GUY WALTERS

THE LEADER

A weak King , A facist leader, Germany an ally.
What does 1937 hold for the people of Britain

About the Book

Great Britain, 1937:
Edward VIII will not abdicate. He and his new bride, Wallis Simpson, are preparing for their coronation.

Winston Churchill is a prisoner on the Isle of Man.

The Prime Minister, Oswald Mosley consults the new Chancellor of Germany, and his close ally, Adolf Hitler on a more ‘permanent’ solution to the ‘Jewish problem’.

The secret police have Britain in an iron grip.

But one man, James Armstrong, a hero of the Great War, is organising the resistance against the government. While ‘the leader’ is determined to see him hang, Armstrong, constantly on the run, is every bit as clever and resolute as his enemy.

In the tradition of Robert Harris’s *Fatherland*, Guy Walters has written a compelling, page-turning what-if thriller that imagines a nightmare vision of a Britain that could have been, if history had gone the other way.

About the Author

Guy Walters is the author of six books on the Second World War, including *Berlin Games*. A former journalist on *The Times*, he writes widely on historical topics for the national press. He lives in Wiltshire with his wife, the author Annabel Venning, and their two children.

For more information on Guy Walters and his books, visit his website at www.guywalters.com

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THE LEADER

Guy Walters

Epub ISBN: 9781446436134
Version 1.0
www.randomhouse.co.uk

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
61–63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA
A Random House Group Company
www.rbooks.co.uk

First published in 2003
by HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 0 7553 0058 0

This book is for
WILLIAM

Acknowledgements

I AM EXTREMELY grateful to several people for helping me breathe life into *The Leader*.

On the Isle of Man, I was shown around Peel by William Bolton and Eddie Leece, the founder of the excellent Leece Museum. Its curator, Roy Baker, took the trouble to supply me with various documents concerning the internment camps during the Second World War. I am also thankful to Sandra Bolton for allowing me to rummage through her vast collection of Manx books.

In Galloway, I was well looked after by Mr and Mrs Collins at Damnaglaur House near Drummore. Visitors to the Rhinns could do no better than to stay with them.

I am indebted to the following for helping me with my research: John Lee for his encyclopedic political knowledge; Vanessa Andreae for allowing me once again to pick her medical brain; my father Martin Walters for his knowledge of steam engines; my mother Angela Walters for supplying a vast amount of pertinent books and newspaper cuttings; Adrian Weale for explosives manufacture; Meryl Keeling at Buckingham Palace for matters of royal protocol. Members of staff at the Wiener Library were kind in allowing me to view Captain Ramsay's 'Red Book'. Long may the library flourish.

Once again, my editor, Marion Donaldson, has been immeasurably helpful in ensuring that what follows is up to scratch. I have an enormous respect for her abilities, not least because she is eerily capable of zeroing in on any shortcomings and not letting me get away with them. My agent, Tif Loehnis, has provided support on an intravenous basis, and her advice is always spot on. I am lucky to have

the backing of two such capable professionals. Their respective assistants, Sherise Hobbs and Carl Parsons, have also tolerated my demands with good grace.

Finally, I am indebted to my wife Annabel Venning, and her parents Richard and Venetia Venning, for enduring my authorial moans and complaints. Now that Annabel is an author herself, I hope that I will be capable of providing as comprehensive a support service for her as she has afforded to me. However, this book is not dedicated to Annabel, but to a joint project whose gestation period exactly coincided with the writing of these pages.

Prologue

A Day to Remember

June 1937

He had at least a hundred flags to put up – eighty down The Mall, and another twenty or so in front of Buckingham Palace. Neatly folded and piled up in the back of his van, half of them had only arrived last night. He had wanted to make a start a few days ago, but was told he had to wait until *all* the flags had arrived. But couldn't he just put up what he had and wait for the rest? No, absolutely not, he most certainly could *not* do that. That would give out the wrong message, they said, that would not do at all. But didn't they know how long it took to put up a hundred flags? They didn't care, and furthermore, if he didn't do as he was ordered, he would lose more than his job.

So Albert started work at five that morning, the day before the state visit. He had young Eric to help him, and together they started to unload the flags in a companionable silence. It was a good time of day, thought Albert, the early morning air clear and golden. He loved London like this, quiet, majestic, the centre of the world.

It was Eric who broke the silence.

'Hang on, what's this?'

'What?' said Albert.

'This one,' said Eric. 'This don't look like a Union Jack.'

Eric was spreading a vast flag out on the pavement under the plane trees. Together they looked down at it. It was blood red, a white circle in its centre, a circle that bore a black swastika.

‘When did that happen?’ asked Eric. ‘When was we supposed to put up *German* flags?’

Albert took off his cap, scratched the top of his scalp, and then put his cap back on.

‘No idea,’ he said. ‘P’raps there’s been a mistake. Must have been slipped in the van accidentally. A mistake, it has to be a mistake.’

Albert repeated the word ‘mistake’ a few more times, as if by the repetition he would ensure that he was right. He walked round to the back of the van and climbed in. In the gloom he could make out the neat piles, and as his eyes got used to the darkness he could discern the patterns on the folded edges of the flags. Around half of them showed a mixture of red, white and blue, but the remainder showed only red. In a near panic, he lifted a couple of Union Jacks up to reveal what he had already suspected – another German flag underneath them.

‘So?’ said Eric.

Albert looked back.

‘I don’t understand it,’ he replied. ‘At least half of them are bleedin’ Nazi flags.’

‘You sure?’

‘Course I’m sure! This can’t be a mistake, they’ve got to be for the visit.’

‘I don’t like it,’ said Eric, ‘not one bit.’

‘Ssh! People might hear!’

And indeed there were a few people around, tradesmen on horse-drawn carts, the odd early-bird on his way to work, and, several yards away, a couple of policemen.

‘But *Nazi* flags, Albert . . .’ Eric started.

‘I don’t care!’ Albert snapped. ‘Let’s just get on with it! It’s not our business if they change the flags, is it?’

Eric did as he was told. He was getting used to doing so these days. He wondered how many would turn up tomorrow, how many really wanted to see the German leader. He knew *he* wouldn’t, that was for sure, but he’d

heard that people were being forced to come. Some neighbours in Eric's street in Peckham had been sent tickets, tickets stating that they had been picked out of a hat to attend the German leader's visit, and that therefore they were very lucky indeed. But Eric had heard that there was a catch – apparently the tickets said you *had* to go, and if your ticket was not used then you could expect an investigation into your 'patriotism'. Eric had tried telling Albert about that, but once again Albert had told him to keep quiet, to keep his opinions to himself. It was for the best, he said, these days it was for the best.

Later, much later, when they had finished, even Eric had to admit that The Mall looked magnificent. The Nazi flags and the Union Jacks were splendidly triumphant in the evening light, their colours marvellously bright in amongst the lush green of the plane trees. And as they had worked, they had received a lot of attention. Passers-by had pointed at the flags, some with smiles on their faces, but most with frowns, frowns accompanied by grim shakes of the head, before walking briskly away.

They saluted with little enthusiasm, if any at all. They knew that in their midst there were those who would report them if they didn't, and so they saluted as bored children might, sarcastically slowly, limply. Brass bands lining The Mall drowned out an absence of cheers, an absence that would have been especially felt when the open-top cars went past.

In the first car, the crowds could glimpse King Edward VIII and Adolf Hitler saluting back at them. The two heads of state were smiling, talking easily to each other. In the second were a beaming Queen Wallis and the Leader, Sir Oswald Mosley, his chin thrust proudly upwards; in the third, the German ambassador Joachim von Ribbentrop and the Leader's beautiful wife, Diana.

The Treaty of London had been signed that morning, and the future had been sealed. Today was a good day for

Britain, the Leader said, a good day for Germany, a good day for Europe, fascist Europe. The Germans are our friends now, he said, good National Socialists, fellow travellers. We have lots of work to do, and much to achieve. Herr Hitler has brought miracles to his country, and I shall do the same to ours. But for now, enjoy this day, a day which means we can work together in peace.

There was a loud cheer when the six stepped out on to the balcony of Buckingham Palace. Stalwart Party men and diehards had been placed there, been given special tickets to ensure enthusiasm up at the front. In picture palaces all over the country, the newsreels showed the delight on the faces of those on the balcony, while a breathless State Broadcasting Corporation newsreader commented on the fact that the King was wearing his fascist uniform for the first time, and that both the Queen and Lady Mosley were sporting very elegant Party armbands, which featured a black circle with a silver lightning flash through it. A great day indeed, said the newsreader, a day to remember in our hearts.

* * *

At Peckham police station late that evening, one of the regulars at the Black Lion found himself filling in a form, reporting some anti-patriotic remarks he'd heard earlier at the bar. Today of all days, said the duty sergeant, not a good day to be making jokes about the Leader. Your friend Eric had better mind his tongue.

Hampstead, March 1937

Otto regrets wearing his overcoat as soon as he has walked a hundred yards down the road. He thinks about going back to the flat, but a glance at his gold Omega tells him that he

doesn’t have the time. Instead, he takes it off and drapes it over his left arm, cursing its unexpected weight in Russian. This little slip – and it is only little, because no one could have heard him – causes him to curse further, but this time in English.

‘Shit,’ he says.

Otto doesn’t normally make mistakes like that. Even though he is only thirty-two, Otto is very experienced, one of the best Moscow has ever employed. His Austrian passport says that he is a ‘university lecturer’, and indeed he could be, because he has a PhD – with distinction – in chemistry from Vienna University. But Otto rarely frequents universities, and spends much of his time engaged in meetings similar to the one he is about to have.

The walk up to Belsize Park underground station takes little more than five minutes. Predictably, the station’s lift is out of order, and soon he is walking down the damp and winding stairwell that leads to the platforms. Although he can neither see nor hear anybody following him, Otto knows that does not necessarily mean he is not being followed.

Otto walks to the southbound platform, and sits on a bench shined by countless weary backsides. He looks casually up and down the platform, taking in his fellow passengers. A couple of young women seemingly engaged in some revelatory gossip, a slightly shabby man whom Otto fancies to be a schoolteacher, a bowler-hatted businessman reading *The Times*, even a vicar carrying a suitcase – a typical smattering of mid-morning passengers all on their way into London.

Which one is it? Otto wonders. Certainly not the vicar, because he is too noticeable, and besides, he is hampered by his suitcase. The businessman? No, and not the schoolteacher either. He suspects one of the young women, the one who occasionally looks up from her conversation, as if to check for the arrival of a train. Otto allows himself a brief smile, because he knows the woman is looking at him.

How can he be sure? He just is, and even if he is wrong, there is no harm in it, for you can never be too cautious.

Otto feels a cool waft of stale air stroke his face. The train will be here in a few seconds, and he watches the other passengers move towards the edge of the platform, as if pulled by some invisible force. The young women continue to talk, letting out loud peals of laughter that struggle to compete in volume with the arrival of the train, the train that he knows he is not going to take.

He stands up, deliberately leaving his overcoat on the bench, and walks towards the decelerating carriages. Their interiors are largely empty, a contrast to how they would have been a couple of hours ago. He waits for them to stop, and after the doors have opened he gestures the vicar on to the train before him. He would have done the same for anybody, because Otto thinks of himself as a gentleman. However, he has little time for priests, because he is a *mosaisch*, an observant Jew, and he takes his religion almost as seriously as he does his love for the Communist Party.

Otto takes a seat and sits back, seemingly waiting for the doors to close. He has seen the young women get into the same carriage, which has confirmed his suspicions, as they were standing nearly two carriage lengths further down the platform. He waits for five seconds, and then stands up abruptly.

‘My coat!’ he says to no one in particular, in the sudden outburst of the eccentric, and then jumps off the train, just as the doors close behind him.

He walks to the bench and picks up what has become a useful prop. He turns to see the train start to move away, and can draw no conclusion from the fact that the two women are just as engrossed in their conversation as they were before. The businessman flashes a look over the edge of his newspaper and then he is gone, along with the train and its temporary cast of characters.

Otto smiles once more, and then crosses over to the northbound platform. He will eventually end up going south, but he needs to make sure. He looks at his watch – there is enough time to go to Golders Green and from there to take a number 13 bus down to Baker Street. It seems preposterous, a real waste of time, but it is a delay he has allowed for.

It takes Otto an hour and a half to complete a journey that should have taken just over a third of that time. When he arrives at the café near Clapham Common station, he is only five minutes late, which he knows will cause his contact no concern. They have met many times before, and have no need to explain why delays are all too common.

The café goes by the name of Gordon & Eve's OK Café, and Otto sees Gordon and Eve themselves behind the counter. Gordon waves a hairy arm at him through the smoky air, a gesture that is met with a distracted but perfectly polite nod, for Otto is looking for his contact amongst the gaggle of clerks and labourers.

It does not take long for Otto to find his man, because his man is tall, and even when he is sitting down he towers above his fellow diners. Otto walks over to the chipped table and sits down.

'Hello, Tony,' says Otto.

Tony is not the man's real name. Otto knows his real name, but never uses it, not even when they meet in private. For his part, Tony refers to Otto as 'Stefan', but unlike Otto, he does not know his contact's real name. There is no need to know, and neither does Tony wish to know. All Tony knows is that Stefan works for Moscow and, like him, is a loyal Party member. He does not even know that Stefan is an officer of the Narodnyi Kommissariat Vnutrennikh Del – the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, or NKVD. The NKVD has many agents in Britain like Tony, but few are as well placed as him.

‘Stefan,’ says Tony, tilting his head in a slight bow.

They make small talk for a few minutes, throughout the prosaic business of ordering and receiving two plates of ham, eggs and toast.

‘So is it going to happen?’ Otto asks eventually.

‘It looks like it,’ comes the reply. ‘I expect we will come to power in a week, maybe two.’

‘And Mosley’s still promising you the job?’

Tony nods.

‘You will have a lot of power, Tony, a lot of power indeed. You must use it carefully!’

Tony has never seen Otto look so intense.

‘I will use it as you and the Party see fit,’ says Tony.

‘Good,’ says Otto quietly, spooning sugar into a scummy mug of tea.

The two men sit in silence for half a minute, a silence that is broken by Tony as he reaches under the table for a parcel.

‘What’s this?’ asks Otto.

‘A birthday present,’ says Tony.

Otto looks startled, or an approximation of it, because it is very hard to surprise Otto. He shakes the box as if he was a child, putting his ear close to the wrapping paper.

‘A board game!’ says Otto.

‘Well done.’

Otto unpicks the wrapping carefully, methodically, stretching out the anticipation.

‘Monopoly?’ he finally asks. ‘What is Monopoly?’

‘It’s proof,’ says Tony quietly. ‘Proof that capitalism has got so decadent that they’ve turned it into a game even children can play.’

Otto studies the back of the box.

‘*Not* something we’ll end up seeing in Moscow,’ he says.

Tony takes a sip of tea before speaking.

‘Or here for much longer,’ he says, which makes Otto laugh, wryly.

Chapter One

The Party

April–June 1937

‘WE ARE NOW in a dictatorship,’ said Armstrong.

‘James, you’re drunk,’ said his hostess.

The table, which consisted of many old friends and colleagues, had gone quiet. Armstrong pointed at his wine glass, which was still half full.

‘I assure you, Patricia, I am not drunk. I’m perfectly sober, *depressingly* sober in fact.’

Patricia glowered at him. She did not like conversation at her dinner parties to steer too close to the rocky shores of politics. The Season, the South of France, sailing – these were Mrs Fallowell’s favoured havens of chitchat. Never mind that there were three MPs at the table, in addition to Ted Frost, the editor of the *Daily Sketch*, and John Iremonger, the owner of a firm whose mustard could be found in every kitchen cupboard in the land.

‘I’ll say it again,’ said Armstrong. ‘We are now in a dictatorship. And it’s thanks to people like you, Harry, the people who voted for him on Saturday.’

The man whom Armstrong was addressing, the man who was now looking back at him with an open mouth, was his host, Harry Fallowell. Harry had entered Parliament with Armstrong in the ‘khaki election’ of 1918, and the two men had developed a strong friendship as they had jostled their way down to the front benches. Both men had returned from the trenches with a deep belief that society owed the younger generation a massive debt, and that it was their job

to ensure that the older generation – the generation that had sent them to die – paid up.

‘You take that back,’ said Harry.

‘I’m sorry, Harry, I won’t. We didn’t *all* vote for “the Leader”, did we?’

Armstrong looked over at Duncan Ratcliffe, another Conservative MP. To his frustration, Ratcliffe stayed silent. Typical, thought Armstrong, Ratcliffe had always been a man to sit on the fence. It had come as no surprise to anybody that he was an abstainer on that Saturday.

‘I disobeyed your whip,’ said Harry, ‘because I thought – and still do think – that voting against the Emergency Powers Bill would have been an act of gross disservice to this country. Goddammit, James! Can’t you see that Mosley’s what we need?’

‘I dispute that,’ said Armstrong.

‘Hear, hear,’ said Ted Frost.

‘Thanks, Ted,’ said Armstrong. ‘In fact, I wonder how much longer your paper will stay in print? I wonder how much longer any of them will . . .’

‘Oh, come off it, James!’ said Patricia, almost giggling.

‘I’m being serious, Patricia. Men like your husband passed a bill that allows Mosley – amongst other things – to have the press subsumed into the civil service. I give the Sketch another week, maybe two.’

‘He’s right, you know,’ said Frost. ‘We’ve already had a visit from the Ministry for Information. They’ve installed a couple of men on the editorial floor whose job it is to read every news report and opinion piece.’

‘And they’re just going to be *reading* them, are they?’ asked Armstrong.

‘Thin end of the wedge,’ said Frost. ‘They’ve already objected to our running a piece that told our readers that the *Sketch* was now being censored.’

‘How did you get that past them?’

Frost knocked back the rest of his drink.

‘Arts pages. First time they’ve been read in months!’

A gentle laugh broke some of the tension.

‘Do you see, Harry?’ said Armstrong. ‘That’s dictatorship. That’s got Hitler and Mussolini written all over it.’

‘Balls,’ said Harry. ‘Complete balls. This country has been going to the dogs ever since the King refused to abdicate. I don’t need to tell you what happened after *that*.’

‘It’s not balls, Harry,’ said Armstrong. ‘Otherwise why would we all be staying here tonight? Let’s not forget the curfew!’

‘These are small prices to pay,’ said Harry. ‘You only have to walk down any street in any town in Britain to see the scars of chaos. Shop windows smashed, graffiti everywhere, soup kitchens . . . anarchy! In times like these, a firm hand’s what’s needed. Don’t forget, James, it is only temporary.’

‘I doubt that,’ said Armstrong. ‘Come on, Harry, you’ve seen them for yourself. The Blackshirts aren’t about stability and order, they’re a bunch of thugs who happen to have found the right leader. How would you feel if you were Jewish?’

Harry shrugged and lit a cigar.

‘Refu-jews,’ he said nonchalantly, the first wreaths of smoke starting to envelop his head.

‘What was that?’ Armstrong asked.

‘*Refu-jews*,’ Harry repeated. ‘Someone came up with it at the club. Rather good, I thought, considering that most of them are bloody immigrants. Anyway, if my name was Goldberg, I’d probably feel a lot safer now that there’s firm government in charge.’

Up to this point John Iremonger had stayed silent. However, Harry’s attitude had clearly struck a nerve.

‘For God’s sake, Harry!’ he exclaimed. ‘You know as well as everyone else round this table that they’re in for a rough ride! Last week my general manager received a form asking us to state how many Jews work in our factories, what their

names and addresses are, et cetera, et cetera. What the hell's all that about?'

Harry drew on his cigar.

'I'm sure it's for their own protection,' he said.

Armstrong shut his eyes before speaking.

'Did you fill in the form, John?' he asked.

Iremonger looked around the table. Eyes gazed down at half-finished salmon steaks.

'Well then,' said Armstrong, 'did you or didn't you?'

Patricia cleared her throat.

'James,' she said, placing a heavily jewelled hand on his wrist, 'John doesn't have to answer that question, does he? Does he, darling?'

The last part of that was addressed to her husband, who continued smoking.

'Actually, Patricia,' said Armstrong, 'I think he does.'

Iremonger held a shaking glass of burgundy to his mouth and drained half of it.

'Come on, John!' Armstrong urged. 'None of us are informers, are we? We're old friends. Whatever you say goes no further, isn't that right?'

'Of course,' said Ted, accompanied by murmurs of agreement from the men's wives and Ratcliffe. Armstrong noticed that their host continued smoking.

'Harry?' asked Armstrong.

'My loyalty has always been to the Crown,' said Harry, 'and therefore to His Majesty's Government.'

A gasp. There really was a gasp, Armstrong noted.

'Including the all-new His Majesty's Secret State Police?' he asked.

Another draw on the cigar.

'If necessary,' said Harry.

It was Armstrong's turn to take a slug of burgundy. This was *Harry,* he told himself – good old 'Fare Thee Well' Fallowell – what in God's name was happening to him?

'You *are* joking,' said Armstrong. 'Aren't you, Harry?'

An impassive expression partially obscured by a defiant cloud of cigar smoke told Armstrong the worst. He shook his head.

‘Christ, Harry – what’s happened to you?’

‘What’s happened to *you*?’ came the cold reply.

Iremonger threw his napkin forcefully on to his plate.

‘You want to know what I did with that form, Fallowell?’ he asked.

‘What?’

‘I threw it in the fucking bin, that’s what. What are you going to do now, eh? Ring the police? Or rather, the secret police? I expect you’ve already got their number.’

Harry looked over at Ted.

‘None of this goes in the *Sketch*!’ he barked.

‘None of it would be allowed in,’ said Ted, staring witheringly at his host.

Touché, thought Armstrong. He had always liked Ted, had always found him good company. Over the years, they had enjoyed many lunches, and Ted was the only journalist with whom he had allowed himself to be indiscreet.

‘So, Harry, are you going to inform on him?’ asked Armstrong, folding his napkin carefully.

Harry started laughing, a slightly forced attempt.

‘Come on, you two! Stop taking all this so seriously! Of course I wouldn’t inform on John here – that would be absurd. Come on! Let’s eat up and talk of more merry things!’

Armstrong stood up, smoothed down his waistcoat, took one more sip of wine and then looked at his watch. Ten o’clock. The curfew had started two hours ago. He wasn’t allowed to leave, but he desperately wanted to. With no taxis or buses, he would have to walk home. He might get caught, but then so what? What could they do to him? The penalty for breaking the curfew was a £100 fine or three months’ imprisonment. He would refuse to pay a fine, so let

them lock him up. What would people say then? It would expose the new law for the absurdity it was.

‘Where are you off to?’ said Harry.

‘Home,’ said Armstrong.

‘But the curfew . . .’ Patricia began.

‘In Harry’s words, *balls,’* said Armstrong.

Iremonger stood up as well.

‘I’ll give you a lift,’ he said. ‘My driver’s here tonight. Fallowell – tell your man to go and get him.’

‘The *curfew,’* Patricia bleated once more.

‘I’d rather be locked up than stay here a minute longer,’ said Iremonger. ‘You coming, James?’

Armstrong nodded.

‘I’m sorry, Patricia,’ he said. ‘I appear to have ruined what should have been a lovely evening. Nevertheless, I’m sure you’ll be able to find plenty of other things to talk about. Sorry to have been such a bore!’

He bent down and kissed her on both cheeks. She smelt of Chanel and a trembling unease. It was only then that it finally sank in. The posters, the Blackshirt marches, the Emergency Powers Act – these were merely the signs, thought Armstrong. What had gone was trust. Mosley had abolished it, and with its abolition, freedom had been crushed.

It was just a ruined dinner party, but in its small way, thought Armstrong, it was a social breakdown.

Armstrong and Iremonger sat in the back of the Rolls-Royce in silence. Both were preoccupied with the conversation they had just left, as well as the risk they were taking in breaking the curfew. Iremonger had promised his driver £50 if he took them, which the man readily accepted, telling him that he’d have done it for free, but seeing as Sir John had offered him all that money, well, who was he to refuse the missus a few baubles? All three men had laughed at that,

and Armstrong expressed a secret gratitude that the bulldog spirit was still in evidence.

'Do you think that bastard Fallowell will really shop me?' asked Iremonger, offering Armstrong a cigarette.

'I wish I knew,' Armstrong replied, shaking his head at the cigarette. 'Two, three weeks ago I would have said that Harry was the last man to do such a thing.'

'But it's *monstrous*!'

Armstrong nodded and looked out of the window. A huge fascist banner billowed gently under the newly built Constitution Arch at Hyde Park Corner. It was illuminated from below, its redness strikingly bold against the whiteness of the arch and the blackness of the night. Lit up for whom? As there was a curfew, no one could see it. Empty pomp, thought Armstrong. Even when you couldn't see them they wanted you to know that they were still there.

'Yes, it is monstrous,' he said. 'I really didn't think this was going to happen. I was naïve, I'm ashamed to admit it.'

'Come off it, James! We all were. No one could have anticipated all this. I've got half a mind to go and tear down that fucking flag back there. You on for it?'

Armstrong smiled.

'We need to tear down a lot more than flags.'

'Huh?'

'We need to destroy the whole bloody thing. It's not just flags and drums and black shirts. We've been invaded, that's the word, *invaded*.'

'You're not wrong.'

'And it's going to get worse,' said Armstrong, watching the high wall surrounding the gardens of Buckingham Palace speed by. 'We're going to hop into bed with Hitler and Mussolini soon, you mark my words. And then where will Europe be? France will fall to fascism – Spain will doubtless do so as well. Soon America will be the only democracy left.'

'Well, that's where I'm going.'

'What?'

‘I’m going to push off to Virginia, got some land there.’

‘No!’ Armstrong snapped. ‘No! John, you must not go, you must not leave. We need men like you around. Otherwise we’ll be left with people like Harry and wet blankets like Ratcliffe. You’ve got to do your bit and stay!’

Iremonger exhaled a long jet of smoke.

‘Well?’ asked Armstrong.

‘You’re a persistent bugger, aren’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘All right, perhaps I’ll stay, stick around, “do my bit”, whatever that means. In fact, what *does* it mean?’

‘It means that I’m going to form an opposition,’ said Armstrong.

‘How? Parliament’s been closed.’

‘No, not that sort of opposition–’

Armstrong was cut off by the sound of a loud ringing approaching rapidly from behind. They turned to see a police car speeding towards them, its blue light flashing frantically.

‘Oh shit,’ said Iremonger, his tone resigned. ‘What should we do?’

‘I think we should do what rich men do in every country such as this.’

‘What do you mean? Bribe them?’

‘Exactly. Offer them twenty quid per head and we’ll be on our way to bed.’

‘In a cell. We’ll never get away with it.’

Ten minutes later, Armstrong and Iremonger were indeed on their way to bed.

‘I don’t know whether I’m more troubled by the curfew,’ said Iremonger, ‘or the fact that the good old British bobby is now corruptible. You owe me thirty quid, by the way.’

Something else had changed, thought Armstrong, reaching for his wallet, something about the policemen’s

uniforms. They were wearing Party armbands. That was new. How much longer would bribery last?

It was continuity that kept the Blackshirts in place. That was Armstrong's opinion, and he was proved right. People still went to work, people still fell in and out of love, the buses were still red, people still ate ham – things were, after all, still *British.* If anything, the situation was getting a little better, because how indeed could it have got worse? Since Mosley had entered Downing Street, where were the riots? Where were the shortages? Queues had all but disappeared from the high street. If you ignored some of the more excessive elements of the new regime, dismissed them as necessary to ensure stability, then life, some people said, wasn't so bad.

Some people. For most, and Armstrong was certainly one of these, the air was poisoned. Neither did he shy away from saying so. Anybody who asked him his opinion, and even those who hadn't – *especially* those who hadn't – would get the full force of Armstrong's argument. After all, he was still an MP and the chief whip of the Conservative Party, Parliament or no Parliament. What were they going to do? he would ask. Lock him up? If they did that, they would have to lock up nearly every MP who wasn't a fascist, every trade unionist, every 'suspect' journalist – the list would be very long. It would be like Germany, he said, and Germany had happened because people had not spoken out, had retreated into a satisfied world of continuity. The Germans had absorbed themselves in those things that reminded them of better times – mostly the countryside – and it was this absorption that made them feel that not much had changed.

But much had changed, in Germany and in England too. One incident Armstrong would use to highlight the dangers took place in his own constituency in the West Country. It was an everyday event, he said, an event that was

becoming all too common. The victims were a Mrs Jones and her seventeen-year-old son Richard, who were out shopping together one Thursday morning.

‘Rick and me was walking down Princes Street,’ she told Armstrong one Saturday in March, ‘when we hears this tremendous crashing and banging. Pipes and drums and all that. I ain’t really heard anything like it before, Captain Armstrong. Anyway, around the corner comes this large group of Blackshirts, waving their flags and singing something about hanging the Yids. There must have been two – no, three hundred of ’em, and they were marching down the street sending everyone scattering for cover.

‘Well, you may not know this, Captain Armstrong, but my son Rick – well, he’s a little slow, you see? Not the brightest of buttons. Gets into trouble a bit, but he’s a good sort really, never means no harm to no one. Anyway, so there we were, all these Blackshirts walking past, and one of them turns to us and says, “Why aren’t you saluting?”’

‘Saluting?’ Armstrong asked.

‘That’s right, saluting. “Why aren’t you saluting?” And he’s got this expression – well, I don’t know how to describe it – fierce, real fierce, nasty. So I just stares back at him, ’cos to be honest I don’t really twig at first. And then he asks me again, “Why aren’t you saluting?” By this time the march has stopped and I can feel all these eyes on me . . .’

Mrs Jones started to sob. Armstrong got up from behind his desk and walked round to hand her his handkerchief. Perching on the front of the desk, he assured her that everything was all right now, and that she should continue her story.

‘Well, Captain Armstrong, I’m not so sure that it is all right, because . . .’

And she started sobbing again, Armstrong would say later, but this time at such a volume and at such length that he was minded to call a doctor.

‘No, that’s kind of you, sir, but it’s my son who needs doctors, not me.’

‘Mrs Jones – *please* – you must tell me what happened.’

Interrupted by frequent tears, Mrs Jones continued her story.

‘“Why aren’t you saluting?” this man says, and then I realise that he wants me to give one of them fascist salutes, you know, with your right arm in the air. Well, I was scared you see, and so, well, I had no choice, did I? My husband Peter always said them Blackshirts were no good and that me and Rick was never to pay them any attention, and that it was good men like you, Captain Armstrong, who would get this country out of the crisis.’

‘Where is your husband now?’

‘He’s in the navy, sir. Most of the time it’s just me and Rick, just the two of us.’

‘Do carry on, Mrs Jones.’

‘So I salute, don’t I? I’m not proud of that, not proud at all, but you have to, don’t you, when you’ve got hundreds of ’em threatening you like that.’

‘And what about Rick?’

‘Well, I told you that Rick was a good sort really, and that he has good manners most of the time, but Rick goes and *spits*, spits at this Blackshirt who was making us salute. Now I can’t abide spitting, Captain Armstrong, but Rick just goes and spits and tells them that they’re a bunch of so-and-sos.’

More tears followed, many more tears.

‘Well, you can imagine what happens next,’ said Mrs Jones after she had calmed down a little. ‘They give ’im a beating, don’t they? Some of ’em grab me and hold me against a door, while I have to watch my poor little boy being kicked and punched and all the time he’s screaming for me. “Help me, Mum!” he’s crying, but I can’t and I see that he’s getting hurt real bad. It goes on for ages until Rick stops crying. Then they stop, you see, and have a laugh, a *laugh* at poor Rick all bleeding on the ground. And then one of the