filling the holes, and then they jumped in the last truck to ride in the direction of Aalter.

‘Half a day of war,’ Jan Sinnagel grumbled, when he threw himself next to Bastien on a metal bench, ‘and we are already almost sitting with our backs in the water of the sea. Holy Moses!’ Less than an hour later, the remaining Battles reached Aalter. A few men were sent back to Evere to check on how many of the abandoned Battles there could be salvaged.

Jan Sinnagel’s words were lost to Bastien, for he sat with his back against a metal bar, eyes closed and snoring. Bastien could sleep wherever you put him. The transfer by truck to Aalter happened without incidents. Bastien and Jan helped to unload the trucks of the supplies that were immediately needed. Then, they preferred to continue to sleep in the truck rather than to seek a house for the night.

They woke up in the afternoon, and walked to the Information Centre of Aalter.

They heard that Major Jules Piot had received orders to prepare a bombing mission by three platoons of three Battles each. Headquarters wanted to bomb a footbridge the German troops had thrown over the Albert Canal, a bridge over which much infantry might pass and breach the natural defence line of the Belgian Army, the lines made by the River Meuse and the Albert Canal that ran from Antwerp to the Meuse. Headquarters ordered to use bombs of fifty kilogrammes. Major Piot asked Captain Edmond Pierre to prepare this attack.

The preparation for the bombing mission happened in some confusion, for the hooks at which the bombs were to be hung under the wings could not at first be found. When the hooks were indeed found somewhat later, they were discovered in the truck that brought the kitchen pots and pans. After that, time fuses were sought for the bombs, but none found. Impact fuses would have to be used, which made it necessary to dive at the bridge from a height of at least three hundred metres, for the bombs had to straighten out to have their noses hit the ground. Coming in very low over the bridges was not possible. Moreover, the aiming system of the Battles had recently been dismantled from the aeroplanes; new and more sophisticated devices would be installed in the following days. These devices had not been delivered yet, so the pilots and observers would have to launch the bombs on sight.

Dropping the bombs from much higher than three hundred metres was not possible. That was an ideal height for the anti-aircraft guns! Somewhat later, the decision for attacking a footbridge was changed to bombing the existing bridges over the Canal. But then, wondered Bastien, were bombs of fifty kilogrammes sufficient to destroy these bridges? He remembered having heard somebody tell some of these bridges had been built in reinforced concrete, some other in steel, some in an iron structure conceived by a Professor of the University of Leuven called Vierendeel, which was Dutch for Quartering. Would the pilots be quartered?

The work of installing the bombs took much time, and still the definite order for the mission did not come. Late in the afternoon Captain Pierre had to telephone to Headquarters that the raid should be ordered very soon, now, or that it should be cancelled for the day, because the

aerodrome of Aalter was not equipped for night flights. The order was therefore cancelled for that day, and it was decided to launch the attack the next day, on 11 May, at dawn.

The German Army attacked Belgium and the Netherlands on 10 May at 05h35 on an order of Adolf Hitler dating from 8 May. The attack plan had been drawn up mainly by Lieutenant-General Erich von Manstein, but the more daring and innovative elements of the massive attacks with tank divisions, which were later called the Blitzkrieg, had been devised by Lieutenant-General Heinz Guderian. The Manstein plan consisted of two parts. The first part was an attack that resembled the 1914 invasion through Belgium and now also the Netherlands. The main attack, however, executed by Guderian's tank divisions, would be through the Ardennes with the aim of pushing to Amiens and the North Sea Channel. In the Netherlands, parachutists conquered the airfields of Katwijk and Waalhaven, the island of Dordrecht and the bridges of the Moerdijk. The troops advanced also to Groningen, Assen, Zwolle, Arnhem and Venloo. They attacked the town of Maastricht. In Belgium, almost all the known and main airbases were bombed, destroying many aeroplanes on the ground. The most dramatic incident was that the Belgian Army blew up all the bridges over the Albert Canal that connected Antwerp to Liège and Maastricht, a natural defence line between Belgium and the Netherlands, except for the three bridges that really mattered, the bridges of Briegden, Veldwezelt and Vroenhoven in front of Maastricht. The fort of Eben-Emael, just south of Maastricht, between Maastricht and Liège, a huge defence point on the Meuse at the border of the three countries and on the hinge of the Albert Canal and the River Meuse, was also attacked by the Germans immediately at the beginning of the war. The attacks around Maastricht and on the Belgian defences of the Albert Canal lasted the entire day.

Bastien would have to fly another aeroplane if he were to be part of the bombing mission. Jan Sinnagel proposed to play a game with another team, the outcome of which would decide on what pilot would fly in which aeroplane. Bastien won the game, so he and Jan Sinnagel won their seats. It was then that the bombing mission was changed to the bombing of the three solid bridges over the Albert Canal. The German footbridge had been destroyed by Belgian artillery fire. The Belgian bridges over the Albert Canal had been mined and at the instance of alert, these bridges had been blown up with explosives, except for the three bridges around Maastricht, where the Germans had already arrived before the orders to blow could be transferred. The bridges of Vroenhoven Veldwezelt and Briegden had thus remained open for the German troops to use. Over these bridges, the Germans could strike into the heart of Belgium without natural obstacles.

Around 03h30 in the morning, however, this mission was cancelled and replaced by two observation mission in the sector of the towns of Visé and Maastricht, on the eastern border of Belgium, where the German troops attacked in force. The bombs had to be removed from under two aeroplanes. The personnel grumbled. Sixteen bombs were dismantled. An hour later, Major Piot had to announce that these missions also had been cancelled, but the bombing missions on the bridges over the Albert Canal had been confirmed. The bombs were returned to under the two aeroplanes.

When the final order for the bombing mission fell, Bastien and a few other pilots still sat waiting in the Information Centre. The Chaplain De Meester brought him and Jan in his old Sarolea car to the airstrip. Two platoons of three Gloster Gladiator fighter aeroplanes each, older biplanes of British facture, coming from the campaign aerodrome number 21 of Beauvechain, were assigned to escort the bombers.

The pilots ran to their machines. Little things were missing, such as helmets, glasses, and gloves. Bombs still had to be hung under the wings, and the mechanisms checked. Machine-guns failed and had quickly to be repaired. The preparation of the mission took much time that morning, too much time, thought Bastien.

The bombers climbed in the sky long after dawn, when it was already very light and clear in the day, after 6 o'clock. The German and the Belgian forces on the ground would be very much awake and eager to shoot by then at any aeroplane above their heads.

The preparation of the Battles took much time, so they were late to take off. The Gloster Gladiator fighter aeroplanes that were waiting for them in the air got almost immediately attacked by Messerschmitt fighters. Two Gladiators only returned around 7h30 that morning. One Gladiator was forced to make an emergency landing near Borgworm, for his pilot was hurt in the face and the aeroplane damaged. A second one fell burning out of the sky, its pilot killed. A third Gladiator crashed also, but its pilot could save himself with his parachute. The fourth fighter was also shot out of the sky, and the pilot went missing. The bombers flew their mission unescorted.

The first platoon of three bombers had to attack the bridge of Veldwezelt. South of the town of Ghent already, that platoon met a squadron of three German fighters. The Germans did not miss the three bombers. They attacked the formation of Belgian bombers immediately and in a battle of fifteen minutes, one Fairey-Battle was brought down. The two other Belgian bombers continued their mission to their objective, but in the environs of Hasselt, three other German fighters pursued a second bomber and also that Fairey was shot out of the air. One bomber could continue and drop its bombs on the bridge. The bombs fell beside the road, at a few meters of the bridge. No damage was done, the bridge of Veldwezelt would remain open on 11 May, and it remained undamaged also the following days.

The second platoon had the bridge of Briegden as its destination and destiny. This platoon took a more northerly route than the first. The aeroplanes flew low, and they flew into very heavy fire by the Belgian ground forces. Hundreds of Belgian soldiers shot at the aeroplanes that flew low above their heads to escape being seen by German fighters. Two bombers were shot out of the air, their petrol tanks or controls shot and cut. In one aeroplane, the observer received a bullet wound and lost much blood. The other lost fuel, caught fire and fell out of the sky like a torch. Luckily, the pilot and his observer could bale out and save their lives by parachute.

The last Battle dropped its bombs on the bridge, but flew straight in such heavy German firing that its petrol tank also got hit. Glycol, oil and petrol was sprayed over the cockpit. The observer jumped out of the aeroplane and his parachute opened, while the pilot landed the machine in a field. The pilot ran away from the bomber as soon as the machine halted. He ran for fear of fire and explosion. When the pilot stood a hundred metres from his aeroplane, he saw totally horrified that he had skidded in the field on his bombs. The observer had activated the lever to release the bombs by an electrical system, and thought that the bombs had fallen, but the mechanism had not worked, the bombs had not been released and hung still in their cells under the wings of the aeroplane. They had served as a sleigh to the aeroplane. The aeroplane had glided on the bombs, which by some rare miracle had not exploded. The pilot remained standing several minutes trembling all over his body until he could get on his way to find friendly troops. Not one bomb had reached the bridge of Briegden.

The third and last platoon meanwhile, flew to the bridge of Vroenhoven. They flew to the east, towards the ball of fire that stood in front of them, blazing its light already golden over the

horizon. The bombers flew in a large triangle formation with the platoon leader in front. On the left side, one hundred metres behind, flew Jan Sinnagel with Bastien as observer and on the right side flew the machine of Max Vinck, who piloted. Before taking off, when Bastien wanted to climb in the cockpit, Jan Sinnagel stopped him by tugging at his sleeve. Jan wanted to fly on this mission. He said Bastien had flown the last time, it was now his turn. Jan also argued Bastien had better eyes than him and could therefore better aim the bombs. There was some truth in that, but Bastien protested.

Jan Sinnagel then said, 'let's toss up and let us have chance decide who flies or not.'

'Agreed, but be quick, we have to go,' Bastien replied.

Jan Sinnagel took a coin of twenty Belgian francs out of his pocket, asking, 'head or tail? I choose head!'

Bastien laughed. Jan tossed the piece up high, caught it in his hands, closed them over the coin, and then he opened his hands to show head on top.

'I fly,' Jan decided, climbing in the front seat.

Bastien stepped reluctantly in the back seat, but not before Jan Sinnagel pushed the coin of twenty francs in Bastien's breast pocket.

'That was my lucky coin,' Jan shouted over the roar of the propellers of the other aeroplanes. He grinned, 'it's yours now! Keep it for me!'

The men sat in the cockpit and Jan made also the engine of their machine roar as loud as those of the other bombers. One after the other of the three aeroplanes rose in the air and they built the formation.

Jan and Bastien and the two other Fairey-Battles of their platoon flew very low, at a height of no more than fifty metres. They flew so low that they formed part of the landscape and blended with it so that German fighters which roamed at from a thousand to two thousand metres higher, could not distinguish them from the patchwork of fields, pastures and villages, towns and roads below. The landscape of Brabant, the Belgian province over which they flew, lay truly beautiful in the first rays of the sun. This would have made a very pleasant flight. Orange streaks emphasized the contrasts of colours, the green and brown and the myriad colours of the roofs on the houses being sharper now than on more sombre, rainy days.

The platoon passed over the aerodrome of Evere where they had spent so many nice days of flying and happy comradeship. Enormous black clouds still rose from the airbase today, and the airstrips were littered with large brown holes, the craters torn open by the impacts of hundreds of very destructive high explosive bombs. Flames still could be seen eating at some of the barracks and hangars. Oil and petrol tanks were still on fire. Also the roads farther off were torn and broken open, houses of civilians had exploded, the walls blown away, roofs on fire. Bastien had the time to look to left and right, and he saw desolation everywhere around the airport. The airstrips could not be used anymore and repairing the aerodrome, also the civilian part of it, might take weeks. In a few minutes of time, the pride of Belgian aviation had been destroyed. In some of the hangars, Bastien distinguished the rests of burned-out aeroplane fuselages, devoid of linen clothing, lying like crushed skeletons of ancient giant beasts among the iron beams of the caved-in roofs. Distorted metal plates of the roofs of the hangars had been thrown hundreds of metres away by the deflagrations of the exploding bombs.

The pilots reached the front zone of the war not long after their passage over Evere. Concentrations of armed forces clogged the roads. The aeroplanes followed the long lines of Belgian troops on the roads eastward from the town of Leuven. The troops below did not recognise the Belgian colours on the aeroplanes, and by then they must have believed that

only German aeroplanes could fly in the air. Artillery batteries of anti-aircraft guns and machine-guns mounted on light tanks were directed to the Fairey-Battles, so that a very heavy fire greeted the Belgian bombers. They did not need such a dire welcome!

Bullets and shells were shot to the thundering aeroplanes. The platoon dislocated rapidly, as each plane chose a safer course. The pilots turned their machines in frantic movements in the sky to confound the aiming of the ground troops. Several bullets nevertheless hit the three aeroplanes.

Jan Sinnagel swayed to the left and right, but he tried to keep the general direction of Maastricht. Bastien then also spotted another stream of people, a long column not of soldiers but of civilian refugees on the roads. Heavily loaded cars, trucks, tractors and handcarts moved at the same speed as the hordes of people on foot. Bastien found more roads filled with fleeing people afterwards. The long lines of misery advanced to the west to avoid the indiscriminating violence of war. Bastien hoped that the German *Luftwaffe* might still show enough humanity not to bomb these columns, or not to shoot at them with machine-guns from their fighters. He thought the Germans quite capable of doing just that, though, if only to increase the chaos on the roads and make it more difficult for the Belgian troops to move into the direction of the war front to the east. Flying low over the crowd with Belgian aeroplanes proved enough to cause total panic below, but Jan Sinnagel did not dare to climb higher here. His main fear were still the German fighters that lurked in the sky above in large numbers. Bastien saw the people scramble and run far in the fields to the sides of the roads when their aeroplane flew over the crowd. The refugees left their possessions lying in the dirt trying to save their hide. So this was what war was like! A dark hatred for the enemy grew in Bastien's breast.

The formation of Fairey-Battles reached in this way the town of Tongeren in the province of Limburg. Large columns of smoke rose over the city. Tongeren had been bombed terribly. Many houses in the centre of the town had been hit and bombs had completely destroyed their façades. Fires flamed up everywhere. The bombing of Tongeren could not have taken place a long time ago, for fresh fires flamed up. Bastien was on his guard instinctively, but he detected no German aeroplanes in the sky.

The German troops and especially their trucks loaded with Flak anti-aircraft guns had reached the outskirts of the city, for suddenly the Fairey-Battle formation flew into very thick and dangerous firing. Bastien saw motorised German troops on several roads converging to Tongeren. Jan Sinnagel dipped the aeroplane, and he sprayed bullets from his machine-gun over a long stretch of road.

'At least here some useful work could have been done,' thought Bastien. 'We cannot possibly destroy the concrete bridges over the Albert Canal with our bombs. We should drop our bombs here, on the advancing German columns, and clean the roads with our machine-guns. I suppose orders are orders!'

Jan Sinnagel continued impassibly his flight in the direction of Maastricht to the village of Vroenhoven. The German troops were densely concentrated in this region. Bastien saw more German columns advancing into Belgium. The Germans had breached the line of the Albert Canal, and they were walking straight for Brussels! Many German groups walked on foot, and Bastien wondered how those had come so soon from so far, but he also saw columns consisting of cars, motorcycles, trucks, and every four or five cars he remarked armoured cars mounted with machine-guns or anti-aircraft guns. The Germans had organised their attacking groups well, and equipped them with complementary weapons. Bastien saw also tank columns roll on the roads. Bullets were then shot by the hundreds at the aeroplanes. Bastien remained in fact far beyond this inferno, but he counted at least four bullet holes in the

fuselage behind him and on one wing, the right wing, two bullets had passed through the metal skeleton and torn holes in the linen that covered the wings. When would the bullets pass more closely to his body?

The German columns became so dense that they filled the roads, and then Bastien saw the Albert Canal appearing in front of him, a shining silvery straight line shimmering in the new sun, a line that cut through the landscape as if sliced by a giant knife. His blood pressure rose a few points and he opened the hatch in the floor of the fuselage, through which he could see the details of the ground under the aeroplane. Bastien knelt from his seat and he went lying on the floor to watch the fields pass under him.

Jan Sinnagel followed the aeroplane of Max Vinck at a hundred meters. When Max passed to the area just in front of the bridge of Vroenhoven, Jan expected to see a load of bombs drop from under the wings, but nothing happened. The aeroplanes flew then into very heavy machine-gun fire.

In the rear seat, Bastien felt bullets hitting the fuselage and wings. He tried to shrink to the tiniest surface possible, but he was very much aware that his body covered a serious surface of the floor of the cabin.

Max Vinck's observer had not dropped his bombs! The aeroplane in front suddenly gained more height and prepared to pass the bridge, where German soldiers ran to the banks, away from the bridge. They understood that Belgian aeroplanes aimed for the structure. The electric mechanism used to unhook the bombs from under Max's wings might have been hit by bullets, cables sectioned. The release mechanism had not worked at all. The aeroplane of Max Vinck climbed slowly and turned in a wide bend to try a second time.

Jan Sinnagel had let a more considerable distance between him and Max Vinck. Then, he steered his aeroplane right on to the bridge, in the direction of the length of the imposing construction of concrete and steel. He flew at somewhat more than one hundred fifty metres. Yes, the bombs if dropped from this height could still change to a vertical fall, point downwards, dip their points to fall with the ignition mechanism on the concrete, but Sinnagel should not fly much lower! Bastien saw the narrow line of the bridge appear within the view of his hatch, and then he knew instinctively this was the time to push the button to release the eight bombs. Now! He pushed the button.

Bastien expected a sudden surge in the aeroplane when the bombs, the heaviest weight of the machine, fell from the wings, probably not all at the same time, the bombs of one wing falling maybe sooner than from the other, destabilising the machine for a few moments, but Jan Sinnagel flew on in the same straight course as before. Bastien saw the entire length of the bridge pass under him, and he remarked the chaos of German troops running to the banks of the canal beyond the bridge, but he saw no bombs drop! The bombs of their aeroplane had not been released from their cells, exactly the same way as not from Max's machine.

Bastien cursed out loud and he cried in the interphone, 'the bombs have not fallen!'

Jan Sinnagel spun the Fairey-Battle into a steep turn, and in that instant Bastien saw on the left bank of the bridge of Vroenhoven numerous German gliders lying in the fields. The Germans had brought infantry troops in by gliders, so that was how and why Bastien had seen so many troops already so far inland.

Bastien shouted, 'Jan, you must release the bombs yourself. Use the safety system! I'll tell you when.'

The Fairey-Battle was also equipped with an entirely mechanical system the pilot could use to drop bomb by bomb. This was a safety system that could be used by the pilot when for

instance the observer was wounded and the aeroplane had to land for an emergency. Bastien supposed the electrical system of his machine had also been hit by a bullet, or maybe in their haste the technicians at the airbase had severed or torn off a contact.

Jan Sinnagel did not think for long about that solution. He threw his aeroplane into a sweeping swerve back to the west. He kept turning his aeroplane and tried to drop a bomb himself on a road filled with German troops. One bomb dropped, fell in a few seconds next to the road, pulverising a willow tree and sending a German column to break and seek cover on both sides.

‘The mechanism works!’ Jan cried, ‘let’s try it again. I’m going up to four hundred metres, then dive to one hundred fifty and drop the bombs.’

Bastien stood up for a few moments, looked behind him, saw the third Fairey-Battle behind them throwing its bombs on the bridge, then fly straight on. At least these bombs might have reached he target. Bastien remained lying in the cockpit, eyes at the hatch. He wanted to see Sinnagel turn completely, drop the bombs and he desired eagerly to see the bombs explode. Suddenly, a stream of oil spurted over his face; a bullet must have cut through a conduit of oil. Bastien’s face dripped with oil. He wiped the oil out of his eyes, and a new fear gripped his heart. How long could this machine still fly? Without oil, the engine could hold out only for a few minutes longer, not much more. Still, Jan Sinnagel turned and headed once more for the bridge. Strange, Bastien has not seen Max’s aeroplane pass over the bridge again. What had happened with Max?

Jan Sinnagel turned the machine in a long, wide bend to come once more soaring in the direction of the Vroenhoven bridge. Bastien kept lying at the hatch.

At a few hundred metres from the beginning of the bridge, Bastien cried to Jan, ‘let loose! Keep straight on!’ and Jan Sinnagel kept steering on in a straight line, but he released the bombs.

Bullets pierced the aeroplane and shells burst around the Fairey-Battle. Bastien now saw distinctly the string of bombs descend. The aeroplane shuddered dangerously and swung with the release of the weight. The aeroplane jumped up as if kicked by a giant dragon, rocked to and fro, so much that Bastien cried out in fear the aeroplane might crash. The aeroplane shuddered, rocked like a leaf in a gush of gale. Bastien got crushed to the floor of the cockpit by the shocks, and then he also felt a stream of very hot air pass over him.

Bastien heard Jan shout, ‘Bastien! Jump! Bale out!’

Bastien cursed again, got back on his knees in the ever shuddering aeroplane. The fuselage had been hit by several bullets in numerous places. One side of his seat was practically a sieve, and one bullet had torn a large piece of iron plate next to his seat. He was lucky to have been lying down. Bastien got into his seat, which took him quite some time; and then he looked at his pilot.

Jan Sinnagel did not sit anymore in his seat. He was standing up, enveloped in black, heavy fumes. Acrid fumes stung Bastien’s eyes and he coughed as the thick smoke bit into his lungs and throat. He saw more black oil spurting out of the engine, catch fire and augment the black smoke that was now exceedingly drawn behind the aeroplane.

Bastien realised the aeroplane was on fire! Fire was the most feared death by a pilot. Jan Sinnagel was striking with his arms as if wasps were stinging at him, but Bastien saw flames lick everywhere in the cockpit. Sinnagel’s clothes were on fire!

Bastien could still see the dashboard lower on. He saw they are flying at four hundred kilometres per hour, at a height of one hundred fifty metres. If he jumped now, he was not certain to make it in one piece to the ground. He feared the height was not enough to open his parachute and to dampen his fall, and also the speed they were flying at was too fast. Still, he

pushed himself on his feet, moved his head through the cockpit and he tried to jump. The fierce wind around the aeroplane sucked him rudely away by a huge force, he hit his legs against the plastic of the cockpit, and he was drawn out in a violent force out and away from the machine. While he tumbled he drew on the ropes of his parachute, and he saw the aeroplane entering in a deadly spiral and fall from the sky at tremendous speed. He did not see Jan Sinnagel jump out. He waited fractions of a second, and then his parachute deployed, but only for a few seconds. He saw the canopy above his head widen and catch air, and then with a heavy shock, Bastien was brutally thrown to the ground. Out of a corner of his eye he remarked how a burning aeroplane spewing flames continued to fall, then burst and exploded on the ground. He heard a second explosion on the other side, when a second Battle was hurled to the ground and went up in flames, throwing up a thick black cloud of burning petrol and oil.

After having been crushed to the ground, Bastien lost conscience from pain in his limbs and breast.

Bastien awoke after what he thought lasted only a short time, but his ears heard another danger, even two dangers. Artillery batteries seemed to concentrate their fire on the road and the field where Bastien lay, and he saw a huge German armoured tank riding to where he lay. He tried to get up, but the pain made him push his head back into the earth. The German tank halted with much noise, ignoring the shells that threw up heaps of dirt around Bastien. Bastien hurt all over his body. He was sure he has not only been crushed, he had also suffered burn wounds. The tank stopped next to Bastien, and he saw a man in grey uniform jump from the tank and come to him. He did not see the man's face at first, but he distinctly read on the soldier's belt the words 'Gott mit uns'. Two more men approached. They grabbed Bastien's parachute, rolled the silk carefully together and pushed the parachute next to him. One of the soldiers brought his face close to Bastien's, and the man spoke, but Bastien could not hear what the man said, for his ears seemed to have become insensitive to low sounds amidst the impacts of shells in the fields. The Germans showed a fine example of cold calm in the shelling of the field. They seemed to think they could not be harmed. The German smiled compassionately and he brought a can with lemon water to Bastien's lips, without trying to move him. Bastien drank eagerly, for his throat burned and felt very dry. The Germans pushed slowly and cautiously Bastien sideways to have him lie on the parachute silk, not on the damp earth, and he and another soldier wiped his face clean. Bastien started to hear the voices again. He nodded, and he tried a little German. He said he was hurt and asked the men not to touch him. He heard the men tell him, very slowly, distinctly, and repeating, that they would call a medical post to come and help him. They preferred not to place him in the tank. Bastien nodded and added a German thank you, whereupon the men smiled, patted him an encouragement on the shoulder, and left him lying on the parachute.

The artillery fire intensified. Earth continued to fly over his body and face, but the Germans had to leave him. Bastien turned his face painstakingly to see the German soldiers climb in the tank and with much noise of clattering metal chains roar towards the other side of the field, westwards, to Belgium, to the war front.

Shells continued to explode intermittently around Bastien, who dared not to move one finger. At least twice, heaps of earth fall on his legs and breast and face, and Bastien heard the pieces of metal casing of the shells whizz past his ears. He eased into the least hurting position on the parachute.

A strange appeasement then came over his mind. He felt comfortable lying in this fertile field. He was getting cold. He turned parts of the parachute over him. He turned his face to the sky

and prepared for death. He thought of his lovely Irene and of his father. He lost conscience once more, but his mind and heart stayed serene at the instant of death.

Suddenly, Bastien cried out of pain and his back lurked upward. The shelling of the area had abated for a while, an eerie silence hung over the field, but other men stood around him, talking in soft voices. They too wore grey uniforms, but one of them explained he was a doctor and he urged Bastien to lie and not to move. The man worked at his face to wipe off the dirt and he used instruments, pliers, to scrape the earth out of Bastien's nose and ears. The doctor once more urged Bastien to remain calm. He should be saved. When Bastien moved, however, he cried out in sharp, tremendous pain. The doctor yelled a command and a motorcycle with a side-cart drove to next to Bastien. Bastien shouted of humiliation and pain and despair, but three men took him up from the ground like a child, gently, to hurt him as little as possible, but Bastien felt knives cut at him everywhere. The men placed him on the seat of the motorcycle. He could half lie there, half sit, and support his body with his elbows. The doctor explained that Bastien would suffer more pain for a good time, but the motorcyclist had to take Bastien to a medical post at the rear of the artillery fire. At that moment, shells started to fall once more in the field and on the roads, and the Germans ducked. Bastien had to keep sitting in the motorcycle, thinking he might be hit by shrapnels any second. He dared not move.

A German command sounded once more, and the driver, clad all in black leather, got in the seat of the motorcycle and started the motor. The soldier turned his vehicle and drove over the field at great speed, probably glad to leave this open ground. He drove very rapidly, expertly bumping over earth holes and heaps, between exploding shells in, until he swung on to the road. Bastien yelled all the time in pain, for each shock stabbed at him, but the driver remained impassive, knowing he could do no better than to drive fast. When they were on the road, he turned his goggled face to Bastien and grinned encouragingly.

On the road, they sped in between tanks and armoured cars that came from the direction they drove to. They drove past German columns for a quarter of an hour, and then a new burst of shelling began to hit the road. The Germans on foot sprung to the sides. The shells seemed to concentrate on the road, so the German driver of the motorcycle stopped and he too jumped into a ditch on the side of the road to avoid shrapnels. Bastien had to keep sitting in the side-cart, unable to drag himself out, quite happy and relieved with the delay in pains. The shelling lasted also about a quarter of an hour, then the shells got dropped more to the west. No shell hit Bastien. One shell exploded an armoured car only twenty metres from where he sat, and he heard shrapnels clink against the truck that stood in front of him. That truck may have saved his life from being hit with sharp, biting, red-hot pieces of metal straight in his face.

When the shelling abated, the German motorcyclist climbed out of the ditch and the man jumped slightly ashamed, without daring to look at Bastien, back in his driver's seat. He got the motorcycle to start again. The motorcycle and side-cart continued their journey eastward. The German driver had to ride around potholes as large as an elephant, larger than Bastien's cart, but the road was clear and a little further not only free of craters but also of German soldiers and enemy cars. The motorcyclist sped on. Half an hour later, he arrived at a medical outpost of the German Army. The driver rode to the front of a tent, he disappeared into the tent, and a little later two men in white coats grabbed Bastien, ignoring his screams, and they wrung him out of the cart. They cared little for Bastien's groans and yells while carrying him into the tent to dump him on a stretcher. Bastien had barely had the time to make a movement of gratitude to the German driver, who gave him once more an encouraging smile and a wave of his hand, before the German soldier turned his motorcycle, and he left the field in a burst of exhaust gases. For an hour or so, this man shared Bastien's fate.

Bastien lay on a stretcher, a lot more comfortable in the tent than in the seat of the side-cart. He looked around and saw many German wounded soldiers. Twenty or so stretchers were placed in neat rows in the green tent. Three or four men in white coats looked after the men. Bastien saw much blood and windings on all men. The windings looked clean, but blood oozed through many. One man had a crushed leg through which the bones showed. A doctor helped putting the bones in place and he closed the flesh over the wound. Bastien saw him work with patience and dexterity. Another man on a stretcher in the far corner seemed to have died. A white linen has been drawn over his face. A man nearer to him had a part of his skull shot away.

Two German doctors with stern, haughty faces came then near to him, accompanied by a male nurse. The men handled Bastien brusquely, but in their eyes he also detected pity and the softness of empathy. The doctors touched him roughly everywhere. They felt at his limbs, and several times Bastien had to bite on his teeth not to yell out very loud in the tent. He cursed the doctors to hell. He tried not to shout, but he did not succeed in that each time.

Finally, one of the German doctors asked him whether he understood German and when he nodded weakly, the doctor explained him nevertheless in a trying French with the almost metallic accent of a man whose mother tongue is German, 'you have multiple fractures on your left foot and leg. Your right foot is dislocated. Your chest has been caved in and you have broken ribs but none entered the lungs. The worst is that three of your spine vertebrae have been hurt. They have been crushed and we don't know what the result may be of those wounds. Your injuries can heal, but you must be operated on. Your fractures are too complicated for our means, here. We are therefore going to transport you to the hospital of Maastricht.'

The doctors left Bastien on the stretcher without further ado. They did not offer him medication to ease the pain. Not now.

An hour later, two orderlies entered the tent to fetch the stretcher and Bastien was brought to an army truck in which already three other stretcher with wounded soldiers had been placed. The truck left the outpost immediately. Bastien fell asleep again on the stretcher, and he awoke an hour later when the truck stopped. Bastien awoke by the sudden drop in noise of the truck engine. Bastien heard other voices then, voices speaking in another language. He heard Dutch be spoken. Men entered the truck and Bastien's stretcher was once more taken up by strong hands and brought inside a building. Bastien could note the truck stopped at a hospital of Maastricht. The men walked rapidly through the corridors, bringing him to a room in which he lay alone, still on the stretcher. He lost conscience from the excruciating pain.

Bastien woke up the day after around noon. His right arm was bound in plaster and in windings. His left leg and foot were also imprisoned in a plaster mould, and also his right foot. He felt a thick bandage around his chest. He looked around. His room was very white and clean, very silent. He did not suffer from pain anymore. Bastien waited and he dared not to call out, although his throat was terribly dry. He tried to sleep some more. He wondered what has happened to Jan Sinnagel, though he is practically sure Jan has perished with the Battle. He did not see Max Vinck make a second try over the bridge, so he also wondered what has happened with Max.

In the late afternoon, a doctor and two pretty nurses opened the door.

The doctor spoke loudly, but at ease, 'I am Doctor Barendsen. I am the saviour of the sick and the fear of all nurses!'

The doctor grinned at his nurses, who drew a cherry mouth as if to grant him the favour of a truth. Barendsen spoke Dutch. Bastien had neglected his school Dutch, but he remembered enough words and he nodded when the doctor tried to explain to him very slowly, adding gestures and even a drawing on paper, about his situation. Bastien had been operated upon. The fractures were nothing, explained the doctor, he waved those injuries away. His leg and feet would mend rapidly enough. The doctor could not do much for his broken ribs, but those also would heal on their own, giving time. Bastien must not move. He had been operated on especially for his spine too, and that operation lasted a long time, but it ended successfully. Bastien should be able to walk again, and he would regain the use of his limbs. Yes, that had been at stake during the operation, but the doctor announced him with a grin and then a sad face that Bastien should not do sports again. No running and jumping for a few years! The injury has probably finished his career as a pilot, but Bastien would live and walk.

Bastien asked to drink. The doctor nodded to the nurses, and he ordered a nurse to stay with the patient, for the water will cause Bastien to throw up, which in itself is quite natural, said the doctor, but difficult to cope with when one was alone. In a couple of hours Bastien would feel better. The doctor said he would come back to see the patient.

The nurse helped Bastien to drink. She placed a beaker at his lips, but he took the cup from her with his left hand, smiling. The nurse helped him to vomit a few moments later, for which Bastien was very ashamed. Bastien drank several times thereafter, and he thanked the nurse, a pretty girl of scarcely twenty with a very pale, immaculate face and golden locks bursting from under her white bonnet. Bastien grinned, for he reminded himself he was a married man. The nurse tried to talk to him, asking him where he hurt. Bastien told in broken Dutch he suffered nowhere for the moment. Then she asked him where he had been wounded, in which attack. Bastien understood she was merely talking to bring him at ease. She knew perfectly well the state of his wounds.

Bastien explained to the girl in many words and gestures that he was a pilot, sent to destroy the bridges over the Albert Canal in a bomber. The nurse's eyes widened. He asked her whether the bridge at Vroenhoven had been destroyed, but she shook her head. No, Vroenhoven bridge still carried German soldiers and German war material over the canal, into Belgium. The bridges had also been attacked later on by tens of British and French bombers, but these too had not succeeded in destroying the bridges. The nurse told him many allied aeroplanes, very many, had been destroyed during the bombings.

The Netherlands had been attacked ferociously. Maastricht and the region around has fallen in German hands. Fighting went on everywhere in the Netherlands. Parachutists had landed and captured many bridges and also airbases of inland Holland. The war raged on, but the nurse believed the Netherlands would have to surrender to the Germans, for Germany had also attacked massively in the north of the country. Bastien closed his eyes with the nurse beside him, and he slept. The nurse tugged him in affectionately.

When Bastien awoke, the sun fell and it was beginning to darken outside, and also in his room. He waited. Suddenly, the light was switched on and the doctor he saw before entered the room. Bastien remarked instantly how tired the doctor was. Many casualties of the war had been brought into this hospital, explained the doctor. Another nurse accompanied the doctor, one with dark brown hair. The doctor explained he brought a nurse with him who spoke French, a Walloon girl who married in Maastricht. She did not have a very pretty face, but her eyes laughed warmly. The doctor examined Bastien again, and he confirmed what he said earlier. The doctor told Bastien that the hospital knew his name, for they had searched his pockets and found his identity card and name from the Belgian Air Force. The doctor knew

that Bastien was one of the pilots who tried to destroy the bridges over the canal, though in vain. The doctor explained that the nurse had found the telephone number of Bastien's parents, and he has assured Bastien's parents over the telephone their boy was hurt but would heal. Bastien nodded with pleasure and gratitude. Irene would know he was alive. He tried to sit, but the doctor pushed him back into the bed with an angry groan. The nurse then told him in French he must absolutely not move, for his spine had to heal well, and he had to change his position as little as possible during the next days. That would be hard, she said, but necessary. The objects that Bastien had in his pockets would be returned to him and placed in his closet tomorrow, including his papers.

The doctor explained, and the nurse translated, that Bastien had to be considered a war prisoner; The doctor also told, almost whispering now, that he and the hospital would do everything they could to keep him in the hospital for as long as they medically dare, and keep him out of German hands for several months at least. By then this war must have ended, conjectured the doctor, and maybe with a somewhat strained diagnosis, we could send you home again, not to Germany. The nurse too grinned. Their assurances calmed Bastien considerably. He arrived in Maastricht to be cared by compassionate, friendly hands.

The doctor left the room, but at the door he turned around and said, 'oh yes, we found this in your breast pocket when we undressed you. The nurses showed it to me. It must be a luck charm or something like that. I kept it out of curiosity and wanted to hand it over to you personally. You must tell me its story once. You Belgians are some jokers!'

The doctor held between two fingers a money coin and presented it to Bastien. Bastien accepted it gratefully. It was the luck coin of twenty Belgian francs that Jan Sinnagel tossed in the air to vie for the pilot's seat. Bastien took the coin in his left hand, turned it around, and remarked then that the piece was a fake. It had a head on both sides. Jan Sinnagel tricked him into piloting the aeroplane and saved his life. The doctor and the nurse watched him, grinning, smiling, waiting for a reaction, but Bastien turned his head to the wall and wept. He wondered what had become of his other friend, of Max Vinck.

When Max Vinck cursed and turned at the end of the bridge of Vroenhoven, his bombs still hanging in their cells under the wings of his Fairey-Battle, he sensed something was wrong with his machine. He lost oil from his engine, he could see oil along the front of his cockpit, and he could not get enough power to climb as rapidly as he would have wished. He too then saw a number of glider aeroplanes lying on the other side of the Albert Canal. He turned in a wide angle to spare his engine, climbed very slowly, and turned to fly once more over the bridge, to drop the bombs himself with his manual release. He flew straight over the bridge, felt he was hit by bullets, but flew straight on as if nothing had happened, and when his observer cried, he pulled the lever. He felt the bombs go, for his aeroplane suddenly jumped into the air as if it had been kicked tremendously at the tail. Over water, aeroplanes also jump and fall, so for a few moments Max had very much trouble keeping his machine in the air, and he had no idea where his bombs fell. He would have estimated it a miracle if his eggs, as the pilots called bombs, had even touched the structure of the Vroenhoven bridge. Since his observer had probably been flattened to the fuselage, all breath drawn from the man, Max also did not ask in the interphone whether the bombs had reached target. He preferred not to know. He felt despondent. This was no way to perform any precision bombing! Each bridge, moreover, should have been attacked by at least ten bombers. Max was certain that if the

Germans would have wanted a bridge bombed, they would have sent at least a dozen Heinkels against it! Max fled.

Max Vinck followed a stretch of the Canal afterwards with his battered Battle, though he could not really point at what was the matter with his machine. His aeroplane shuddered and kept shuddering, but his Fairy flew!

‘Hold on, baby,’ he thought, ‘we’re almost home, now.’

Max looked down, seeing long and large columns of German soldiers drive to the undamaged bridges and rolling over the one at Briegden into the heartland of Limburg. They would probably do so over the three target bridges, for the one he had attacked would have remained intact, and this one also seemed unscratched. Finally, he turned, passed the Canal once more, and he flew at low speed, saving his engine, back to Aalter airfield. After a flight of half an hour, he discovered the campaign airfield and started to descend cautiously.

Max dove to the airfield rather steeply, then he flattened out, felt his controls go sloppy, and when his machine was going to fall out of his hands, he worked hard on the rudder to have the nose of his aeroplane point more towards the field. Max landed with his machine without further issues, but his Battle bounced high on landing. When he had stopped, he left the Battle to be inspected by the technicians. He did not dare to look at the numerous bullet holes that had damaged the aeroplane he had risked his life in. He realized by then that his wings, flaps and rudder had been severely damaged by bullets.

The result of the attempt to bomb the bridges had been catastrophic, Max learned at Aalter. Six Battles out of nine had been destroyed, and Max had no reliable news about Bastien Trioteignes and Jan Sinnagel. When they did not land, he worried very, very much for his friends. He spent the rest of the day in worrying, and in the evening he made an improvised bed of straw somewhere in a corridor of the Villa Maenhout, the Information Centre of his bomber group at Aalter. He wanted to sleep near the only telephone of the airfield. He wanted to hear it ring to have news from his friends.

Late in the night, early in the morning, the telephone did ring, but only to announce two missions of observation for the following day, for 12 May. Bastien and Jan were missing, nobody knew what had happened to them.

The fort of Eben-Emael south of Maastricht was captured by German storm-troops in the morning of 11 May. It surrendered around noon, only a little later. The Belgian Army took positions on the Albert Canal. In the evening of 11 May, the Germans had still to fight before Liège, but they threatened Tongeren in the Belgian province of Limburg. The largest part of the Netherlands was by then already in their hands, but for parts of Holland and for Zeeland. The German forces had overrun the Grand-Duchy of Luxemburg. Guderian’s three tank divisions reached the Semois River in Belgium that night, at the border with France.

On 12 May, the Captain of the squadron did not send Max Vinck back into the air. Max’s Battle was still being repaired from the many bullets it had swallowed. The fuselage was pierced, the fuel tank hit and bullets had torn long cuts in the engine block. The bars of his steering stick were plied. Max spent his time waiting on that 12 May. Many pilots came to have a look at his damaged aeroplane, and Max became part of the legends of the squadron. The pilots shook their heads when they saw the damage, and wondered how Max had been able to fly, let alone to land with such a tormented machine.

Two Battles took off that morning, and they returned an hour or so later, their fuselage and even their cockpits touched by bullets. Their mission was to observe what happened over

north-eastern Brabant and over the south of Limburg, to which the German troops have advanced. Curtains of machine-gun and anti-aircraft cannon fire from friend and enemy await all aeroplanes that flew low, but the Captain of the squadron ordered to fly low to spare the machines! It remained the best strategy, nevertheless, to avoid being downed by enemy fighters, but flying low also exposed the crews to other great risks.

In the afternoon, the fighter group of Nivelles brought seven Fairey-Fox Hispano aeroplanes to Aalter to replace the destroyed Battles. Although these machines were faster than their versions equipped with Rolls-Royce engines, they can barely fly faster than three hundred kilometres per hour! The mood of the pilots got darker, and heads bowed.

On 12 May, the German ground troops moved from the Dutch border southward to close to the town of Tienen, and they penetrated deep into the Belgian Ardennes, continuing their progress there from out of Luxemburg. The French Seventh Army reached Tilburg, too late to save the Netherlands, but the battles raged against the German invasion. The Belgian troops still occupied the right side of the Albert Canal then, north of the canal, but for the sector of Maastricht. German troops spear-pointed to Hannut and Borgworm, where fierce battles took place. The French and British armies had by then also arrived in Belgium. Belgium had become a fierce battle-field.

In the morning of 13 May, two observation flights took place out of Aalter by Max's squadron with the Fox Hispano machines, and one mission was held with a remaining Fairey-Battle. The Battles would not anymore serve as bombers, only as observation aeroplanes. Two other missions of observation were ordered in the afternoon, both on Fox Hispano. These two aeroplanes did not return. They both crashed in emergency landings, but the pilots saved their lives. On that day of the 13th, the group 'Egyptian Wings' nevertheless executed five very useful observation missions for the Belgian Army.

The Dutch Army retreated on 13 May westward to Zeeland, and the cities on the northern Dutch-Belgian border were captured. The war was almost practically finished in the Netherlands. Several German attacks were directed towards Leuven and the Gete River in Belgian Brabant, but these attacks faltered. The Germans retreated temporarily to Sint-Truiden. German detachments attacked Halen and Arendonck in three assaults, which also failed. The Belgian Army occupied a line called the 'KW Line', positions from Koningshooikt near Antwerp to Wavre, south of Leuven. The resistance of the Belgian Army was still very strong.

In the Ardennes, however, the German troops passed Givet and Sedan. Sedan fell. Namur held while the Belgian troops fought in the Condroz Region east of Namur and east of the Meuse, but the German armoured divisions passed the Meuse south of Namur, at Givet in France, and they also passed the stream at the island of Houx near Anhéé and Dinant. The Belgian campaign airfields of Schaffen, Wilderen-Duras and Brustem near Sint-Truiden came to lie in German occupied territory on 13 May. Bierset and Hannut-Thisnes suffered the same fate.

French and British attacks were launched on the three intact bridges over the Albert Canal on 13 May, attacks with tens of bombers, most of the English bombers also Fairey-Battles, but these bombings did not succeed. The Allies suffered heavy loss of aeroplanes, but the bridges of Briegden, Veldwezelt and Vroenhoven remained open for German traffic.

On 14 May, the ebullient Max Vinck got more and more bored and frustrated with the situation, for the only thing he could do was to wait. He asked desperately for a mission, but at Aalter there were now far too many pilots for far too few aeroplanes. He received a

reconnaissance flight with a Battle over the region of Antwerp and Breda. His orders were, as for the other missions, to fly low. Max Vinck took off, glad to fly again, and his trip remained absolutely uneventful. He saw how the roads around Antwerp were filled by refugees, fleeing with their meagre belongings on carts or backs, pushing anything that could roll filled too high. He shook his head at this chaos. On his reconnaissance trip, Max and his observer noted that no additional bridges were being thrown over the Albert Canal by the German forces. He saw also that the roads above Antwerp looked totally abandoned. The Germans had either not yet arrived between Antwerp and Breda, or they attacked more to the south, through lower Limburg. The bridges around Antwerp and to its east seem all to have been blown up by the Belgian Army. Max got shot at by machine-gun fire near Antwerp. He jammed his stick forward and dove behind a wood.

Max Vinck returned to the airfield of Aalter, two hours after the start of his mission. His observer phoned the information of the mission to Headquarters.

Max hated not having been able to drop bombs or to use his machine-guns against German columns. He wanted to fight, not just to observe. Max would remain frustrated thus for the remainder of his war!

During another mission, yet one Battle more of the Egyptian Wings got hit by so many bullets that the aeroplane would henceforth have to remain on the ground. Other missions were executed in the Fairey-Fox aeroplanes, and these were way too slow for Max's temperament. In the following three days of 16, 17 and 18 May, Max Vinck did not fly at all, even though a Fairey-Battle had been recuperated. His own former aeroplane was abandoned, for it could not be repaired. Tools and spare parts missed. Max waited. He was in a gloomy, dispirited mood, for he had heard in the meantime what had happened to Bastien and Jan. He knew of the death of Jan Sinnagel, and also of Bastien lying lame in a hospital of Maastricht, in German occupied territory. He remembered he swore with the Blue Flowers never to fall into the hands of the Germans.

One only Fairey-Battle was still able to perform mission then, and Max still hoped for revenge.

In the evening of 14 May, the town of Rotterdam surrendered in the Netherlands and the first German troops rolled south to Antwerp. The front in the north of Belgium then went from Antwerp to Herentals and Turnhout.

The province of Belgian Limburg was already occupied in its eastern part and the Germans arrived at the River Dijle, at the famous University Town of Leuven. The Dijle would become for several days the new front line in Brabant.

South of Wavre, to the east of the KW Line, the Battle of Gembloux raged, not so far from Trioteignes. The German troops had to halt there temporarily, thrown back by the French troops.

Namur and its mighty citadel got encircled by enemy troops coming from the north, the troops that pushed west of Namur to Gembloux, and from the south northward from Givet. By then, the German armoured divisions were already pushing west of Sedan and also Dinant was overwhelmed on 14 May. The German troops passed the line Maisoncelle-Raucourt-et-Flabas, their tank divisions rode west of the River Meuse at Monthermé and at Donchéry.

On 15 May, the battle raged around Sedan. The German tank divisions cut into the French armies as if they passed through butter. They advanced toward Carignan, Mouzon and Beaumont, far to the west of Sedan, destroying all French resistance in the region of the Meuse. The Belgian and British armies meanwhile held on well against German attacks on the KW Line. The Netherlands capitulated at 11h00 on this 15 May, the German troops entered

Den Haag and Amsterdam. The Flemish city of Ostend was bombed for the first time in the night of 15 May.

The Belgian Army still held the KW Line on 16 May, and German attacks on Antwerp were stopped. The British Expeditionary Force fought around Leuven, but in the course of the day they decided to retreat towards Brussels, which they did in the night of 16 to 17 May, abandoning the Dijle line. In Wallony, the German divisions arrived at Charleroi, pushing in from the south, and they occupied the left bank of the Meuse at Namur. The forts of Namur were encircled, but the Belgians continued to fight there.

The Allies left the Dijle on 17 May, abandoning Mechelen and Leuven to the Germans. They took position on the Canal of Willebroek in front of Brussels. Brussels was taken on that day, the campaign airfields of Grimbergen and Evere fell in German hands. The region of Antwerp suffered under heavy attacks but held on. In the north of France, the German tank divisions opened the valley of the Oise River and sped ever more to the west. They attacked Maubeuge from the south. Some but still not all forts of Liège, the forts of Flémalle and Bonnelles, also fell on this day, but other forts would hold out against the Germans for several days more.

Early in the morning of 18 May, at 07h40, no less than eighteen Heinkel 111 bombers appeared in tight formation above Aalter. The resulting bombing was very severe. Max Vinck ran out of a tent where he had been chatting with technicians, and he ran until he found a sturdy willow tree near a ditch. He crawled into a ball, into the smallest surface he could possible form, and he waited patiently and terrified for the end of the bombing. He believed many times his last day on earth had arrived, and he got buried in dirt and debris. Max hated his vulnerability and the humiliation. The Heinkels did not only bomb the aeroplanes on the ground, systematically and thoroughly in several waves. They also sprayed hundreds of bullets from their machine-guns over the Belgian machines. The Germans knew how to finish a job until everything was destroyed! The Belgian pilots would have to drink the chalice till the bottom. Practically all the remaining aeroplanes of the airfield of Aalter were destroyed in this terrible bombing.

When the bombers left, less than half an hour after they had appeared, Max Vinck cautiously looked up and then sauntered hesitatingly from behind his willow tree. He shed the dirt from his uniform, and looked, still somewhat dazed, to the devastation. Several soldiers of the ground personnel of his group had been killed, others were wounded. Max had hidden in a place where no bombs fell very near. He had been lucky. With other pilots, he helped the wounded the best he could, but he was no medic! He could not do much. He brought the wounded to one place, where the men could be helped by a doctor. The doctor of a nearby village arrived and went from wounded to wounded. Then, Max turned to the aeroplanes. The machines lay as torn animals of steel, dead and wrung on the grass. Other pilots, who had not been hurt, walked around also and told him of the result of the bombing. Only three Fairey-Fox aeroplanes remained intact, and one of these had received a bullet in the fuel tank but could be repaired, given time and tools. Which they hadn't.

A little later, a telephone call from Headquarters told the group that more bombings of Aalter might be expected, so new orders were to leave as quickly as possible by trucks from the campaign airfield and to drive to France, to Norrent-Fontes.

Three or four Battles remained on the grass field, machines of which at least the engines could be recuperated.

In the afternoon of this 18 May, the pilots and technicians left the airfield by trucks and cars. They left behind a chaos of burning and destroyed aeroplanes, once the pride of the

Aéronautique, now a charred mass of distorted metal, and they also left tools, bombs, ammunition, spare parts and fuel tanks behind. They set fire themselves to the remaining aeroplanes that were anyhow not able anymore to fly.

The group of the Egyptian Wings split in two detachments. One moved in trucks to Norrent-Fontes, the other to Saint-Omer by Abbeville. Max sat in the trucks that headed to Norrent-Fontes. At that base, the group received already on 20 May orders to continue on south, to Tours. Max arrived at Alençon in the afternoon. The roads in France too were by then clogged by columns of refugees. The Belgian trucks advanced very slowly, and they had sometimes to stop for hours. On 21 May, Max arrived around noon at Charentilly, an airfield near Tours, where the two parts of the group reformed. They waited but received no new aeroplanes. They were a group of pilots without machines, totally useless in the war. On 28 May, at Charentilly, the group heard about the surrender of the Belgian Army. They wondered what would happen with them, but lacking orders, they remained stuck at the airfield. They remained this way near Tours until 12 June, when they left once more in their trucks to still more southern regions. They arrived at Moissac, where they stayed until 20 June. Then they moved on to Canals and Dieupentale.

On 17 August, the group of the Egyptian Wings, now without wings, returned in their trucks to Belgium.

Max Vinck felt humiliated and sad. The trucks entered Belgium through Charleroi. Max had a bag with him in which he had packed civilian clothing. When the trucks stopped for a few minutes, Max disappeared and his Group Captain noticed that only many kilometres later. No German would throw Max in prison if he could avoid it.

Fiat Fighters

In May 1940, Georges de Trahty flew on Fiat CR.42 fighter aeroplanes out of the aerodrome of Nivelles, the aerodrome of a small town south of Brussels. The Second Regiment of the *Aéronautique Militaire* formed the fighter regiment of the Belgian Air Force. Its first group of two squadrons flew the most modern fighters of Hurricanes and Gladiators, the third group used the older versions of the Fairey-Foxes equipped with more powerful French Hispano engines than were the other Fairey-Foxes of the Air Force, and the second group, the group of Georges, flew in newly acquired Italian Fiat aeroplanes. The squadron numbered three in that group had received fifteen Fiats and the squadron numbered four had ten. The emblems of these squadrons were the '*Cocotte Blanche*' and '*Cocotte Rouge*', the 'White Ducks' and the 'Red Ducks'. Georges was a White Duck. This suited him well, since the Trioteignes, his friends, wore proudly three ducks in their badge.

The Belgian *Aéronautique* had acquired forty Fiat CR.42 aeroplanes from the Turin factories of the '*Fabbrica Italiana Automobili Torino*' of Giovanni Agnelli. The 'CR' stood for Celestino Rosatelli, the Italian engineer who had designed the aeroplanes for Fiat. The CR.42 was based on earlier designs, on for instance the CR.32, which had been an aeroplane flown with much success in the Spanish Civil War by the Italian *Regia Aeronautica*. The machine was also called the '*Falco*', the Falcon. The Falcons had been delivered to Belgium only in March of 1940, so the Belgian pilots had scarcely received any training with the aeroplanes

and they certainly had little experience flying them. Moreover, the Falcons were strange birds indeed.

The Fiat CR.42 Falcon was a single-seat sesquiplane fighter, sesquiplane referring to its one-and-a-half wings. The aeroplane had been designed with one large wing above the fuselage and with a much shorter wing below, fixed under the cockpit and set somewhat more behind than the main wings. With the tail planes, it had therefore six wings. The machine was something of a hybrid between a full biplane, the two wings of which were usually equally large, and a monoplane. Because of its one-and-a-half wings, however, its wing loading of weight per wing surface was very low, lower than on monoplanes, and therefore it claimed and proved exceptional manoeuvrability in the air. The Falcon could roll like no other aeroplane and turn faster and better than the Spitfires and the Messerschmitts, and it flew nearly as fast as these last fighters! A Hurricane flown by an equivalent pilot could not win from the Falcon in duels. Even a Messerschmitt Bf109 could not dive faster than a Falcon, and the machine climbed rapidly too, to a thousand metres in one minute and twenty-five seconds.

It flew also fast, for it reached a top speed of four hundred thirty-eight kilometres per hour at five thousand three hundred metres and three hundred forty kilometres per hour at ground level. That was because Fiat had equipped the Falcons with a supercharged Fiat A.74R1C.38 air-cooled radial engine, which provided a particularly smooth feeling in flight. This engine drove a three-bladed constant pitch propeller of two hundred ninety centimetres diameter. The fuselage and wings of the Falcon were made of a structure of duralumin and steel in a sleek-looking profile. The radial engine was a miracle of engineering, hidden in front in a cowling housing, which sent hot air around the front part of the fuselage, adding to thrust.

The most important feature of the Fiat Falcon was its extreme agility, which came very handy in air duels. The aeroplane also had its drawbacks, though, which were only discovered in the few weeks just before and after 10 May. First, its engine dripped oil. That was not so important on short, non-strenuous missions of straight flights. On long, stressful fighter missions, however, the eight hundred forty Horsepower engine could become flooded by oil and the oil might ignite, setting the aeroplane on fire. The pilots, though they knew oil was a lot heavier than petrol and would therefore not catch fire easily, dared not to think too much about this eventuality.

The other drawback was the armament. The Falcon was equipped with only two machine-guns of twelve point seven millimetres, which proved also to be something of a hybrid device. Georges called them popguns used at Flemish fairs. The machine-guns had been designed by Breda-SAFAT, by a subsidiary of Fiat called SAFAT for '*Società Anonima-Fabbricazione Armi Torino*' and sold to the Breda company, the '*Società Italiana Ernesto Breda*' of Brescia. The guns shot steadily but more slowly than the Browning machine-guns mounted on most other aeroplanes, and they shot bullets that exploded on impact like the shells of the twenty millimetres cannon of Spitfires or Messerschmitts, but their explosive power was low. The machine-guns hung heavy in the fuselage and there was an issue with the Constantinescu design. Falcons had returned after shooting trials with holes in their propellers. The machine-guns shot not through the open spaces in the whirling propeller, but also occasionally by bad synchronisation through the propeller blades themselves! These two features meant damages and hence long maintenance in between fighter missions. Georges de Trahty also dared not think of what might happen when the Constantinescu of his machine desynchronised totally and destroyed the propeller blades during an air fight! Nevertheless, the manoeuvrability of

the Falcons could cause considerable surprise to the German fighter pilots. The Falcon was a biplane with the stamina of a monoplane!

Other drawbacks were that the Fiat had an entirely open cockpit, which meant severe cold at the heights of the thousand metres the aeroplane could reach. Its landing gear was fixed, could not be drawn in, and its cockpit was not armoured.

Georges de Trahty fell in love with the Falcons at first sight. He might admire the sleek designs of the Spitfires and of the Messerschmitts, the race-horses of the fighter scene, the Falcons had a feminine touch to them. One had to cajole the Falcons, give them affection and special attention, handle them with care. He compared the Falcons to a Renaissance Botticelli painting, pure and clean, versatile and spectacular, elegant and nervous. They also hid well what exactly they were. The Messerschmitts might confuse the Falcons for slow biplanes, impose by their speed, to be out-manoeuvred, out-rolled and even out-dived by the Italian precision machines. The Falcons could be deadly deceivers of their true nature.

Georges de Trahty had been called to his aerodrome in the early night of 10 May by a friend of his regiment, who had heard of alerts at other aerodromes, and Georges had left Trioteignes at the same time as the other pilots of the Blue Flowers. He arrived at Nivelles even before the alert was given officially at the base. The order had been transmitted late to Nivelles, at 01h00 only. Around 3 o'clock, however, a Lieutenant of Nivelles left by truck for Brustem near Sint-Truiden in the province of Limburg to prepare the campaign airfield for the White and Red Ducks. The vehicles, trucks and cars of the group left a few minutes later. The Falcons were then also readied, rolled out of the hangars and brought in readiness to leave Nivelles at the first light of dawn.

A little before 05h00, the Falcon engines were warmed up and the first aeroplanes took off, to arrive less than a quarter of an hour later at Brustem. One aeroplane landed too fast there and the machine went overhead at the end of the airstrip. Georges de Trahty climbed to the sun in his aeroplane and he arrived at the campaign airfield without incidents. He did not expect incidents, and he could hardly believe a war had started.

Three other Falcons of his squadron, however, encountered already then German Junker 52 tri-engine transport aeroplanes that were dropping doll parachutists. The Falcons attacked the Junkers and forced one of them to an emergency landing, before a squadron of Messerschmitt fighters engaged them. The Falcons could escape from this first air battle in which at least five Messerschmitt Bf109 took aim at them. The Belgian leader of the squadron riposted until his machine-guns gave up. Then he and another Falcon returned to Nivelles, believing the airfields of Brustem was being bombed, while the third Falcon continued on to Brustem, oblivious of what had happened to its two comrades.

Three Fiat Falcons needed last repairs at Nivelles, so those were late to leave the aerodrome. While the last Falcon was being prepared for take-off, the pilot was very nervous. He was still checking on his instruments, propellers turning, when he saw his technicians run to shelter behind trees and bunkers. They called to him and pointed to the sky. He looked up, and saw a number of Stuka bombers plunge down to the aerodrome. Nine German Stuka dive-bombers appeared above Nivelles and began to bomb the airport. The pilot remarked then for the first time the peculiar broken gull-wings of these bombers.

The Falcon that was being readied rolled at full speed among falling bombs over the airstrip to get into the air, bumping over holes and ditches to jump into the sky at the last moment. The pilot was gripped by panic, but he shot over the airfield and could escape the ordeal over Nivelles. He opened the throttle full and blew as much petrol in his engine as he could. He

rolled over the airstrip at increasing speed, over flags and coloured sticks that delimited the airfield, mowing bushes, and bombs exploding to the left and right of him. He succeeded nevertheless to climb into the air and while he did that he turned his machine to the left to swing into the way of a diving Stuka, over which he sprayed the bullet-shells of his machine-guns. One machine-gun stopped firing, also something that would happen more often to other Fiat fighters. The pilot had to draw on a lever to get the gun working again. He saw at least twelve Stukas take aim and dropping bombs on the hangars of Nivelles. That Fiat pilot thought he was the only one to remain in the air to defend Nivelles, but his machine was soon taken as target of the anti-aircraft guns of the ground as well as by the fire of the German bombers. The pilot decided to flee to Wevelgem, believing also Brustem had been bombed. Later, from that airfield, he was able to contact his Commander, a Major, who ordered him to come to Brustem, where all seemed calm.

On the ground, the damage done to the barracks and hangars of Nivelles was impressive. The hangars burst open when the Stukas dropped their high incendiary bombs into the buildings with precision. Only a few Fairey-Fox aeroplanes in repair remained in the hangars of the aerodrome, and also an English aeroplane that had been forced to land in 1939. These were destroyed.

When the Stukas Junker 87 bombers left Nivelles, the two aeroplanes that were engaged in an air battle with German fighters landed, but one of them rolled on to an unexploded bomb, which then did explode and damaged the aeroplane. The pilot took off a little later with yet another undamaged Fiat that was being repaired and that had survived the bombing. These two pilots brought the news of the bombing of their base to the campaign airfield, to the great consternation of the rest of the crews.

Two platoons of the Ducks, six Falcons, remained constantly in the air over Brustem in the following hours, including Georges. The Belgian pilots roamed over the aerodrome, waiting for attacks, and they did not have to wait for long. Ten to fifteen Messerschmitts appeared over Brustem to attack the airfield with their cannon and machine-guns. Georges de Trahty never understood why the group of Nivelles had to move to an aerodrome that was situated only about twenty kilometres from the Albert Canal, the prime target of the German Army on that 10 May, and to an airfield that was known to German intelligence as much as Nivelles was. The squadrons should have been sent more to the west, further inland!

Georges Trahty flew with four companion fighters above Brustem. They should have been six, but one aeroplane had to remain on the ground due to engine trouble. The pilots toured in the environs of the town of Sint-Truiden, when Georges remarked shining dots appearing in the sky, twelve to fifteen German fighter aeroplanes. When these neared quickly, he recognised German Messerschmitts Bf109, the most dangerous and fastest German monoplanes.

A frantic air battle followed, in which the German and Belgian fighters danced around each other in the vast space of the Belgian sky. The sun still stood low and red over the horizon and the aeroplanes whirled silvery in this light.

Georges deployed all his art and experience as an ace flyer to avoid the first Bf109, he almost collided with another, emptied his machine-guns in a burst, and engaged a third German fighter. That one, flown by a very fine pilot, but a pilot who obviously had not yet fought against Fiats, entered a steep dive. Georges loved it when Messerschmitts tried to out-dive Falcons. The German fighter pilots were still a little arrogant in their first duels, believing no biplane could move as fast as their machines, but this one must have been quite astonished to hear and see his opponent gain on him. Diving fast is what the Falcons did best! When Georges was almost on the Bf109, ready to shoot again, the German aeroplane drew up, and

that manoeuvre too was exactly what Georges had been waiting for. He could level faster and shorter out of a dive than a Messerschmitt! He emptied his two machine-guns on the Bf109, until thick, black smoke curled out of the German's engine. Georges then moved into a roll to the right, on to another enemy fighter. He could claim one hit on that day, the first day of the war! Other Bf109 had seen how Georges downed one of theirs, and a terrible ballet of whirling, rolling and looping aeroplanes followed, in which the Messerschmitts could not deploy their maximum speed because they wished to remain around the Falcon. Georges applied all the acrobatics he could tear out of his machine, avoiding being shot at directly. Cannon shells passed him, but several machine-gun bullets reached his wings. Nevertheless, Georges got behind another Bf109 and sprayed bullets all over that aeroplane. He saw that Bf109 at first continuing its course, then wallow like a wounded crow, stall and side-spin, finally fall in flames from the sky, leaving vertical and dark trails in the sky, in the wonderfully clear morning. Georges then climbed to four thousand metres, and two Bf109 followed him on his tails into the high cold.

There, Georges came on a formation of Dornier 17 bombers, called by then the 'flying pencils', and he saw two other Falcons fly up to those dangers for Brustem. Before the pursuing Messerschmitts could get hold of Georges, he settled behind a Dornier and put as many bullets as he could out of his slow machine-guns in the bomber. He fired without interruption about two hundred fifty bullets into the Dornier, into its flanks and rear. The bullets exploded on the fuselage and though the explosive charges were not heavy, Georges thanked the Italian manufacturer for having provided him with the strange machine-guns that spit small shells, rather than the light bullets that merely pierced but did not explode. Georges saw the Dornier turn to the side, flames erupting at the tail of the aeroplane, and he sent a last time his bullet-shells into the cockpit.

By that time, however, his machine shuddered at the impact of bullets from a Messerschmitt fighter that had reached him. His aeroplane quivered when the bullets ripped through his fuselage. Georges began a rapid roll to get out of the target of the German fighters, and he already fired at another Bf109 who flew from the left in his flank. He swerved, dived and rolled to spoil any machine-gunner's aim. Shells burst in front of him, above and below. Out of a corner of his eyes Georges then saw yet another Dornier being shot out of the sky, whirling downward to the Albert Canal. Georges dived also, remarking that the German fighters at that moment rolled left and then turned. They turned back, eastwards. They must have flown in the air for a long time already and be running out of fuel, or else they had to lick their wounds for the day. The Dornier bombers continued their journey to the southwest, the German fighters disappeared east. Georges saw his petrol and oil levels also diminish. He did not pursue the Dornier bombers. He had to land. He returned to Brustem.

Georges de Trahty landed at Brustem totally exhausted. He had practically no bullets anymore in the magazines of his machine-guns. He grinned with satisfaction to the technicians who ran to his machine. When he climbed out of the cockpit, the men stood around his aeroplane with their hands on their hips, or harking their hands through their hair. One had already opened a panel where the engine sat, and the man cursed. Georges was a little astonished to see them staring at his aeroplane like this, but then he followed their eyes and what he saw then made his face get very, very pale.

His fuselage right behind the cockpit, only centimetres from his head and back, resembled a sieve. He counted at least ten holes. His rudder had two holes in it and his smallest wing below, the rear wing, had been pierced also. Why did the Bf109 fighters not use their cannon more? Had they already emptied their cannon of shells in ground attacks?

The technician who was looking at the engine whistled, and the other men came nearer to see the damage. Oils dripped everywhere around the hot engine, and dropped deeper in the engine housing. Only one red-hot bullet thrown into this mess might have set the engine on fire! Georges began to tremble, but he saw similar crews of men running to the other landing Falcons, and then stand in awe and amazement in front of the wreckage caused by the German aeroplanes in this fierce battle over Brustem. Henceforth, Georges would be known as a kind of miracle-man, and pilots who went into the sky with him would want to touch him for luck before taking off.

Georges de Trahty left the airstrips to walk to the improvised barracks of Brustem. He let the technicians discuss how the damage to his machine could be repaired. Tools and plates would have to be fetched from the trucks. A few hours of hard work waited on the technicians. Georges did not look around. He walked to the Information Centre first.

The Major of the group telephoned the damage and the loss of two Falcons to Headquarters. The answer came back an hour later, around nine o'clock in the morning. The group was not allowed to attack any enemy formation on own initiative anymore. The pilots were only allowed flying on ordered missions of protection or observation missions. The news provoked bitterness in the hearts of the pilots. They had proven that they could handle the German fighters on their own initiative in one-to-one combats, and they could down German bombers, but from now on they had to play the role of guard-dogs to machines that could only fly at half their speed! Georges lowered his head and he sighs. He too would have to follow orders. Following the observation aeroplanes might prove to be a challenge, a hard job, for the machines they were assigned to, the Renard R.31 aeroplanes of Bierset, flew slow and very low, so that they were difficult to spot for the Falcons that were built to fly high and fast!

Georges de Trahty could sleep a little. Other pilots were assigned for the protection flights. He hurried to a barrack, took a quick shower for he felt dirty and drenched in sweat. Then, he put on his same clothes, unable and unwilling to go and find his bags in the trucks, and he stepped out of the barracks again in the fine morning. He saw a few men drawing camouflage nets over the falcons. He went over to help these. At that moment, he heard the roars of three other Falcons take off for a mission to accompany observation aeroplanes.

While Georges was helping other Lieutenants, a Captain and three Pilot-Sergeants to draw camouflage nets over the aeroplanes, five Messerschmitts sheared over the aerodrome and attacked with fire from cannon and machine-guns. The Belgian pilots and the technicians had barely the time to jump in a ditch. The Messerschmitts returned three times to swing their bullets over the Belgian fighters. So much for the secrecy of the Brustem campaign airfield! The ordeal did not end, for when the German fighters flew away, Georges heard the characteristic high whistle of the sirens of German dive-bombers. A dozen of Junker 87 Stuka bombers took their targets on Brustem, on the aeroplanes on the ground and on the hangars, but they threw their bombs first at the anti-aircraft cannon emplacements, destroyed some of them, and then returned to bomb the aeroplanes systematically. The sound of the high explosive bombs falling on the Falcons was ear-splitting. One after the other Fiat exploded in an inferno of flames, ejecting petrol and burning oil. Huge black clouds rose from Brustem, but the Stukas continued diving and bombing through the smoke. The German machines dove like Satans from the sky and destroyed. Georges bolted, he ran for his life.

Georges lies in a ditch next to this Captain and Commander. Both men held their hands to their ears, and they did not dare to watch above the ditch. Earth and metal pieces were hurled above them with destructive power. A hangar exploded in a sudden violence of bursting

windows, glass and metal panes. The aerodrome was churned into a tapestry of craters. The falling bombs gave off a shrill whine that increased in volume and heightened in tone when they homed in close to where Georges lay. Debris fell in the ditch in which he hid. All the time, however, Georges also heard the Belgian C.40 anti-aircraft guns fire. The cannon never ceased firing at the Stukas, though these continued throwing their deadly eggs down and doing their gruesome destructive work despite the shells.

When the Stukas left, an awkward silence set in, unbroken by the shrieking sirens of the dive bombers. Georges and his Captain emerged out from the ditch. They were covered with dirt. Their trousers were wet from the murky water that ran at the bottom of the ditch, and they looked disgusted, shocked and sad at the devastation caused by the bombing. They walked both towards the aeroplanes. Only ruined carcasses lay twisted and smoking on the grass. Explosions continued to be heard, now, for petrol tanks burned and went up in flames. The wind threw heavy, acrid smoke in their throats. The two men advanced and counted how many aeroplanes had been destroyed. Of the twenty-five Fiat Falcons that had found refuge at Brustem, only eight machines remained relatively undamaged and probably in flying order! Sixteen or seventeen Falcons stood or rather lay in flames and smokes like strange animals constructed of distorted metal.

The fighter group of Fiat CR.42 aeroplanes of Nivelles had in one day, in the first day of the war, been reduced to one third of its aeroplanes! The catastrophe was complete. 'The war will not have lasted a long time for the two squadrons!' Georges dared to think loud. His Captain only nodded and Georges saw the man almost wept at the devastation caused by this one, major German raid. Georges wandered about, but there was not much he could do here. He had to let the ground personnel now try to save what they can. The technicians shoved him aside. He walked to the barracks, found an unoccupied room and he threw himself on a bed. He slept almost immediately.

Georges de Trahty found some sleep that afternoon of 10 May. He slept in his flying-kit. He fell into a heavy but disturbed sleep, from which he only awoke around seven o'clock in the evening. His thoughts wandered to Trioteignes and to Violaine Vresele ter Hoven.

Georges had met Violaine at a gala dinner in Brussels, where he and his family sat at the same, round table as the Trioteignes and the Vreseles. He had been placed next to Violaine Vresele, and that must have been arranged so by their respective fathers, of course. Georges had to acknowledge that Violaine was a stunningly beautiful girl, with a striking, somewhat angular face crowned by thick, auburn hair and she also had warm, extraordinarily green eyes. Had her hair been a little more the shade of red, he would have taken her for an Irish beauty or for a Danish Viking's daughter. She sat straight on her chair when he arrived, slim and lean, but full in forms of breasts and hips. She smiled at him with a surprise on her lips, for he was tall and very blond of hair and as haughtily handsome as a German aristocrat, probably the handsomest young man of the evening, a man who had all the looks to seduce her. Yet, her eyes and lips set in a small, mocking grin. Georges had refrained from immediately starting a conversation with her. He never liked when his family imposed girls on him, not even such fine creatures as Violaine, who more often than not were pretty but lacked a mind of their own. Georges and Violaine had listened to what their fathers and mothers said, not particularly interested in the high society gossip of Brussels, and Violaine must have considered him as one of the fads of the capital until Bastien de Trioteignes came over.

Bastien sat at another table and he came to greet Georges. Bastien spoke of aeroplanes, of bombers, of engines and of the capacities of the observation machines in the *Aéronautique*. Bastien was in uniform that evening, Georges not.

The conversation did catch Violaine's attention. After Bastien had returned, she asked whether he was a pilot too, and Georges had answered yes to that question, not a word more. She had looked at him with softer eyes, then, and Georges had to explain he flew in the *Aéronautique* on Fairey-Fireflies from out of the base at Nivelles. He had studied for two years engineering at the University of Leuven, which meant he had mainly followed courses of mathematics and physics, but he had to confess to her he had been weak and abandoned his studies to sign a contract with the *Aéronautique*. He had studied very easily, maybe so easily he had been bored, but he wanted to remain for a few more years in the Air Force, return to the University, finish his studies in engineering, and either go back to the Army or get a job in the industry. Once she started, Violaine had the knack to draw out his nose everything she wanted to hear. No, he had no particular interest in finance. He felt like his friend, Bastien, in that. They both let finance and administration to Jean-André Trioteignes.

'My brother and cousin are engineers,' Violaine told him then, 'they are tinkering with aeroplanes. They saw my ears off with talk of wings and fuselage and rudders and machine-guns each time I see them. You should meet them. They are no pilots yet, but they take courses right now. They would like to set up an aircraft business on their own. You might help! You have the experience they lack entirely.'

That caught Georges's attention indeed, and also to a girl he had thought dull and effaced a moment ago. She spoke in a warm, somewhat husky voice, pronounced her words distinctly and finely, and phrased her French well. He understood her mother tongue was Flemish. He asked whether she too had studied, and she gave him another mocking smile, which looked a little flirting this time, probably thinking the same of him until a few minutes ago, that he was a boring high-class stupid boy who only flaunted his good looks around. Yes, she had studied. She was finishing her years at the University of Ghent. She wanted to become a Doctor-at-Law. She was in her one before the last year. That startled Georges's interest, for at twenty-one she must have been something of a genius girl and have skipped one or two years of school in her past years.

'I did skip one year,' she admitted rather proudly.

A little later, he asked to dance with her, and she accepted. They continued talking while dancing. She was not a good dancer, and Georges also did not dance well, so after the third dance Violaine said she had enough of whirling on the dance floor, but when he wanted to bring her back to the table, she had refused.

'No, not to the table,' she replied. 'Can we go elsewhere?'

Georges had looked around, noticed the garden through the open doors, and he asked, pointing his eyes, 'that way?'

It was a nice, warm summer evening. They had stood outside, and they walked a little on into the garden. Several couples walked there. Georges lighted a cigarette and only then asked, a little embarrassed, whether she smoked, and she said yes, and took one of this cigarettes. Violaine remained silent at first, but then they got on talking again. Georges found her extremely intelligent, a woman with a very cool, pragmatic mind, a good logician, and imposing in her opinions. She was not afraid to offer him how she thought of religion and politics. She seemed to hate Fascism, could not bring up much sympathy for Franco in Spain and Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany, held solid religious beliefs for a better world,

and she talked very freely about the Belgian politicians she liked or despised. She hesitated of choosing between a career at the Courts of Justice, becoming a lawyer, or embarking on a career in her father's business because her brother had no inkling for management and administration and accountancy. She might go into politics, but she thought she could combine that with a major career. She did not mention anything about a husband, children or a family. In fact, she was talking much like a man, Georges thought. She certainly had a mind of her own, but she did not brag with that. What she said she said calmly, almost speaking to herself, and smiling a little mockingly as if what she was saying was not to be taken too seriously.

Georges's friends had warned him often to stay away from too smart, domineering girls, but Violaine really was an impressive woman, not a brainless girl at all, very mature and pragmatic for her age, and he had never liked less intelligent girls. He wanted a woman who was at least as much an erudite as he was, for although he had ended his studies he had read much and eagerly. He had not met many, in fact only very few women with such strong characters, and such women as he had met had then been much older than he. He had lived a few adventures with such women, dangerous adventures. He sought something else.

When they left the garden and returned to the table, all eyes were upon them, for they had stayed outdoors much too long than could be deemed harmless, and Georges held one hand at Violaine's back, as if to support her, to which she did not object.

After the dinner, he had asked her whether he could phone her and see her again. She had answered with a non-committing, 'why not?'

She had replied that without much open enthusiasm, and he had been a little disappointed. Had he made so little impression on her? He thought he understood her, though. He was but an obscure ignoramus from the forests of Wallony, and from the despicable circles of the arrogant capital, whereas she moved in the circles of the most interesting and most intelligent and wealthy young Flemish entrepreneurs of the parts of the country that were booming with action and wealth. He was merely a pilot! He reckoned Violaine was a calculating girl. A peasant fighter boy was not really in her chords. She desired to hold her distance.

Georges did therefore not phone her back in the days after the dinner. He had also been very busy at his aerodrome. When he returned after a few weeks to the Trahty family mansion in Brussels, however, his father told him one Violaine had called and left a message. She wanted him to phone her. Georges was astonished, but he phoned her a few days later. She came to the telephone, panting, and said she was sorry, for she had been out of the house and studying with a friend. She had to pass examinations and could not meet him for about a month.

Georges then had a sudden, brilliant idea, and he had invited her to a week of rest at Trioteignes after her examinations. He too had been invited there by his friend Bastien. She accepted that invitation, and a month later he drove to Ghent to fetch her in his car. He had driven her to Trioteignes. She wore a silk, light, multi-coloured dress, and she looked like a peach, very different from how she had held at their first dinner. He saw her more girlish and fresh, now.

Violaine caused quite a stir at Trioteignes Castle! Georges smiled when he remembered how he had led Violaine into the parlour the first evening. He had only mentioned he would bring a girlfriend, not who. His father Léon-Alexandre recognised her immediately, however, and he almost dropped his glass of wine. Charles Trioteignes' mouth went into a wide letter 'O' when Georges mentioned her full name. Violaine later told him she almost puffed when she had remarked the effect she had made that evening. The ter Hovens were a very wealthy family indeed, a multiple times wealthier than the Trahties and the Trioteignes together. It

was not her money that impressed Georges, however, but Violaine's beauty, charm and character.

The following days at Trioteignes had been wonderful. Violaine had found a real family, not one in which everybody was merely polite to one another and then went one's own ways, but a family that was a warm nest. In a few days, Violaine had been crushed to the bosoms of the Trioteignes and the Trahty families! Georges and Violaine had walked and talked and met in the sunshine of a wonderful period of warm, dry weather. She rested splendidly at Trioteignes, she assured him.

After that short vacation, they had met often in the following months, in Brussels, in Ghent, in other cities they could drive to when Georges could get a few days off from Nivelles. They had walked holding hands and they had kissed for the first time in a street of Bruges, walking along the water of the romantic *Minnewater*. The kiss had been given passionately, yet something was amiss, thought Georges.

It had all been so easy, so quietly natural, and so arranged and predictable! Where was the daring, adventurous lack of reason and magic in their relationship? Where was the romance, the gipsy-like loss of control? When had he heard the violin strings, heard the bells of heaven pealing, and seen the fireworks? Georges had always thought of love as something irresistible, a terrible longing that would grip two souls, an attraction with the fierceness of Catherine and Heathcliff, the devouring, tearing pain of eternal feelings of belonging. He had wanted love to be like a double looping followed by a long roll in a fast aeroplane, during which the entire world spun around, and nothing like that had happened between him and Violaine. Were his soft, warm but still reasoned affections true love? Was it enough to enjoy the other's company, to discover one had the same views and opinions in life? Maybe they were enough for marriage among noblemen and noblewomen in families of the best names, but was that love? Was Violaine not engaged to him merely because she thought he would be a fine father for her children, a man of good genetic stock, a good companion, an acceptable husband in her society, and a man inferior to her own qualities of the mind so that she could and would arrange the affairs in their marriage according to her own views only? In the two years they had been together, and also since their official betrothal, they had not once made love. He had not found that animal longing he had felt for a few other women. Georges was very much confused in his feelings for Violaine, and he wished more passion in her. He would have wanted to crush her to his breast and feel her naked skin when they kissed, but for one reason or other he never came to override the respect he felt for Violaine. She also had not encouraged, invited him to more than a furtive kiss, and Georges had too much respect for her to press her on. Later, when they both stayed at Trioteignes, Violaine had sneaked into his room, and they had passed nights together, but they had remained very chaste and done nothing more than sleep in each other's arms.

The last weeks before this day, he had watched the warmth and ease with which Violaine spoke to Carter Ash. He had even thought for a few days he was losing Violaine. Georges knew, of course, that Violaine and Carter had to talk and negotiate, sometime for long periods, for Violaine arranged the matters of her family, of her brother and cousin, with Carter, but he felt oddly excluded from those conversations in which he took no part because he did not want to impose on Violaine, but he felt jealousy because of the calm conspiracy that seemed to work between Violaine and Carter. Why were you jealous, he asked himself, then. Was that merely hurt masculine pride you felt or indeed the pangs of jealousy? Georges could not decide with his mind which of the two was true, and also not with his heart. Was Violaine his true, unique love? What should he do about his doubts?

Georges's thoughts wandered back to the aerodrome, for he heard a number of pilots wander into the barracks. He should get up. Why had he so insolently been sleeping while others worked and guarded? He would be sleeping a lot more in this war, for only eight aeroplanes were left for thirty-odd pilots. His own aeroplane had been destroyed. He had now less claims to a flight, to a mission, than the pilots whose machines had been saved. Georges wondered also what was left of the Belgian *Aéronautique* after the first day of this war. Had other campaign airfields been bombed too? The German aeroplanes had been five to ten times more numerous in the air than the Belgian machines, and how many more enemy aeroplanes roamed constantly in the skies? The Germans used the *Luftwaffe*, as well their fighters as their bombers, as autonomous acting attack weapons. The Belgian Air Force merely defended and observed. Without the Falcons, almost no fighters remained in the Belgian Air Force, only a few observation aeroplanes could still fly. The *Aéronautique* had been reduced to assistance of the ground troops for reconnaissance. What kind of an Air Force was that? Was the war already over for the Air Force after one half day? How ephemeral was all this? Was his life so ephemeral too, and his affections for Violaine even less important? He might as well marry her, then. Georges felt depressed, but he stood up from the bed and left the room. He would have to recuperate his bags, too.

Georges spent the night at the Information Centre of Brustem. In the evening, more German aeroplanes had been spotted over the airfield, so the Commanders of the decimated squadrons believed they might expect new bombings at dawn of 11 May. The Commanders phoned and asked to move to another airfield. That should be Grimbergen.

Even before dawn, the roar of heavy engines was once again heard above Brustem, and the pilots who had not been sleeping rushed to the aeroplanes, also Georges. He was astonished to be given one of the few remaining machines, but grateful and glad. The adrenaline of the expectation of an air battle blew away his depressive mood. He wished to fight, now. He was running and alert to action! He jumped into a cockpit, turned on the engine and propeller, waited only a few moments and he forced his metal monster into the air. The aeroplane to his right rolled on the airfield at the same time as he, but Georges saw a large piece of camouflage net still stuck to the other pilot's rudder and tail planes. That man rolled to his death, but Georges understood well the anxiety of that pilot. Georges tried desperately to make gestures, to point at the rear of the Falcon, but the other pilot stared intensely forward in the fascination of the take-off. Luckily, a burst of wind tore the cloth away from the aeroplane.

Three Fiat Falcons climbed in the night, into the first dim light that appeared over the horizon, flying toward a squadron of Heinkel bombers. Six German bombers approached Brustem, but the Falcons intercepted them before they reached the aerodrome, and attacked them. The Heinkels could fire from the front and the rear, and they were fast machines though not so fast as the Fiats. The air battle should turn out to the advantage of the more agile fighters. The Falcons whirled around their enemies, and they shot and hit. A second platoon of Fiats took off from Brustem. The entire group of remaining Ducks was then in the air, trying to take revenge on the German bombers. Georges emptied his machine-guns on the large bomber aeroplanes, and he saw a Heinkel turn and fall, trailing smoke in the far. The bombers would not reach Brustem this time! The Fiats barred their way with bullets. The Heinkels finally dropped their bombs near or over the town of Sint-Truiden, and then they turned away, using the advantage of the raw speed of their two engines to flee.

The Falcons landed at Brustem, to hear they must take in fuel rapidly and fly on immediately to Grimbergen. Georges remained sitting in his cockpit, and half an hour later he landed at Grimbergen. He remained for a while looking at his aeroplane there, and he helped the technicians who travelled earlier to Grimbergen to dry the engine from spilled oil.

Two hours later the order was delivered to fly on to the campaign airfield of Nieuwkerke-Waas, near the town of Sint-Niklaas-Waas, deep in Flanders. Georges also flew the aeroplane to that airbase without issues, and without meeting German fighters or bombers. He supposed the German *Luftwaffe* had remained mostly above the regions closest to the Albert Canal and the Meuse River. He landed in the late afternoon of 11 May, around 18h00.

At Nieuwkerke, he saw French observation aeroplanes of the GAO 502, Potez 63 machines, well camouflaged. A strong section of C.40 anti-aircraft guns defended the airfield. In the morning of 12 May, however, the battery of C.40 anti-aircraft guns received the order to move to Antwerp to assist in the defence of Hoboken. Without anti-aircraft protection, everybody hoped the airfield would receive no unwanted visits from German bombers. Much camouflage had been foreseen, more and better than at Brustem, and that reassured the pilots and the ground personnel a little..

Georges Trahty rested for the remainder of the day. Other pilots would use the Fiat Falcon he brought to Nieuwkerke. The next two days, on 12 and 13 May, Georges remained grounded. Few mission were ordered, and other pilots flew. Georges talked to the French aviators and with the Cognac they have brought his mood changed for the better. He thought of telephoning to Violaine, but for that he would have to leave the airfield, for he could not monopolise the unique telephone of the Information Centre. Why did he feel the need to phone to Violaine? Was she his true love despite his doubts? He did not phone her then, she would have to wait. Would she indeed be waiting? Hid did remember with joy and pride how beautiful she was. To some men, the woman they loved was the only conquest they would make in their life, and that was also how Georges felt on that day. But would Violaine let herself be conquered in the long term?

Georges spent his time walking around with his colleagues and friends, pilots and technicians. He walked, but he did not say much, and also his co-pilots did not talk much. Their mood was even more bitter and depressive than his. The bulk of their aeroplanes had been destroyed, their war seemed lost so soon. Georges did not dare to say loud what he thought, that the sooner this war was over the better. That made him reflect on why he had become a military pilot. The Belgian *Aéronautique* should have had more aeroplanes, much more aeroplanes, and better and faster machines. Nevertheless, the pilots knew, and they had proven in the air battles, that they were at least as good pilots and fighters as the Germans. Georges also thought about his friends, the Blue Flowers of Trioteignes. He had no news of Bastien and Jan, of Max and Thomas and Richard. A French pilot heard of heavy air battles over the Albert Canal and of the bombing of bridges by the Belgian Air Force, but he did not know anything about losses.

The weather on 12 and 13 May was foul, it was heavily clouded and misty, rain drizzling. The weather was so foul that even the *Luftwaffe* pilots seemed depressed. The German aviators must have hated this kind of weather as much as the Belgians who had to fly in open cockpits, for German activity over the airfields remained low. Several missions of protection took place out of Nieuwkerke on 13 May, but no air-battles happened. A shell exploded in the middle of a formation of three Falcons, luckily without causing damage. The first danger still remained the anti-aircraft guns on the ground, were they friend or enemy, and the weaknesses of the

engines of the Falcons were now well known. Only six or seven aeroplanes seemed ready to take into the air on dawn of 14 May.

On 13 May, the Commanding Major received the order to use eleven Fairey-Firefly IIM aeroplanes for their missions of deterring attacks on aerodromes and on the roads in the sectors of Ghent, Dendermonde, Willebroek, Sint-Niklaas and Zelzate. The Major protested. The Fireflies were ten years old, obsolete biplanes that flew no faster than two hundred kilometres per hour, at half the speed of Messerschmitt fighters and even of the large German bombers. The aeroplanes were also designed by Marcel Lobelle in the beginning of the 1930s, assembled partly in Great Britain at Hayes and partly at the Fairey Belgian subsidiary. They were equipped with Rolls-Royce Kestrel piston engines of a mere four hundred and eighty Horsepower. The 'M' stood proudly for metal, because earlier version had a wooden structure, but the pilots now used another, a French word for that letter. The order stayed, however. Georges Trahty was one of the pilots who accompanied the Captain of his squadron to fetch five Fireflies at the airfield of Zwevezele. They rode in a truck, received the aeroplanes, took off and landed at Nieuwkerke around 14h00. The pilots gathered and looked with bitterness and hatred at the derelict biplanes. To search for and fight duels in the air with these old biplanes was about the same as committing suicide! Four more Fireflies that had to come from Nivelles were damaged and could not be used, but the crews at that base succeeded in repairing one more Fiat Falcon.

On 14 May, the group of Fiat fighters received the order to protect the embarkation of an important contingent of French troops on trains in the railway station of Fleurus near Charleroi. The last six Fiat Falcons that remained in good flying order executed this mission. Georges Trahty was allowed once more to fly a Fiat CR.42.

The six Falcons climbed into the air. The sixth CR.42 had to remain a while on the ground, for the engine sputtered, but the machine could take off a little later. The two platoons left Nieuwkerke around noon. They climbed to about three thousand metres above Fleurus. The weather was nice, white clouds float in a sea of blue at two thousand metres. On the way, the two platoons met a lone German bomber. One of the Falcons emptied a round of ammunition at that machine, hitting the bomber severely, but the German aeroplane continued its course and the Belgian Fiat took his place again in the Belgian formation.

All seemed clear above Fleurus, no German aeroplanes were in the sky. The danger came not from the enemy! The anti-aircraft guns of the allied troops, of friends, proved very active, shooting at everything that flies, also at the Belgian CR.42. The Falcons climbed back to four thousand metres. One Falcon had to turn back because of engine trouble, probably hit previously by bullets, but from where was that machine shot at?

Suddenly, Georges and the other Belgian pilots saw a squadron of German Messerschmitt fighters fall on them from at about five hundred metres in front of the Belgian formation. The Germans had placed their machines in the sun, so that the Belgians, blinded by the very white light of the early afternoon, had not seen them coming. The Germans fired already from that distance with their cannon. They hit no Falcon with their shells, however, and a fierce air battle with machine-guns ensued. Georges sent his fighter into one howling somersault after the other. The earth and sky whirled around him, the landscape turned into a kaleidoscope of colours in which he could distinguish no feature correctly until he straightened his aeroplane and swerved to the right.

Georges entered a short roll and turned. The Germans still followed him, but they had to turn wider because they flew at higher speeds. Georges saw projectiles sizzle twenty metres to the

side of his machine. Tracers whirled past his cockpit. He smiled, and even more when he saw how clumsily one of the German pilots turned. Georges turned right once more, and the German followed him. Georges turned as wide as the German to lull the pilot into thinking he could not do better, and then he turned left but so short that he arrived just behind the Messerschmitt and was able to empty a round of his machine-guns on the enemy. Tracer bullets streaked through the air to form a rare fireworks for the spectators below. The German aeroplane rolled away, but Georges continued to fly on him, through a melee of other Fiats and Messerschmitts that opened fire at each other. When the German fighter before him entered the group, the German trailed a long line of dark smoke behind him, and his machine began to roll and to sink.

Georges did not pursue this aeroplane further. He fired at other Messerschmitts. One other German fighter fired at him too, so Georges heard and saw bullets pass around him. He turned again, thought of nothing, certainly not of the danger of being hit, and he repeated the manoeuvre that brought him a victory a few moments ago. He succeeded in shooting and probably at hitting the German aeroplane, but his machine-guns refused to work, although He should still have more than three hundred bullets remaining. He shot again, nothing happened! He reloaded the gun manually and shot. A couple of bullets passed the Messerschmitt, then nothing. He reloaded again, shot, two bullets were released, nothing more. The air battle was over for Georges Trahty then! A fighter could do nothing in the air with blocked machine-guns. He pushed the stick of his aeroplane forward, pulling his machine into a steep sideslip, escaping from the air battle.

He disengaged from the German Messerschmitt, performed a couple of dazzling rolls and dives, hid in a cloud, and he left the battle over Fleurus. Georges directed his aeroplane westward. He was alone in the sky. He climbed high. He saw he was near Brussels. Georges dived again until he was at four hundred metres high only, to be welcomed by Belgian anti-aircraft gunfire. He dived to lower still, to one hundred metres to show his colours, but the guns continued to shoot shells at him. He climbed higher again.

After Brussels, Georges felt something was amiss with his steering. His aeroplane did not answer his stick as it should. Nevertheless, he continued on his flight to Nieuwkerke and he landed. When he jumped out of his cockpit, he saw that bullets had passed through his main right wing, destroyed a part of the wing, making his steering heavier. His technicians found a little later that two couplings of compressed air had been torn away from his machine-guns by enemy bullets. He stood then next to a comrade-pilot who had the same issue the first time he shot at the German fighters. The other Falcons landed a little later, all damaged by bullets. The pilots greeted each other heartily, they slapped at each other's backs, but one Falcon did not come back and someone remembered having seen a machine fall out of the air in flames. The smiles of the pilots sagged. Two Messerschmitts had been downed that day. It seemed the Belgian missing Belgian Fiat did not crash after all, but had to land near Nivelles with a pierced petrol tank. The pilot could save himself.

The same day of 14 May, six more Fireflies were sent to the group of Belgian fighters. Despite continuous protests of their Major, orders were dispatched to fly missions with these old machines. The pilots wondered what Headquarters had in mind, and they began to think nobody at the *État-Major* seemed to know anything of air battles and of the kind of aeroplanes the German *Luftwaffe* was throwing at them. The pilots could not fight with these aeroplanes! When they saw Messerschmitts, they would have to flee if they did not want to commit suicide. As to protect the observation planes, why, those machines could fly almost faster than the Fireflies!

On 15 May, the group of the Ducks fulfilled two missions, one with Fireflies and one with Fiats. Four Falcons could take off in the afternoon for the second mission, but one CR.42 had to leave its formation due to engine problems, the eternal issue of oil leaking out of the engine block. The rest of the formation was attacked by about ten Messerschmitts, seemed to have shot one Bf109 out of the air, and they returned when the at least nine Bf109 overwhelmed them.

In the evening of that day, the Lieutenant-General of the Air Force visited the airfield of Nieuwkerke, and he saw with own eyes the Ducks could not reasonably fulfil anymore missions with degraded machines. The remaining Fiat CR.42 aeroplanes lost much oil, especially during air duels, and their propellers all had holes in them due to the bad synchronisation between the engines and the machine-guns. The propeller-blades could be replaced, but these repairs would not last. He ordered therefore the group to move to France. The Ducks on Falcons had to travel to an airfield of the south of France. The next day, the pilots took off from Nieuwkerke, leaving the fifth group of the First Regiment of Bierset, who had arrived there the same day, to their fate. These pilots flew with the Renard R.31 observation aeroplanes. The Belgian fighters had played a role in the battle of the air for only six days.

The Commanding Major of the fighter group ordered the trucks and cars to leave in the night of 15 to 16 of May. Fourteen pilots would fly in the remaining aeroplanes, of which still there were six Fiat Falcons and eight Fireflies. Georges Trahty flew in one of these Falcons and around 19h30 in the evening he landed at the airfield of Norrent-Fontes in the north of France. He could rest there the next day, and on 17 May in the evening he heard that the group would be split up. The Firefly pilots would leave for Caen, the Falcons had to fly to Montpellier in the south. In the morning of 18 May, the Falcons flew to the airfield of Chartres. From there they were sent to Tours, and then back to Chartres, where their trucks also arrived around noon of that day.

The Commander of the airbase of Chartres asked the pilots to help him in the defence of the aerodrome, and twelve pilots, among which Georges, remained at Chartres with six Falcons. In the following days, they executed missions above Chartres, but already on that 18 May in the afternoon, three Dornier 17 German bombers passed through the defences and bombed the airfield. One Falcon was destroyed in that bombing on the ground.

On 28 May, the pilots heard of the surrender of Belgium, but they remained in France. The airfield of Chartres was largely left alone by the German fighters and bombers the following days, until 3 June.

Georges could drive to Chartres with three friends at the very end of May. He went to the post office of Chartres and tried to telephone to Belgium. He succeeded in getting a connection to Trioteignes, and he could talk to Charles. He recognised the emotion in Charles's voice, and he heard Charles call for Léon-Alexandre. Georges told his father he was doing well, he was at Chartres airfield, which had remained relatively quiet, and he asked to talk to Violaine. Violaine was with her parents in Ghent, but his father gave him a phone number. Georges heard about what had happened to Bastien and to Jan Sinnagel, but when he was about to get Charles back on the phone, he was cut off. Georges did not try again the same connection. He phoned to Ghent. He got Violaine's mother on the phone, and he heard her cry for Violaine, then she asked him how he was and where he was, with much emotion, which surprised him. He had not thought the Vreseles to care much about him. He had already told much of how he had gotten to Chartres, and assured Violaine's mother he had not been wounded, when Violaine came on the phone. She wept when he heard her.

‘Georges, darling, where are you? Are you all right? When will you come back? I miss you so!’

Violaine sounded hysteric from worries about him, and that too astonished him. He had expected to hear a cold fish on the telephone. Instead of that, Violaine too sounded only warmth and the care sounded in her voice. More, he heard despair.

‘I am fine,’ Georges began. ‘We have a grand time here, at Chartres in France. We lost most of our aeroplanes during bombings in Belgium, so we are five pilots for one machine, and I am all right. I flew a lot, but I am not hurt. We have fine aeroplanes too. How have you been?’

‘We are all right,’ Violaine cried. ‘Our King has surrendered, you must know that. German soldiers occupy Ghent. I am so glad you are not hurt. I missed you so much, a lot more than I thought possible. I love you! Please keep care and come back. There is only you for me. I want you back!’

The rest was lost in tears and sobs, and Violaine’s mother came back on the phone. She said the war was ended for Belgium, the Vresele family was fine, though her son was a prisoner and would probably be sent to Germany. She too asked Georges to take care and to return quickly. She urged him not to trust the German soldiers, unlike her son had done. She told Georges not to give himself up as a prisoner to the Germans. She would hide Georges in Ghent. She gave him an address to remember. That too astonished Georges. She assured Georges she would send Violaine to the country, back to Trioteignes at the tiniest alert of danger in Ghent. Violaine’s mother cried all that hurriedly, almost hysterically. Then, before Georges could say anything or thank her, the connection broke.

Georges’s doubts about Violaine vanished. She had not responded like a cold, rational girl, a few moments ago. She had shouted like a woman in pain and a woman in love. His confusion and scepticism of the previous days fell from him. A love like that should be answered! He remained at the dead phone, he stood in a small cabin of the post office, and his mood of the last weeks had turned completely to something he could only describe as a heavenly euphoria. Yes, Violaine loved him. He had found their feelings were simple, but they were nevertheless real and deep. More than ever he had a duty now to get back to Belgium.

A formation of twelve Dornier 215 bombers approached the airfield of Chartres on 3 June. Four Fiat CR.42 could climb in the air, one flown by Georges. The Belgian fighters attacked the bombers, and at least one German aeroplane had to leave the formation, trailing smoke, but the other bombers did reach Chartres airfield and they could drop their bombs on the aerodrome. In this minor air battle, again two Falcons had to disengage much earlier than their pilots would have liked, because of blocked machine-guns.

The German *Wehrmacht* almost reached Chartres on 11 June. The Belgian Fiats were then ordered to fly to the airfield of Bordeaux-Mérignac. The five remaining Fiats flew to there, whereas Georges and another pilot received each a French Mureaux aeroplane to bring those to Cognac. From there they joined their comrades at Bordeaux. At Mérignac, they tried to bring a few French aeroplanes in the air, without much success.

The French Marshal Philippe Pétain asked for an armistice with the German Army on 17 June, and from that day on the Fiat Falcons did not fly anymore missions. They moved also to Montpellier in the afternoon of 19 June. The weather on that day was very bad, so the CR.42 landed first at Toulouse. From there, they flew on to the airfield of Maugio near Montpellier. France capitulated on 22 June, but the armistice began officially only on 25 June. The Belgian pilots passed the time as pleasantly as they could, though their morale was not high. They swam in the Mediterranean and played at *pétanque* with the local folk. Georges tried several times to reach Belgium by telephone, but he did not succeed in that.

On 6 August, the Belgian pilots contacted the German authorities of Bordeaux. Orders were to return to Belgium in their trucks and cars. Two of their pilots had disappeared, saying they wanted to reach Great Britain. These were considered deserters, then. Georges desired to hold Violaine in his arms. He returned with the others to Belgium. The fighter pilots drove the long way back north to Diest in Belgium, where they were to be demobilised on 20 August. There was some confusion in Belgium about what should happen with the Belgian officers. The Reserve-Officers were released and demobilised by the German authorities. Officers of the professional army were sent to be imprisoned in camps for officers in Germany. Georges Trahty weighed the risk. With another officer who had family in Leuven, he jumped off the truck and disappeared. They received civilian clothes in the first bar they dared to enter. The other Pilot-Officers continued their journey, but the Group Captain closed his eyes. Two officers were being marked in his diary as having been missing in France since early August. Georges de Trahty set out on foot for Trioteignes.

Renard Observation Aeroplanes

In the night of 9 to 10 May, Thomas Drandin and Richard Bousanges rode in silence to Bierset by the road from Namur to Liège. They both believed this alert to be the real thing, but they had no idea what to expect. Richard thought the German troops would make slow progress through the province of Luxembourg, to be halted at the Meuse. The Belgian troops might be able only to throw twenty divisions in the balance and the Germans a hundred, but the allied French and British forces would enter Belgium and help staving off the aggressors. The German troops and the Allies would fight for many weeks around the Meuse and the forts of Liège, such as at the bunkers of Eben-Emael, which were invincible. The defences now were much better organised than in 1914. Richard supposed the Belgian, French and British divisions would amass at the Meuse, to a new war in the trenches around the stream he liked so much.

Observation aeroplanes would play an important role in the war to direct artillery, to follow movements of the troops behind the lines of the war front, and maybe to attack war Zeppelins. Richard had heard a little about the fast fighter aeroplanes the Germans had constructed, but the Belgian observation aeroplanes would be protected by the newly arrived Fiat CR.42 fighters for Belgium, and surely also by the newer British and French fighters. The French word for fighter was 'la chasse', for hunters, and Richard hoped indeed the Allies would hunt the German aeroplanes to back over the frontier with Germany.

One thing was certain: he fought on the right side of the belligerents, on the side of justice and of good. The Allies had not attacked, Germany had attacked, the German Army was the aggressor. Belgium had only wanted to live in peace with its neighbours, to laugh, to drink a fine glass of beer, to eat well, and to make jokes. If Belgium was indeed attacked, Richard would fight for a good cause. He would have no trouble with his conscience.

Richard and Tomas arrived at the airfield of Bierset around 01h00. Trucks and aeroplanes were being prepared to leave for the campaign airfield of the group, the airfield of Hannut. In fact, only two groups, only two squadrons of the *Aéronautique* were still equipped with Renard R.31 observation aeroplanes based at Bierset, and these were called the 'Blue Sioux' and the 'Red Sioux'.

The Blue Sioux flew in eleven Renards and in one biplane Stampe-Vertongen SV5 built in Belgium. The SV5 was more of a liaison aeroplane than of an observation machine.

The Red Sioux flew in ten Renards, and they also flew occasionally in two SV5 and one Morane 236, a French-built small aeroplane. The SV5 and the Morane would not really be used as observation aeroplanes. They came in handy to bring the Group Captain to other airbases or to Headquarters, and to move urgent and valuable spare parts quickly.

Rumours went among the pilots that the Renards were only exercise aeroplanes, to be used until the war broke out. After the first day, the *Aéronautique* would distribute more modern aeroplanes to its pilots. Newer aeroplanes would, however, never be given to the pilots and observers of Bierset! The Renards were flown to the very end of the war in Belgium.

For the Red Sioux, to which Richard and Thomas belonged, three Renard R.31 and the Morane were in repair on 10 May and would have to be abandoned for a few days at Bierset. A small team of technicians would remain at Bierset for these repairs. The orders to leave for Hannut-Thisnes arrived indeed at 0h40 in the early night, and the Captain held a meeting in the Information Office at 03h45. Half an hour later, the first trucks rolled out of the airfield and the aeroplanes were being readied in position to take off immediately. One waited for the first light of dawn.

The pilots knew the airfield of Hannut-Thisnes well, especially from the few weeks they had remained there in January, and despite the snow of those days, they remembered Hannut as an even better airfield than Bierset. They also liked the people of Hannut, the bars and the hospitality of the inhabitants. Richard and Thomas flew an aeroplane each and they took an observer with them. In the squadron served about twenty pilots, and a dozen ground personnel, who now rode in the trucks with a few pilots who had not been able to catch a seat in an aeroplane. All pilots desired to fly, of course. The Group Captain took off first, and then one by one the R.31 roared their engines and followed into the light of the sky. They turned south and west.

Thomas Drandin was the last to roll at ever faster speed to take off Bierset. The R.31 were old aeroplanes, dating from 1931. They were not constructed anymore since 1938, and a joke at Bierset said that the squadrons of Bierset always got the machines nobody else in the *Aéronautique* wanted to fly with. The Renard R.31 had been modern, even revolutionary aeroplanes once, now they were old and slow. Nevertheless, they served well during the first days of the war.

The Renards were not easy machines to fly. They were hard to manoeuvre and they needed a long field to take off and to land upon. When Thomas climbed into the air, he felt the nice, smooth, familiar sensation of an elegant aeroplane being supported by the air.

While he climbed and turned southwest slowly, he saw a liaison aeroplane of Headquarters come in to Bierset, a Topsy. The pilot seemed not to have noticed the 'T' on the ground indicating the wind direction. The small aeroplane tried to land with the wind in its back. 'That is a high bonnet who has not flown since a long time,' Thomas thought, 'he has forgotten he must land into the wind.'

The pilot realised his mistake too late, he tried to turn, but the wind caught his aeroplane and threw it to the ground. Later, Thomas would hear that the pilot escaped unhurt, but that his machine was destroyed.

At that moment also, Thomas remarked about ten Heinkel 111 bombers homing in on Bierset. The bombers dropped only five dozen parachutists. Did the German troops attack liege with parachutists already? Thomas turned his aeroplane back over Bierset, very low, only a few tens of metres high, and he saw the parachutists deviate harmlessly away from Bierset,

direction Liège. The parachutists seemed oddly passive, hanging straight on their large white mushrooms. Thomas grinned then, for he and his observer saw clearly the parachutists were merely large dolls. The Heinkel bombers turned east, but Thomas realised then with a shock that yes, the war had indeed started, the real war, the shooting war. What that war would amount to, he could not imagine. He would know soon enough, he thought.

The aeroplanes of Bierset landed at Hannut around 05h30. The men camouflaged their aeroplanes in a hurry, rolled them into the holes foreseen to protect them, and they checked already on how the machines had passed the little trip to Hannut. The trucks of Bierset arrived around 08h30, so the pilots could take their bags and they conquered a bed in the primitive barracks. They hoped to find a better bed and a warmer room in one of the houses of Hannut, soon. Everybody had forgotten something of course, glasses, gloves, a pullover, a spare of trousers, and so on. The weather at Hannut was nice, the sky open and promising to remain blue for the day. Some pilots grabbed a few hours of sleep, others sat together in front of the barracks, exchanging jokes and finer memories. They expected war to be ninety-nine per cent of waiting and one per cent of flying. They were right to expect that, and some pilots flew even less.

When their trucks arrived, they heard that Bierset has been bombed by the *Luftwaffe*. One Renard could be repaired despite the bombing, and that machine was brought in the morning to Hannut.

Thomas Drandin had the chance to take off in the afternoon for a first observation mission on the bridges over the Albert Canal. Why had he to look over the Albert Canal, to the north? Surely, the German troops were coming from the east? Had the Germans also attacked the Netherlands, another neutral country? Thomas's observer, a Flight-Sergeant, had to write down what he saw and drop the message in a steel cylinder to an Army group near the canal. Three Fiat fighters would accompany him on his mission.

Thomas Drandin took off gladly, accompanied by his three powerful guard dogs to the Albert Canal near Maastricht. He saw the three bridges of Vroenhoven, Veldwezelt and Briegden still intact, not a scratch on them, and many German troops moving over and around them in armoured cars. Thomas also saw and heard German motorised anti-aircraft cannon and heavy cars equipped with machine-guns pointing upwards. These cannon and guns got pointed at his aeroplane. Thomas flew very low, at no more than fifty metres high. When he detected so many German columns amassed, he also feared their fire. Yes, the German divisions attacked from the north, which could only mean they had already passed Maastricht and had violated Dutch territory!

Thomas looked up, to see very high above him dozens of German fighters and bombers occupy the sky. He was confident that these enemy aeroplanes could not detect him moving against the patchwork of colours of fields, pastures, villages and rivers, but his anxiety grew with the minute. The German *Wehrmacht* attacked in force and could easily pass the Albert Canal now, fall into the back of the Belgian troops that still defended the Meuse. The Belgian troops would have to draw back from the Meuse, Wallony would have been conquered in merely a few hours! Carter Ash had been very right in his predictions. Thomas looked for Belgian troops near the bridges to drop his message to, but he saw none whatsoever. Had they already retreated so far behind?

Thomas Drandin had to return and phone his extraordinary message from Hannut. When he turned to the left bank of the Canal, he flew into very heavy machine-gun fire, and he realised the nervous Belgian troops, over which he then and finally did fly, shot indiscriminately at anything that was in the air that day, be they Belgian or German aeroplanes. He turned

abruptly, sheared over treetops, escaped, but he was taken aim at several times more. Thomas cursed. By flying low he could avoid the hawks and eagles above, but not the fire of the troops on the ground. Observation aeroplanes would have to fly between hammer and anvil! Thomas hurried at maximum speed back to Hannut, flying over every treetop and electrical wire he could detect, at the risk of getting his observer sick. When he tried to land at Hannut, his Renard did not lose momentum soon enough, so he had to turn and try again. The second time he landed in line with the field, but he could not stop, his brakes failed, and at the end of the airfield his aeroplane still rolled, so that his machine banged against the wires of a fence and toppled. His Renard had its nose into the ground, but neither Thomas nor his observer were hurt. The technicians ran to the machine although they might expect an explosion. They found that his pneumatics had been hit by a bullet, and also the bars to his wheels had suffered from impacts. Thomas was all the more sorry because the aeroplane he had received for his mission was the machine of the Captain of his squadron!

A second mission of observation over the same bridges was ordered in the afternoon, around 15h00, probably because nobody at Headquarters believed what Thomas had seen. Richard Bousanges flew this mission in a R.31, and he too got two Fiat fighters with him as escort. His orders were to pick those fighters up above Brustem near Sint-Truiden, at the campaign airfield of Brustem where the fighter squadrons were based. Richard flew that afternoon of 10 May to Brustem, to find the sky occupied by very many German fighters. Richard had never seen so many aeroplanes together over Belgium. From the far, also, he saw large, dark columns of smoke rise into the air over the airfield. Richard would have no escort of fighters that afternoon! Brustem had been bombed. The barracks and hangars and aeroplanes laid in flames. Richard made a far bend over Brustem, to pass over the town of Sint-Truiden. He got caught in heavy anti-aircraft fire from the ground, from the Belgian troops. He cursed, and was very bitter to be shot at by friends, but he understood that so very few Belgian aeroplanes were still in the air that the troops on the ground could not but believe every aeroplane in the air was German that day! Richard swirled at very low altitude over the ground, over the columns of retreating soldiers. Yes, he saw the Belgian troops retreat past Sint-Truiden, not advance towards the Albert Canal, but away from it. That would be very bad news to bring to Hannut! Luckily, the cannon and the guns fired late. They probably fired straight at the aeroplane, which meant their shots passed behind him. Had nobody explained the Belgian troops about the vertical velocity of bullets and the forward velocity of aeroplanes? Richard thanked his luck. He knew all about deflection shots, the gunners on the ground obviously not! He reached the Albert Canal quickly, but what he saw horrified him!

Richard saw many villages on fire in the region, and many German columns advancing on the roads. The Belgian troops seemed to have abandoned their positions on the right side of the canal. Everywhere east of the Albert Canal also, German troops advance in force, and their machine-guns were more than menacing. Richard turned southwards and he landed at Hannut-Thisnes about an hour later. He confirmed Thomas's information.

In the late afternoon, the First Army Corps, the group for which the Red Sioux work, asked for another reconnaissance mission on the Belgian positions between Briegden and Lixhe. This pilot and his observer saw the town of Tongeren, the beautiful old Roman town of Limburg, in flames, bombed, and the first long lines of refugees investing the roads southward. The Belgian aeroplane flew low on this mission too, and caused panic among the refugees, who must have felt already the violence of the Stuka dive bombers. The Belgian Army seemed to draw westward, meaning it was still in retreat, a very bad sign for what was happening beyond the Albert Canal. The Germans had passed major defence lines of the

Belgian and Dutch armies, and the French and British troops would have to advance very fast, now, to arrive in time. The entire sector where the observation aeroplane flew into was dark from the smoke of artillery fire and of exploded bombs. The most efficient riposte of the Belgian Army seemed to have been artillery fire, but the devastation was great. The Belgian pilot also saw German Stukas circle above their prey like prey birds, and then dive into the Belgian lines. Around the bridges of Briegden and Veldwezelt, nothing special was to be found, no friend and no enemy. Where was the enemy? The observer saw much destruction, but no columns or massed army troops.

The pilot and observer of that plane could not have known that the Germans had by the evening of the first day already penetrated deep inside Belgian territory with motorised divisions, and certainly not that they had already passed through the Ardennes and had reached Sedan in France.

The pilot flew on to above the massive forts of Eben-Emael, to find the area strangely quiet. The observer noticed large glider planes, with the characteristic German black and white-lined cross painted on them, lying on top of the forts! Had the forts already be silenced by the attacks of the German storm troopers brought by these glider planes on the first day of the war? The enemy had absolute mastery in the air, no Belgian aeroplanes were to be seen. When the pilot landed at Hannut, an animated discussion ensued between this pilot and the crews on the ground, because it began to dawn on the men that a very different kind of war as that of the last World War was being fought.

The next day, on 11 May, another reconnaissance mission was flown in the morning, once more in the direction of Maastricht. This aeroplane was attacked by no less than nine Messerschmitt 111, powerful bi-engine fighters. The Renard could escape their fire by flying extremely low, at times at less than thirty metres low, over electricity wires and towers. The bullets from the fighters pierced the fuel tank of the observer aeroplane, however, forcing the pilot to land in a ploughed field. While pilot and observer fled as fast as they could from the landed aeroplane because they thought the machine would soon explode in flames, they lost each other out of view. A few hours later, the pilot and somewhat later still also the observer reached Hannut-Thisnes, brought by Belgian motorcyclists.

In the afternoon of 11 May, the Red Sioux received the order to leave Hannut and to move to the campaign airfield of Hingene, far to the west, in Flanders, north of Brussels and just south of Antwerp. The anxiety of the pilots grew once more. Did the move mean that the German troops were advancing so quickly that Hannut was in danger of being overwhelmed?

Around 16h00, trucks and aeroplanes left for Hingene.

When they landed there, around 18h00, they found that the airfield was already occupied by the first squadron of their regiment, a squadron of Deurne. There followed a heated exchange of curses and arguments, for the Group Captain of Richard and Thomas more or less considered this airfield his own property. He had found it, and cared for it, prepared it to receive his aeroplanes. Headquarters were phoned to, for there was barely space and places prepared for one squadron at Hingene. The Group Leader present at the airbase feared that the incoming aeroplanes would betray his position to the enemy observation machines.

Headquarters barely heard the arguments of the Group captain of the Red Sioux. Around 19h00, the Red Sioux were ordered to the airfield of Peutie, near Vilvoorde, somewhat to the north of Brussels and not far to the east of Hingene.

The Captain of the squadron did not like this airfield, for he knew absolutely nothing about it, and he even had no accurate maps of the environs, and certainly also not of this airfield.

Nevertheless, the squadron obeyed. The aeroplanes left Hingene and arrived at Peutie around 21h00, practically in the dark, which made the landings difficult.

Peutie was a small airfield, not what the Renards needed, and a place without barracks. The Captain of the squadron therefore had to arrange for lodgings with the *Bourgmestre* in the houses of the small town. The local police brought somewhat later a list of lodgings. The officer's mess got installed in a parish hall near the church.

The airfield of Peutie lay also very wet, and probably built on a former marsh. Drainage works had been planned. Landings on the field were very tricky. The field was so muddy that the aeroplanes slithered over the field before stopping.

While driving from Hannut to Peutie, the column of trucks of the squadron got bombed while riding through Leuven. One truck, transporting a group of machine-gunners, was hit by a bomb. The trucks also had to abandon the mess of the squadron in Hannut. The pilots and technicians did with boxes of awful war regime food and water and bread. The Red Sioux left Hannut in time, however, for also Hannut was bombed in the morning of 12 May.

In the morning of 12 May, the Renards of Peutie were hidden under camouflage nets, and the personnel could settle. The weather on that day was very bad. A tapestry of clouds hung low over Peutie. The pilots and technicians rested the entire day, having lost contact with the Army Corps they work for, the First Army. That Corps was in full retreat that day, moving all the time westward.

The 13th of May also was a calm day for Richard and Thomas, and no observation orders were delivered. Finally, the Group Leader sent an officer to the town of Grimbergen where a Headquarters was signalled to ask for orders, and the man came back with the news that the squadron would from now on work for the Sixth Army Corps, the First Corps being in full retreat. Observation missions should come for the following day, 14 May. The squadron of the Red Sioux remained on the ground for two days. One aeroplane R.31 was brought from the airfield of Zwevezele. New missions were only ordered for the early afternoon of 14 May.

On 14 May, the Sixth Army Corps asked for several observation missions to be executed, but only in the afternoon. Neither Richard nor Thomas flew on one of those missions. The missions were also rather short, the pilots returned after less than an hour. They did not see many troop movements in their sectors.

On 15 May, only one mission took place in the morning. That mission was one of reconnaissance in the region of Aerschot and Leuven. Two other missions in that afternoon were sent to Leuven.

On 16 May, more missions were flown above the region of Leuven, for the German troops seemed to have reached the outskirts of that town. During two missions in the morning, also photographs were taken of the enemy positions. One Renard was shot down by multiple bullets from machine-guns, so that the pilot had to perform an emergency landing with his aeroplane. Pilot and observer escaped alive, they found their way back to Peutie and delivered the photographs of the region.

Around 13h00, the group was ordered to move to the airfield of Ursel in Flanders, between Ghent and Bruges, still much more to the west.

'Have you noticed, friends, we move constantly to the west, and Ursel is not far from the North Sea,' Richard remarked, looking at the map.

The other pilots said nothing. Heads bowed. They understood the war was going very bad, then, the German troops probably passing Leuven and charging on to Brussels.

The Renard R.31 aeroplanes landed at Ursel around 16h00, the trucks arrived a little later.

The next day, on 17 May, the men camouflaged their aeroplanes at Ursel, and they brought also that airfield in good flying order. The routine of changing aerodromes became a

rehearsed drudgery. On the same day, somebody brought news of the heroic attempt of the first day, 10 May, at bombing the three open bridges over the Albert Canal by the squadrons of Fairey-Battles. Thomas and Richard had no news of Bastien and Jan. They would have liked to phone to Trioteignes, but the telephone at the Information Centre of Ursel did not work anymore, and they could not leave the airfield.

On 18 May, the men at Ursel heard the noise of an important formation of German bombers fly on to nearby Aalter, where also a campaign airfield was situated, and the pilots and technicians of Ursel felt relieved that other men suffered the ordeals of German bombings. They were ashamed of such feelings, so their mood became possible more gloomy. Only one reconnaissance mission was asked that day and the aeroplane returned an hour later. A miracle happened on this mission! The aeroplane flew low into heavy machine-gun fire, of course not of the enemy but of friendly troops, and not far from Ursel. The machine-gun of the observer got hit by a bullet, so that the machine-gun swung suddenly hard into the face of the observer. The observer was a Pilot-Officer, and the man remained out of action for a while, almost losing conscience, but no more harm was done.

The German Army made rapid progress in Zeeland on that 18 May, capturing the island of Walcheren and the harbour of Vlissingen. The region to the east of Antwerp fell in German hands, the territories east of the River Scheldt, also the airfield of Deurne, opening the heart of Flanders to their tank divisions. The Germans advanced to the River Dender. They entered the city of Antwerp. Worse news came from the north of France. There, the Germans had almost reached Saint-Quentin, following the Oise Valley. They stood just north of Rethel and Laon, and they fought east of Maubeuge. Their advances had been much more rapid than in Flanders against the Belgian Army. They had amassed their most experienced and formidable divisions in this region, trying to cut to the sea and therefore trapping the Belgian and British troops in Flanders, cutting them off from inland France.

The Belgian soldiers still fought on near Liège; the fort of Fléron fell only on 18 May.

On 19 May, Thomas Drandin flew a reconnaissance mission to the left side of the River Scheldt. It was then only nine days since the war had started, and the German troops had already reached the main stream of Flanders! The territory that was still held by Belgian troops steadily moved westward under the pressure of the Germans. Thomas and his observer found motorised troops near Wetteren! The aeroplane flew above a column of Germans and Thomas shot a round of his machine-guns into the column. When the Germans shot back from their armoured cars mounted with machine-guns, Thomas turned back. His aeroplane returned nicely from the mission, but a bullet was found lodged in the radio set between the pilot and the observer. Thomas escaped neatly from being hit.

‘That bullet had your name on it, and still it missed,’ Richard Bousanges concluded.

Two more missions took place in the afternoon, but Thomas and Richard did not fly anymore on that day.

The German troops attacked fiercely around Antwerp and Dendermonde in the north of Belgium, and they faced the French Army in the part of Zeeland that lay south of the Scheldt estuary. At 15h00, The German troops stood far on the west side of the Scheldt at Antwerp, but the rest of the front stabilised in Flanders. The line of the Dender held. The hardest battle occurred in the north of France, where the German armoured divisions reached Cambrai and Péronne.

On 20 May, the Red Sioux executed two reconnaissance missions, which brought very useful information of the advance of the German troops to Headquarters. The Headquarters of the Sioux group was bombed by three Heinkel 111 aeroplanes, which dropped a few bombs of small calibre, yet enough to kill one of ours. The Headquarters offices were transferred to Knesselare, in a cigar factory of all places!

The Germans breached the defences at the Scheldt and they advanced to Ghent. The airfields of Belsele and Hingene lay now in territory occupied by German troops. Nevertheless, the Belgian and British troops still fought on at the Scheldt. The Belgians fought desperately on at Namur, but the town and citadel had become an island of resistance in German-occupied land. The fort of Pontisse near Liège, completely surrounded and the situation desperate, surrendered only on this day.

One mission was scheduled for the morning of 21 May, a reconnaissance flight in the region of Oudenaerde. This mission served the British Expeditionary Force, the BEF. Not much was happening in that region, and also not many German aeroplanes had been noticed there. The region was calm, but the German troops neared!

In the afternoon of 22 May a difficult mission was asked for the French Army. An aeroplane had to leave for the Dutch airfield of Oostburg in Zeeland, just east of Knokke and only a few kilometres from the Belgian border. The aeroplane had to receive there directives for artillery fire by the French Army on the airfield of Vlissingen in Zeeland, north of the Scheldt estuary in Zeeland. Two officers, not Richard or Thomas, brought the R.31 to Oostburg. The French artillery battery would shoot four shells around 18h00. That should be the sign for the R.31 to locate a German battery, which was very active against the French in firing back. The French also sought information about what happened on the airfield of Vlissingen.

The French promised an escort by French fighters, but when somewhat earlier than 18h00 the Belgian pilots flew over Oostburg, no French fighters were to be found. Nevertheless, the R.31 continued its mission, heard the French cannon shots and they found where the enemy battery fired from. They also saw that the airfield of Vlissingen was filled with about two dozen German bombers. The Renard returned unharmed.

On 21 May in the north of France, the Germans steadily advanced towards Saint-Pol and Montreuil, and a third finger of their Army reached out to Abbeville. The region north of Amiens in Picardy and south of Arras and Douai fell. Laon was taken.

On 22 May, the front in Flanders still held from Terneuzen to Ghent, along the Scheldt, to Oudenaarde and Tournai. The fort of Aubin-Neufchâteau near Liège capitulated only on this 22 May!

The most tragic event happened in the north of France, however, because the Germans there reached the port town of Boulogne. The region of Flanders and of Lille was henceforth cut off from the rest of France. The Belgian, British and French armies in this territory were doomed to destruction or surrender.

Richard Bousanges could fly once more on 23 May, on an observation mission again to the airfield of Vlissingen. Richard flew easily to the harbour town. He met German observation aeroplanes, which must have taken him for one of theirs, for they did not even try to harass the Belgian aeroplane. Richard flew three times over the airfield of Vlissingen before the Germans there realised the aeroplane that circled was not one of theirs. The Germans then indeed seemed to believe at that time that no allied aeroplane could still operate so far north, so they did not care much for the machines that flew above their heads. When the Germans did remark that the strange aeroplane was not one of theirs but an enemy, Richard had to

escape in all haste, for many anti-aircraft cannon took aim on him. He flew very low and disappeared behind the woods.

In the late afternoon, it was the turn of Thomas Drandin to fly with his observer on a mission over the Rivers Scheldt and Leie. It was a nice day. Thomas took off rapidly from Ursel, and he flew south, towards the war theatre where the German troops that had broken through the French defences in the North of France moved to the North Sea. If that movement of enemy troops succeeded, the French troops and the British Expeditionary Force and the Belgian Army fighting in Flanders would be isolated from the mainland of France, and hence doomed. Thomas had to observe the situation in the region east of the Leie, which would form the defence line of the Belgian and Allied troops.

The 23rd of May was really a beautiful day for flying, a clear day with much sunlight, and Thomas flew into that light, Richard Bousanges watching his friend climb with some nostalgia. Thomas flew rather high, at three hundred metres to four hundred metres, as his Captain had now asked since a few days, for it had become more and more dangerous to fly low on account of the machine-guns and anti-aircraft amassed in the area. The gunners had also become more confident in their shooting, and they aimed in front of the aeroplanes now, not anymore on or behind.

Thomas followed the Scheldt, admiring the silvery reflections in the water and the fine landscapes of the heart of Flanders. When he remarked dense concentrations of German troops on the left side of the river, between the Scheldt and the Leie, Thomas Drandin pointed downward to his observer, and he flew lower, over the troops, to let his observer count the numbers and to provide him with a good view of what kind of troops these were. The machine-guns and cannon opened fire on him, of course, but unexpectedly fierce for they formed a real curtain of hot metal right in front of the R.31, and Thomas could not avoid flying into it. He heard the multiple impacts of bullets on his fuselage, the zipping of bullets through the wings of his machine. His aeroplane shuddered, but the machine continued to fly on. He climbed steeply again, seeking altitude. He opened the throttle, rising almost vertically into the sky, but his machine began to wobble, making Thomas think the engine was at the end of its power here.

Thomas believed he had passed the danger, when also anti-aircraft cannon targeted his machine. He swung his wings aside, dived harshly to avoid this firing. He had the time to look behind him, and he saw his observer sagging over, leaning with his head against the pilot's seat. Thomas cried in the interphone, asking what was the matter, but the observer, a young Flight-Sergeant, did not answer.

Thomas turned his aeroplane swiftly back over the Leie, and while turning he saw a white trail of smoke behind his aeroplane. He understood his engine had been hit, either by bullets or by the shrapnels of the exploding shells. His fuel gauge fell back. Thomas sought a place to land in urgency, but suddenly, his engine caught fire, and a sticky jet of hot oil and petrol was thrown over the cockpit, obscuring his vision. The liquid caught fire and in less than a second that fire was blown into the entire cockpit. Thomas screamed when his helmet, goggles and clothes were on fire. His gloves burnt when he desperately tried to dive with his Renard to the earth, but he lost control and his machine fell out of the sky. He spiralled down in friendly territory.

In the evening, Richard Bousanges heard in Ursel that Thomas Drandin's aeroplane was missing, then that a Renard had been seen crashing in flames to the ground. Pilot and observer had been killed.

That same evening, the Captain of the Red Sioux squadron received one more new order to move his aeroplanes to Zwevezele. Half an hour later, before the night fell completely, the squadron arrived at that airfield, but two machines and their crews were missing. One Renard got lost in the darkness over the pastures of West-Flanders. The SV5 also got caught in the darkness, landed where it could and broke its landing wheels. Another SV5 had to be abandoned at Ursel and was left to burn.

The Belgian Army retreated to the Leie in the night from 23 to 24 May, abandoning Ghent and their positions on the canal to Terneuzen, leaving the front of the Scheldt and retreating to the Leie. One would now talk of the Battle of the Leie, which ran west from Ghent and Deinze. The northern front was very heavily attacked from out of the direction of Zeeland. The German troops passed the Scheldt estuary into southern Zeeland, passing the canal of Zelzate and Sas-van Gent. The Belgians still fought around Liège and Namur; the fort of Andoy of Namur only surrendered on 23 May. In the north of France, the Germans did not move much further. They consolidated their positions in conquered territory, yet they also took Maubeuge and the positioned themselves on the heights of Arras.

On 24 May, the squadron of the Red Sioux settled as best as it could at Zwevezele. The Renard that got lost and landed in a field was recuperated and returned. A mission was asked to shoot down a German observation balloon, so a pilot was sent to Ostend to get there a Fairey-Fox aeroplane armed with two front machine-guns. The pilot that accepted the mission tried several times to down the balloon in the following days, but the area was too well protected. The pilot flew into barrages of fire. Nevertheless, the Germans lowered their balloon and left it on the ground. More observation missions took place on 25 and 26 May. The reconnaissance flights became harder and harder. The aeroplanes came back increasingly hit by bullets and shrapnels in fuselage and wings.

The British and Belgian troops held out on the Leie front, despite terrible battles. The Germans passed Ghent, so Violaine saw German troops drive into the streets of her beloved town. She had not been able yet to drive to Trioteignes. The Germans also progressed much in southern Zeeland. Kortrijk came under heavy gunfire. The airfield of Ursel was overrun by German troops.

The next day, 25 May, Maldegem was lost to the Belgians. The front of the north was then an almost vertical line passing Maldegem to the Leie. The Germans advanced in Menen, Kortrijk, Wevelgem and Heule. They infiltrated Deinze and passed the Leie there. The front in Flanders did not break on that day, however. In the north of France, Valenciennes fell, and the Germans moved north of Douai, advancing also to Gravelines and capturing Boulogne. The German Army had reached the North Sea in force, and hundreds of thousands of Allied troops were trapped in Flanders, unable to be supplied from France.

On 26 May in the morning, the German artillery shot shells on the aerodrome of Zwevezele. The territory of Belgium still occupied by Belgian forces was reduced to smaller and smaller stretches of land along the North Sea coast. The pilots sensed that the end was near for our army. Nevertheless, one observation mission was executed in the afternoon, but that aeroplane got hit by so many bullets from the ground that the crew could not possibly accomplish the entire mission. The aeroplane flew very high to avoid such fire. When they returned, the pilot and observer told they have seen an inferno of battles, artillery fire, bombing and troops fighting everywhere on the ground. Flanders was once more destroyed by artillery and bombing. The war front was in intense turmoil. Zwevezele came once more to suffer from fire by German artillery.

The squadron should leave this airfield of Zwevezele! The order to leave came indeed somewhat before noon, and the aeroplanes and what was left of the trucks moved immediately to the airport of Steene, in the outskirts of Ostend. Ostend is a harbour town of the North Sea, the pearl of the Belgian coast, a very touristic beach town. The *Aéronautique*, what was left of it, stood at the sea!

‘This must be the end,’ thought then most of the pilots, ‘we cannot move further west, for more to the west lies only the sea. Headquarters do not order us to France, meaning we are encircled and our trucks cannot get through anymore. We are trapped and doomed!’

Executing observation missions from out of the airfield of Steene was practically impossible. Nevertheless, still one observation mission was executed on that day of the 26th.

Although Ostend was continuously bombed on 26 May, Richard Bousanges and his Captain rode still to the town to find decent places to sleep. They rode through deserted streets, saw the devastation of the impact of bombs, and knew most people had sought refuge in cellars and bunkers. They tried several hotels, until they found one where a frightened receptionist still held guard in the lobby. The hotel had no guests, and hence enough unoccupied rooms for the entire squadron of thirty men. The Captain and Richard returned first to Steene, explained the address of the hotel, and then they drove back to the hotel with a few men. A truck followed them. That evening, more pilots and other personnel arrived, and the squadron slept in the hotel in the centre of Ostend, not far from the local theatre.

The Battle of the Leie raged on that day in Flanders. The Germans took Balgerhoek and Maldegem. They pushed the Belgian Army still back, passing the Leie decisively beyond Deinze, Harelbeke and Kortrijk. They reached Roeselare and rolled on not far from Ieper. In the north of France, the German troops took Calais, which fell already in the early morning. Other German troops advanced by then well north of Arras and closed in on Lille. The Belgian Army had to fight in a territory smaller than the province of West-Flanders, a territory in which also thousands of refugees had amassed. Only one major harbour remained open for the Allied armies: Dunkerque.

In the morning of 27 May, the men of the Sioux squadron were awakened by a bomb that fell right along the façade of the hotel and exploded in the street. The building shook tremendously, and this caused instant panic. Everybody rushed to the cellars. The bombing continued and more high explosives fell close, one along the other façade of the hotel, throwing the window-sill of the Captain’s room into his bed.

When the bombing calmed, the squadron crawled out of the cellars and looked at the damage around. The proprietor of the hotel then became convinced that the German bombers had noticed that Belgian soldiers slept in his hotel, so he asked the men politely but firmly to leave his building.

Richard and the Captain went on a new search. They found a large house, a fine coastal villa in the old Flemish style. The administrator of the place offered it graciously to the squadron of pilots.

A little later, the bombing of Ostend resumed. Bombs fell in the street into which Richard and his Captain drove at that moment. Richard sat at the steering wheel. The Captain signed him to stop the car and to seek cover, which they did. Richard got temporarily separated from his Captain. He dove into an open garage of a hotel, right at the moment a bomb exploded in the street, throwing stones and shrapnels on Richard while he was still running into the garage.

Richard was blown of his feet, thrown to the ground, flung against the rear wall, and he lost conscience for a few minutes.

When Richard came by, two men stood around him and turned him over. He saw his Captain approach through the open doors. Richard hurt terribly in his back, so he did not dare to get up. He was glad to be still alive. The men began to tell him in a Flemish Richard barely understood to keep lying. They would get help for him. One man and the Captain remained near Richard. Ten minutes later, more men arrived with a stretcher. Richard understood the men telling him they would carry him on foot to the hospital. His Captain took his leave, for he had to return to Steene. The men took the stretcher, and they ran to the hospital, which was not more than a few minutes off. The strange cortège of two men in front, two men with the stretcher and two men behind, passed from one street into another, jumped over debris of stones and glass, and reached the hospital, panting and yet shouting for help. At the hospital, Richard saw several men and women in white uniforms take the stretcher and bring him into a room. He got injections, probably of a sedative, and he lost blissfully conscience once more.

Richard Bousanges woke up in the evening of the same 27 May. He knew it was evening, because the light shone dim in the window he looked at and the light in his room white and harsh. He was lying on his belly in a very clean bed, and there also the only impression he had was of the whiteness. He had his head in the cushion of the bed, but his eyes moved. He was no more in uniform, for the sleeve on which he had his head was white, too. He remembered he was in a hospital.

A nurse stood beside him, but he only saw her slim waist and her white robe. She was slim, for a belt drew the plies together. She had a very fine figure, he noticed, as far as he could see. A man, a doctor, stood next to her, and he felt the man was prying things out of his back. The doctor, of which Richard equally saw only the white trousers, sensed he was awake, for he asked, 'do you understand Dutch?'

'I do a little,' Richard answered with a weak voice and a thick tongue.

The doctor was pleased.

'You have been hit by half a bomb of shrapnels in your back and legs,' he explained. 'Quite ironic for a pilot to be floored on the ground, isn't it? We have already cleared your legs and sewn you up in a few places. Tell me when you don't understand me. We also got out most of the shrapnels out of your back. Nasty chaps, those Germans. I didn't dare to get everything out in one time, for you lost some blood and we are low on blood. I'm getting the worst and last pieces out, now. I sedated you and I'm finishing, but scream when you feel like it. The sedation will last on a while, but you will soon start to hurt again. When it hurts too much, scream, and I or somebody will come to help you. Did you understand me?'

Richard nodded, and the doctor continued working.

He said after a while, 'I brought a nurse who speaks French. She also was born in Liège. You can tell what you need. She will not always be around, but she will stay in the corridor, nearby. There is an electric bell near your hand. Just pull the string. Did you understand that?'

Richard nodded and he tried to look at the nurse who held a plate into which the doctor was throwing blooded pieces of metal that came out of his back. The nurse noticed his movement, and she leaned down to see his face, to show him her own face, and to look closely at the man who lay with his head buried in the cushion. When their eyes locked, she screamed, their eyes locked more, and she continued to stare. She jumped up straight, then looked again.

'Richard Bousanges, you're my friend Richard,' exclaimed Arlène Paslot, and Richard tried to move, which resembled a spasm more than a controlled turn, upon which the doctor let go a Flemish curse of the worst kind and cried to the patient to keep lying still.

‘Do you know each other?’ the doctor bellowed, smiling but still cursing because he had been surprised by Richard’s sudden surge and cut deeper than he needed. He looked at Arlène and what he saw in her eyes surprised the doctor even more.

‘Of course we do,’ the nurse replied. ‘I know him from since I was five years old! He was my playmate when we were young. He is a pilot of Bierset, an officer. He lived not far from my former home.’

‘It’s a small world,’ the doctor marvelled, shaking his head. ‘The war brings people together, as much as it separates them.’

‘This doctor is something of a philosopher,’ Richard Bousanges thought affectionately, and he remained in enrapture by the angel’s face he saw. This was a marvellous whirl of fate, indeed! Richard turned his eyes up as far as he could without curving his back, for he wanted to catch as much as he could of the pale beauty that was Arlène. She had not changed much. Small wrinkles appeared around her eyes, but she still looked as a Parisian fashion model. Yes, nature could make such delicate beauties only at Liège!

At that moment, the doctor pried out a particularly long piece of bomb out of Richard’s side at that moment, with a sigh of triumph, and Richard felt the flesh of his body give way.

‘This piece sat deep,’ the doctor explained. ‘We’ll have to clean this side particularly. We don’t want you to get infected by nasty German microbes, don’t we? This was the last piece but one. Can you hold out?’

Richard nodded.

The doctor continued to work.

Georges asked, his mouth in the cushion, ‘how did you get here? I looked for you and you had gone.’

‘I’ve always lived here,’ the doctor answered immediately, grinning, ‘I’m very flattered you have been looking for me. But I suppose that question was addressed to somebody else. You have my permission to answer, nurse Paslot.’

‘We moved to Ostend,’ Arlène explained. ‘My father began a business in real estate here, quite a few years ago. He deals in apartments with view on the sea, apartments on the dike. We left Liège. My mother loves the sea. We live here, in Ostend, and later on I remained here. I am a nurse. They can use nurses here, too.’

Richard turned his face again until he could look at Arlène’s hands, but she moved a lot about, and his looking took quite a while. He moved too much. The doctor slapped him on the buttocks.

Arlène has followed his eyes to her hands. She too looked then at her fingers, instinctively, believing something was wrong with them. Then she understood, and she chuckled. A small laugh lefts her lips.

‘No ring, Richard, no marriage. I’ve stayed as chaste as a nun!’

‘I do understand a little French too,’ the doctor intervened. ‘If you two start to say obscene things to each other I will have to leave this mess unfinished. You can talk as much as you want later. Tell your friend the pilot, here, that there are rumours of an impending total surrender of our army. That is a good though deplorable thing. The Germans are overwhelming us. Surrender is the only decent thing to do now. Your friend will finish the war in hospital. I’m not letting him get out of here for a month or so. We’ll keep him out of the hands of the Germans, too. He will get a card he’s an invalid from me.’

Richard cried hard, ‘ouch!’ because the doctor had pulled out the last piece.

‘There, that’s finished,’ the doctor claimed, ‘and I’m glad it’s done. You have a back like a Gruyère cheese, my boy, but you’ll live. None of the pieces went deeper than flesh. Nothing

vital has been hit. You will be able to spawn fine babies. I have other patients to look after, now. This war is really extremely stupid; I don't understand why people try to destroy each other. A damn life I have to patch up the harms done! I'll leave you in the delicate hands of this fine Walloon nurse. Women do better knitting work than men. She can stitch you up. That will do you good. Teaches you the pains of love and marriage a bit. Please disinfect everything, nurse, will you? Don't be shy about it. Use the thickest thread to knit that hard flesh together! That will teach him to run around while a bombing is on.'

The doctor pats Richard on the shoulders, and he left the room.

Richard asked, 'don't do it too roughly, please, Arlène. I'm rapidly touched by pain. When can we talk?'

'You can talk while I stitch,' Arlène says. 'I'll try to put your back to sleep a while, though not your brain. I have much blood to clean. Tell me what happened when you left for that aviation school of yours. I never saw you back, not really, at least. But you must also rest. You lost quite some blood and I still have much work to do on your back. You will have some nice scars on you, Richard Bousanges d'Exenaerde, but you'll heal. Your bones have not been touched. You will walk again, no issue about that, and you will fly again, too. We can talk later. I will come back often to you.'

Richard heaved his body up on his arms and he turned, because he had to, now. All his wounds hurt, his stitches pinched, but he wanted to see Arlène. She was as beautiful as he remembered, as slim and lean, as pale, vulnerable, and as lovely.

The German Army advanced little on 27 May in Flanders, but their advance in the north of France was spectacular. Almost the entire territory up to the Belgian frontier was conquered, but for the region of Lille, Roubaix and Tourcoing. In Flanders, the Germans rode up to not far from Bruges. The Belgian front ran from Zeebrugge to south of Maldegem, Nevele, then on to the Leie, to Roeselare. The British troops were withdrawing to the River Ijzer. They held from Nieuwpoort to Ieper, knowing the Belgian Command was surrendering, but the largest part of the British Expeditionary Force moved to Dunkerque, to Dunkirk. Around 17h00 of the 27 May, the Belgian King Leopold III sent an envoy to the German High Command to negotiate for the honourable surrender of the Belgian troops. The German answer demanding for unconditional surrender arrived by radio around 22h00. At 23h00, the King accepted the surrender. The cease-fire would start at 04h00 on 28 May.

In the morning of 28 May, Richard Bousanges lay still in hospital on his belly, but with his head turned to Arlène. She held his hand while she told him the war was over for the *Aéronautique*. Richard wept and continued to press her hand.

In the following days, the pilots, observers and technicians of Steene visited Richard Bousanges in groups of two and three. The men were very excited about the surrender of the Belgian Army, though most considered the armistice inevitable. The men raged and shouted in Richard's room, because on 28 May already Aviation Headquarters had ordered to sabotage the engines of the remaining Renard R.31 aeroplanes, so that the German *Luftwaffe* would not be able to use the machines. A few mechanics ran the engines at full power without coolant. The issue was, however, that the crews had vowed to escape to Great-Britain once Belgium surrendered, and the men had not been able to do so, for when they wanted to jump into their cockpits, they noticed that the machines had been rendered unusable. Entire squadrons had wanted to fight on in England, and that had been made impossible. Most men were also very sad to find their beloved R.31 thus grounded and left to rust.

When the noise ran too high in Richard's room, a very beautiful nurse opened the door. She silenced the men immediately by her radiant presence, and when she also took Richard's hand, the Red Sioux stayed totally silent, for they understood Richard's life had taken quite another turn.

After a few days, when the crews of Steene had to leave for imprisonment or demobilisation, and when the German soldiers marched in the streets of Ostend, all became very quiet for Richard Bousanges. Only Arlène remained at his side.

The war in the air

On 10 May of 1940, around five o'clock in the morning, the German Luftwaffe attacked, bombed and sprayed with bullets from machine-guns all the major Belgian aerodromes, destroying a good part of the *Aéronautique* on the ground.

Bombings occurred on 10 May at the aerodromes of the First Regiment at Deurne, Goetsenhoven and at the campaign airfield of the regiment at Wilderen-Duras near Sint-Truiden.

The first group of the Second Regiment of fighter aeroplanes was almost entirely eliminated at Schaffen, and somewhat later the other groups suffered heavy losses at the campaign airfields of Beauvechain, Brustem and Knokke-Zoute. Schaffen was so heavily bombed at the outbreak of the war that the only fighter squadron equipped with modern Hawker Hurricanes did practically not participate in the hostilities of the next days. The Hawker Hurricanes and the Gloster Gladiators were almost all destroyed on the ground.

Another bombing happened at the campaign airfield of Vissenaken, which destroyed many Fairey-Fox machines.

Many aeroplanes of the Third Regiment were destroyed during the bombings of Evere on 10 May, later also during the bombing of Schaffen, and of the campaign airfields of Neerhespen, Belsele, and finally on 18 May at Aalter.

The various squadrons received orders around midnight of 10 May to leave their main aerodromes of Deurne, Goetsenhoven, Bierset, Schaffen, Nivelles and Evere before dawn, but a few squadrons remained nevertheless caught in the bombings of those aerodromes. Other squadrons succeeded in leaving soon enough their base aerodromes, but got bombed at their campaign airfields of Aalter, Beauvechain, Brustem, Neerhespen, Knokke-Zoute and Belsele. The German observer aeroplanes had done a good job for months before 10 May locating these airfields.

On 18 May, practically only two squadrons remained operational, and these had only Renard R.31 observer aeroplanes at their disposal. Most of the other aeroplanes had been destroyed. The pilots and their ground personnel had been evacuated to France, to several French aerodromes near Tours and Montpellier. The personnel of the Belgian Aviation School ended in Oran, in Algeria, before being brought back to the environs of Montpellier.

The effort of the Belgian Fairey-Battle bombers on 11 May might have seemed futile. Of the nine Battles that attacked the bridges over the Albert Canal, only three returned. Of the eighteen Belgian pilots and observers of the bombing mission to the open bridges over the Albert Canal on 11 May of 1940, five got killed, four were seriously wounded in the act, and two were poisoned by acrid gasses.

In a British mission against ground troops of Battles that same day of 11 May, however, only one of eight aeroplanes returned to its base. The following day, the British Battle squadrons tried in their turn to attack the bridges over the Albert Canal. Of the five Battles in that mission, four crashed.

On 14 May, British Fairey-Battles attacked bridges over the River Meuse near Sedan in a desperate counter-attack. Of sixty-three Battles in that air battle, thirty-five Battles were destroyed.

Between 10 and 16 May, Great Britain thus lost ninety-nine Fairey-Battles, and two hundred in the first six weeks of the war. These numbers tell us much about the heroism with which the British and the Belgian pilots flew their missions in these aeroplanes, despite the knowledge that they brought inferior machines into the air.

I feel pride, honour, great respect and great sadness for the pilots and observers that flew on these missions. Their sacrifice should not be forgotten.

The Fairey-Battles were not used anymore by the British Royal Air Force after the spring of 1941, and the Battle squadrons of Britain were limited long before that day, several months before, to coast patrolling or to nocturnal operations.

At the end of 11 May, the day of the attempted but failed bombing of the last open bridges over the Albert Canal, the result of two days of war was made up at the group of the Air Force in which Bastien Trioteignes flew. Of the fourteen Fairey-Battles of the only real bombing squadron of the Belgian Air Force, nine had been shot out of the air or been destroyed on the ground. Three had remained at Evere and could not be recuperated and used, one was damaged beyond repair. The group had only two Fairey-Battles left in working order. The three bridges had not been destroyed. Only three bombs hit the bridge at Vroenhoven, tearing parts out of the railings and damaging slightly the concrete structure. Bastien's squadron received on 12 May seven new pilots of the III/2 Aé and as many Fairey-Fox Hispano aeroplanes. With these and with the two remaining Fairey-Battles, the group performed many observation missions for the Belgian Army in the following days.

On 18 May, the airport of Aalter was bombed by eighteen Heinkel 111 aeroplanes, which destroyed almost all Belgian aeroplanes of that aerodrome on the ground, either by bombs or by hitting the machines with bullets from machine-guns. No Belgian aeroplane was left able to fly. The group was no longer operational in the air from that day on. The men drove in trucks down to France, to Norrent-Fontes, and then to Tours and Moissac, Canals and Dieupentale. The men returned to Belgium after the Armistice on 17 August 1940, to either be demobilised or imprisoned by the German Army and sent to prison camps in Germany.

As for the fighter squadrons, between 10 May 1940 and 20 June, the date at which the Fiat CR.42 aeroplanes ended flying, the second group of the second regiment called the Ducks, executed two hundred and twenty-four war missions in the air, fifty-three missions accompanying other aeroplanes, and they fought in twenty-five air battles. They could claim and obtained eight proven victories. One Falcon pilot only was killed, and two other aeroplanes were shot down without the pilot being severely wounded. This result has remained very honourable, and the Belgian fighter pilots earned an applause against overwhelming German forces over Belgium in the first days of the war.

Of the two hundred and fifty or so operational Belgian aeroplanes, only fourteen remained in a more or less decent state of flying on 28 May when the Belgian Army surrendered. Of these, five aeroplanes remained active in the eleventh squadron of the sixth group of the first regiment, and five in the ninth squadron of the same group and regiment, squadrons of observer aeroplanes of Renard R.31 based originally at Bierset, and four of the seventh

squadron of the fourth group of the same regiment, a squadron of Goetsenhoven. These were the only aeroplanes of the Aéronautique that fought to the end in Belgium.

The Renard R.31s became therefore aeroplanes of legend in Belgium.

Chapter 6. Epilogue

Trioteignes

Richard Bousanges married Arlène Paslot immediately after he left the Ostend hospital, two months after the capitulation. The Flemish doctor, who resembled a butcher but hid a heart of gold under his enormous chest, wrote him a certificate in Dutch, French and German, asserting Richard had become a great invalid. The German *Kommandantur* demobilised him in August of 1940, setting him free and allowing him to travel and work in Belgium. Richard thus escaped the German prison camps. He stayed in Ostend, lived with Arlène, did odd jobs during the war, and became a very successful real estate agent later on, when he replaced his father-in-law in the family business. Arlène gave birth to their first son in the middle of the war, two other children would follow.

Max Vinck and Georges Trahty arrived within a few days of each other at Trioteignes. Georges and Max were both professional soldiers and Pilot Officers, so they should have been sent to prison camps in Germany. They hid at Trioteignes Castle, the best place also Max could think off.

When Georges Trahty arrived at Trioteignes he phoned to Ghent and Violaine drove like a madwoman to Wallony, drew Georges on a bed of Trioteignes with a passion none of us would have believed and married him at heart.

Rosine had not forgotten Max. Together with Georges and Violaine they formed two very happy couples in the domain. Grandfather Charles somewhat grudgingly called them his 'free Blue Flower lovers'.

The *Bourgmestre* of Trioteignes procured false papers to Max and Georges, made them ten years older than they were, and described them as agricultural labourers. They did some work in farms of the village, but in 1942 they couldn't remain inactive anymore and despite Rosine's and Violaine's screams and tears, the *Comète* network sneaked Max and Georges over France and Barcelona to Great Britain, where they served as pilots in the Royal Air Force, among the twenty-nine Belgian pilots who flew on Spitfires in the Royal Air Force during the World War. Max and Georges married only right after the war, but Rosine and Violaine had by then already given birth to a daughter and a son respectively.

After the war, Georges Trahty gave up being a soldier. He became a director at SABENA first, then found a place in the Vresele business. Max Vinck could not give up the Army. Frankly, he could not have lasted in any other job. He continued to serve the Belgian Air Force after the war, promoting steadily with his usual panache and *franc-parler*. Max became the first Lieutenant-General of our family.

At the end of June 1940, a German car and trucks filled with soldiers halted at the gates of Trioteignes Castle. The *Hauptmann* of the group wanted to occupy the castle with his men. They also hoped to empty Grandfather Charles's wine cellar and to sleep in our best rooms. When the German officer passed the bridge to our courtyard, he was greeted at the door by Irene Stratten Gräfin von Schillersberg, who explained politely she was a Honorary Lieutenant in the *Luftwaffe*. She showed her papers and cited all the prominent Nazi Germans she had encountered during ceremonies and gala-diners in Stuttgart and Berlin. The

Hauptmann did not insist, clacked his heels, saluted, and turned to another castle. No Germans have since invested Trioteignes.

Irene, however, left Trioteignes in August. Grandfather Charles gave Irene a car. She rode on her own to Maastricht, saw Bastien who would still have to stay for some months in hospital, swore to remain faithful to him, and then she left for Germany. Her factories were bombed later in the war, but Castle Schillersberg, where she lived, was spared. Bastien arrived at Trioteignes for Christmas of 1940. He got equally demobilised as an invalid, and he would only have to walk with a cane for the rest of his life. Uncle Léon-Alexandre and Grandfather Charles introduced him gradually into their business in Brussels. With his brother, our father Jean-André, he formed a successful pair of financiers and entrepreneurs who operated out of Brussels and Barcelona. We did not see our father and mother for four years. Our parents returned to settle in Brussels only in 1948.

We had never known much about the family of Thomas Drandin, and we also did not hear from them in the years after his death. Grandfather Charles dealt with Jan Sinnagel's family, however.

When the Belgian Jews were on the point of being assembled in Mechelen and placed on transport trains for the German death camps, Grandfather Charles rode with Alain Jacquet to Antwerp to warn his friends that something like that ultimate outrage was imminent. Mother Sinnagel, Jan's wife, returned with them, with her son and daughter, and they hid during the war at Trioteignes Castle. With her came four other, related Jewish families, fifteen persons in all. These were dispersed over Trioteignes village, taken up in three farms and by Father Jean Wastier, our parish priest. We made them all tear up their Jewish yellow stars. The *Bourgmestre* of the village provided them with false papers. The *Bourgmestre* tore at his hair when we presented the scheme to him, but with the aid of his mistress, the *Secrétaire Communale*, he delivered legal forged papers with the right stamps for all. The man slept badly for two years, but nobody outside Trioteignes suspected anything. We remained very much a kind of peaceful no man's land during the war. The Jewish families remained with us until the surrender of Germany. In the 1970s, the Sinnagel family and their relatives saw to it that the Trioteignes family and Trioteignes village received official thanks from the Belgian Ambassador of the State of Israel. A ceremony was held at Trioteignes Castle, medals handed over, and Grandfather Charles presided with the Israelian Ambassador over a dinner in the parish hall at which the entire village participated.

At the beginning of 1947, when the telephone lines with Germany were re-established correctly, Irene Stratten telephoned from Germany. She had talked before with Bastien, told him not yet to come to devastated Germany. She had also made Bastien swear not to come to Germany before she was ready. Irene found it her duty to remain in Germany at that time to reconstruct her factories and put her people back to work. There was much sorrow in Stuttgart and in Schillersberg, many wounds and souls to heal. Irene would visit us later at Trioteignes. When Irene arrived at the Trioteignes Castle bridge in a brand-new French car, our family ran out, even Great-Grandmother Claire. Irene brought a surprise with her. Not only her first son stepped out of the car, the boy called Graf von Schillersberg, but also a six year old boy who resembled Bastien like two apples from the same tree. Bastien went pale and embraced his son. Irene had hidden from him until that moment that she had given birth in Germany. Bastien returned to Germany with Irene, for Irene had still much work to do on her family factories and she wanted to help her country. Bastien understood his sons were Germans. They continued to live in Germany and participated with Trioteignes money in the booming German economy. Bastien learned German and he and Irene helped the ruined country back on its feet.

Arlette de Trahty and Carter Ash had a son and a daughter. Arlette was the Head Surgeon of a large hospital of London at the end of the war. Carter Ash quit the Royal Air Force as a Colonel, and took over his father's thriving business in transport and distribution. Arlette and Carter live in an old cottage of the Cotswolds now, but their cottage resembles a flowered palace.

I forgot to mention that Uncle Léon-Alexandre and Aunt Amandine married during the war. Great-Grandmother Claire died almost a hundred years old, in the peace and happiness of a family that spanned several European countries. We continued to share our pains and happiness with the people of the village of Trioteignes.

We never heard of the family of Baron von Reichenfeld in or after the war. There was no investigation after the vanishing of Andreas von Reichenfeld and his agents. We supposed the Reichenfeld family disappeared in the war, during the horrible bombings of the German cities. Grandfather Charles had three tombstones erected over the graves of the Germans in our forest. The village people of Trioteignes knew of the three graves, and of the story of the two aeroplanes that were hidden in the barns of our domain. Nobody mentions those stories anymore, but Virginie and I sometimes still walk to those tombs. The nightmares associated with the circumstances of the killing of the agents haunt us less and less, but we shall never forget. The past had to bury its dead, but the past did not die in us. The death of the men tore at our hearts, we remained asking ourselves whether or not we should have shot on that day with the machine-guns. A consolation for us is that the horror and the secret were shared by so many, and until today the Trioteignes people tell us we had done the right thing. Had we really?

The survivors of the eighteen days of war in Belgium gather at Trioteignes each year for Christmas. The clan of the Blue Flowers swore to meet once a year at least, though usually they do that more often, and at each other's places. Trioteignes Castle is too small, now, for the gathering, so we invest also hotels in the neighbourhood. The domain gets very loud from the many children that run and make awful noise when they see each other again after an entire year, but Christmas remains a tradition. We never forget to murmur a prayer and bring a toast to the memory of Thomas Drandin and Jan Sinnagel.

You can hear many languages spoken at our castle, during these meetings of the Blue Flowers, French, Dutch, English and German, but we hold on to the tradition of trying to love each other instead of quarrelling. We know what quarrelling can lead to.

Historical Notes

I have tried in this novel to use the background of the true accounts of the Belgian pilots as best as possible, leaving to fiction what is necessary for fiction.

I found many eye-witness accounts of the deeds of the Belgian aviators of 1940 in books, more actually than of what happened on the ground.

The most detailed accounts appeared in the books of Captain Jean Delaet, who served in the 'Egyptian Wings' group of the Third regiment of the Aéronautique. His books 'Escadrilles au Combat' of 1942 (Editions Les Ecrivains, Bruxelles - Paris) and 'Dernières Escadrilles 40' of 1947 (Editions Les Lettres Latines, Bruxelles) are marvels of information. 'Escadrilles au Combat' was translated in Dutch as 'De Strijd in de Lucht' (Scriptura, Brussel).

Other novels of eye-witnesses are the marvellous 'Contact! Enlevez les cales!' of the amazing Emile Witmeur, a pilot of the Red Sioux of Bierset (Editions André Grisard, 1980) and 'J'ai volé la liberté' of Mike Donnet (Editions Art et Voyages, Lucien De Meyer, Bruxelles, 1968).

A detailed account of what happened with the Belgian aviators of May 1940 has also been given in 'L'Aéronautique Militaire Belge en mai - juin 1940' of Peter Taghon (Magazine Avions, Hors-Série no. 18). Interesting books are also 'Les Belges à la conquête de l'air' (Editions Hayez, Bruxelles, 1976), and 'Belgians in the Royal Air Force, Albert van den Hove d'Ertsenrijck' (Philippe Lecoeuvre and André Bar, 2011).

Several books have been edited concerning the Renard aeroplanes, among them 'La saga du Renard 31', which contains many detailed accounts and memories of the 1940 pilots (André Henry de la Lindi and Alain Delannai, Mémoires de l'aviation Belge), and also 'Renard R-36/37/38&40' (Nicolas Godfurnon, Fonds National Alfred Renard, Bruxelles).

I used too many books on the Second World War to mention them all, among which of course 'The second World War' of Sir Winston Churchill (Penguin Classics, 2005), the 'Erinnerungen eines Soldaten' of Heinz Guderian (Panzer Leader, Classic Penguin, 2009), and 'The Spanish Civil War' of Hugh Thomas (Penguin Books, 1984). I found most detailed information on the advance of the Germans troops in 'La Guerre 1940 et le rôle de l'Armée Belge' of André L'Hoist (Editions Ignis, Bruxelles, 1940).

I wish to express special thanks to M. André Bar, researcher at the Belgian Royal War Museum, the 'Musée Royal de l'armée et de l'histoire militaire' of Brussels, who helped me gather much information on the Belgian aviators.

Also M. Didier Champion of the 'Fonds National Alfred Renard' provided me with information.

I thank especially M. Alfred-François Renard, son of the designer of the Renard aeroplanes Alfred Renard, for having allowed me so many times to use the name of Renard in this novel.

The 'Brussels Air Museum Fund' continues to work on the aeroplanes of the Royal Museum, and the National Renard Foundation builds a replica of the R.31 there. That same museum of the *Cinquantenaire* complex in Brussels displays an old Fairey-Battle aeroplane. For a Fiat Falcon CR.42 machine, however, you must visit an Italian museum.

I encourage people, especially younger people, to visit this Brussels Air Museum, a truly wonderful and interesting site. In the bookshop of the Museum, many books can be found on the history of the aeroplanes mentioned in this novel. The Air Museum also organises monthly exhibitions and sales of old books where the exemplars of the titles cited above can be found, though they have become very rare.

In my novel, researchers will recognise in the '*Fearless*' and the '*Assailer*' many features of the Renard R.38 and the R.40 aeroplanes. I have not used these two aeroplanes directly in my novel, for I have preferred to use a hypothetical 'Vresele' family to allow fiction to remain fiction and acknowledge history to what is history.

The R.37 to R.40 were built as prototypes on own funds by Alfred Renard. The R.38, which inspired the '*Fearless*', was flown to Bordeaux in May 1940, where the aeroplane was captured by the German Army. Later located in Munich, traces of it were lost definitively after the war. In May 1940, the prototype of the R.40, the inspiration for the '*Assailer*', was dismantled for transport to France, but the aeroplane was probably destroyed during the bombing of the city of Tournai in Belgium. This novel is therefore also a homage to Belgian aeroplane construction, to its engineers like Alfred Renard and Marcel Lobelle, and to its aeroplane construction factories.

Several German women were either officers of the Luftwaffe, test pilots for the German military or well-known German pilots. Among them we can cite Beate Uhse-Köstlin, Hanna Reitsch, Melitta Schenk Gräfin von Stauffenberg, Liesel Bach and Elly Rosemeyer-Beinhorn. Irene Stratten of this novel was therefore not an extraordinary exception.

The flight of the *Fearless* and the *Assailer* was inspired by the escape to Great Britain in the night of from 4 to 5 July of 1941 by Mike Donnet and Léon Divoy in a Stampe-Vertongen SV4 from Hoeilaart near Brussels to Thorpe-le-Soken in Essex. They flew from out of a hangar of the domain of Thierry d'Huart, then occupied by Germans. That feat remained as extraordinary as on the day it happened.

The airfield of Evere mentioned in this book does not exist anymore. It was also called of Haren-Evere, and situated roughly at the place where currently the Headquarters of NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, has its buildings. This airfield was used until the Second World War as well as military airfield as civil airport, mainly for Sabena. During the Second World War, the German Luftwaffe built a new airfield close by, at Melsbroek of the town of Zaventem. This airfield continued to be used after the war by the Belgian Air Force and by Sabena as the new main airfield of Brussels and of Belgium because longer airstrips were needed for the faster aeroplanes than Haren-Evere could offer.