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CHAPTER ONE

Talking through Armageddon

In 1939 the writing so long scrawled on the wall was translated into many languages. The birds of ill omen no longer screeched but perched gagged in the still trees. The voice of Cassandra sank to a whisper. The lull waited for the hour when strife must be hailed, calculation and logic forgotten. We must summon up all our courage and magnify it, and behave well.

To go or not to go to America became our own particularly burning question. When he resigned from the Government after Munich, Duff had signed a lecture-contract for a year ahead, and now October 1939 was here and so was the end-of-the-world war. Duff, irked by his independence and seeing no niche for himself at home, favoured this useful mission to the United States, yet the idea of leaving England in wartime made him hesitate. The oracles he consulted gave diametrically different but not equivocal answers. One augurer felt confident that Duff, a resigned Minister, would shortly be back in office, for already the Government looked rickety; another said that America would resent propaganda. Friendly American journalists like John Gunther and Knickerbocker urged us to go. Winston wavered, unable to admit the Government's instability. Lord Cranborne cried "Forward!" while Lord Salisbury murmured "Back."

My optimistic husband had been to some army manœuvres
in his anachronistic Second Lieutenant’s uniform. He had wound his puttees tightly round his elegant legs, filled his water-bottle, brushed up his kitbag, and packed it with his few troubles. He had marched off to a field-day, looking as portly as a Secretary of State and jumping with surprise when the Generals called him “Sir.” By evening he saw that the army held no future for him. His helmet now must make a hive for bees, but a lingering hope urged him to appeal to Colonel Mark Maitland of the Third Battalion, Grenadier Guards (he who twenty years before had shouted Duff off to war from Waterloo). The Colonel dashed his last hope. Now only the Prime Minister’s approval of his absence remained to be asked.

The interview was an unhappy one. Mr Chamberlain naturally had no words of sympathy or regret. Duff was surprised at this lack of courtesy. I expected it, but what we did not anticipate was Mr Chamberlain’s suggesting that in a few weeks’ time, when “things get pretty hot here, a man of fifty might be criticised for leaving his country.” Ever since I have maintained that the Prime Minister advised Duff to “go for a soldier.” I can find no corroboration in Duff’s memoirs. I expect that he suppressed or forgot the advice, or else I am guilty of a conscious and vengeful lie that I have come to believe. After a hum and a haw the Prime Minister grudgingly agreed to Duff’s going to the United States if he promised to say nothing that might smell of anti-German propaganda. As if Duff was going to talk through Armageddon about Keats or Horace or the Age of Elegance.

The die had been cast in fateful September. John Julius’s day-school in London moved to a less congested county, and together with his familiars he became a boarder at Westbury in Northamptonshire, the best solution for my peace of mind and his untroubled development. In October, with a trembling
hand in Duff's, I boarded the American S.S. Manhattan. To Conrad Russell I wrote from Southampton:

The platform was Frith's Paddington Station—people with all their worldly goods (nothing so pathetic), the guitar, the clock, the old rugs, cricket bats and toy engine. Mine (had I taken any) would be my wax face by Jo Davidson and Queen Victoria's picture of Mother, your diamond dolphins and what not? The Frith scene made me see ourselves as Ford Madox Brown's The Last of England, and such conceits as these have kept my spirits well up.

It's a brilliant day. No balloons up. I'm equipped with luminol and a beautiful bottle of old brandy brought by Raimund to the station. I feel that this is the first time I have been part of real life. I was going to say "except when John Julius was born," but even that wasn't very real. Artifice, science and drugs veiled the reality. My mother's death was real enough, I suppose, and one mustn't see only horrors as real life. Wandering in sun-bathed Somerset perhaps is real too.

There's a man sorting at least five hundred gas-masks on the platform, some of them with snouts protruding from their cardboard confines. They are stacked in a disorderly pyramid, and these (the lost "Mum's," "Dad's" and "Sis's") are the residue of one train-load only. Priez pour nous.

We sailed unexpectedly south to Bordeaux. It added two days of terror to an uneasy state of mind, inclining neither to the devil nor the deep sea. We both felt uncertain if we were right to leave all we held dearest to the devil, yet riding the deep and treacherous sea in throes of fear I felt, in a complicated way, less cowardly. We were favoured with a cabin to ourselves in a figurehead position, with a shower that gave an unsaturating trickle of nearly-cold water. Black-outs in belligerent waters, no Lebensraum, as all the spacious saloons and ballrooms had become tightly-packed dormitories. We had nothing to complain of above sea-level except a Jonah-woman, who had been in the torpedoing of the Lusitania. I
hated her, for she told me insensitively that when she had heard Duff was on the ship she had tried to cancel her passage. This put new and gruesome ideas into my head. On a neutral ship, with Old Glory fluttering at the masthead, could armed U-boat captains surface alongside and claim Duff individually as their rightful prey? I remember wondering distractedly at night how to counter this grim menace. There was a benison of nuns on board, Jonahs in themselves to many faint hearts, but revered by me (who had my own Jonah). I saw the sisters as a potential salvation, for at the first alarm I would have Duff’s moustache off in a trice and borrow a nun’s habit for his disguise. They would refuse if I prepared for the eventuality by asking the loan in cold blood, but with the sea-wolf baying at the door they would surely come to our rescue.

I confided all my fears, not to Duff, who would have despised them, but to the Captain himself over a cocktail, asking him what he would do if the claim were made? He answered that he had not made up his mind. This was hardly reassuring.

Dreadful rumours, many unfounded, came through a radio at its most confused and raucous worst. The sinking of the Repulse was one to depress us unnecessarily. We passed no ship but were expecting S.O.S.’s hourly. Never did I look forward more to seeing good Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, so unexpectedly green as grass, and at last the skyline in early morning light, its towers unsubstantial as a dream, a sight that always robbed me of breath. I wrote to Conrad:

*Ambassador Hotel, New York*  
22 October 1939

We landed in thick fog, so there was no skyline to see, although I was up by 6.30 so as not to miss it. The good Dr Kommer was on the dock and so was my old chum Iris Tree, but I didn’t feel
relief or pleasure or anything at all. My heart's dead in me. The fog lifted and I could see without thrill how marvellously beautiful this city is, and how much more beautiful than ten years ago. Duff is in a perpetual swoon about it, and is as happy and sans souci as a colt.

Mr and Mrs William Paley were the first to welcome us and give us confidence, although we had met them but once in Scotland. He was the young and successful head of the Columbia Broadcasting Corporation, physically a little oriental and very attractive. Together they lived in a Colonial house on Long Island. This luxury taste slightly depresses me. The standard is unattainable to us tradition-ridden tired Europeans. There was nothing ugly, worn or makeshift; brief and exquisite meals, a little first-class wine, one snorting cocktail. Servants were invisible, yet one was always tended. Conversation was amusing, wise-cracked, light and serious. A little table in your bedroom was laid, as for a nuptial night, with fine lawn, plates, forks and a pyramid of choice-bloomed peaches, figs and grapes. In the bathroom were all the aids to sleep, masks for open eyes, soothing unguents and potions. In the morning a young, silent girl, more lovely than the sun that blazed through the hangings, smoothed all and was never seen again. We felt like a couple of Slys in The Taming of the Shrew.

It was difficult to be in New York in those early war days (labelled "phoney" to one's superstitious horror). The change back to normality was too sudden. I felt ashamed of everything, ashamed of some scrimshanking English people pretending nostalgia for home, ashamed of the "Keep out of it" attitude of many highly intelligent Americans, although sympathising with them full-heartedly. News was plentiful and splendidly biased, though presented in small grey print. It told chiefly, I remember, of bitter hatred of Germany, and of
how London and all England would be stormed. I think that Hitler was abhorred as much as in Europe, and they all seemed anxious for the repeal of the Neutrality Act. We moved in journalistic circles with Hamilton Fish Armstrong, Mrs Ogden Reid of the *New York Herald-Tribune*, the famous Dorothy Thompson and the brilliantly successful Henry Luce. The conversation was always above my head. The Tripartite Agreement, the Treaties of St Germain, Trianon and Sevres were argued, and I do not remember once opening my mouth.

We visited the World’s Fair and even that did not suit me. Nothing did. Duff savoured all and everything. He could not be drawn away from the Surrealist exhibition arranged by their leader, Salvador Dali. It took a lot of beating. I wrote:

The entrance is between a lady’s legs, and when you get in it’s dark except for a dimly-lit tank full of organs and rubber corpses of women. Ceaselessly a beautiful living siren, apparently amphibious, dives slowly round her own bubbles, completely naked to the waist. She fondles the turtles and kisses the rubber corpses’ mouths and hands. In the dark I could see Duff’s face glowing like a Hallowe’en turnip. I infinitely preferred the Hall of Medicine, where you can see a foetus (genuine) brilliantly lit in spirits and glowing pink (not green) from the word “Go!” to the ninth month, in nine close-ups. You can see livers and kidneys pulsating, transparent men and women with pounding hearts, pools of v.d. bugs greatly exaggerated in size, and real babies in incubators, snug and warm and calm, unconscious of their doom and greatly to be envied.

When I first came to New York and so adored it, I was busy from the first day, absorbed in the theatre, with no time for Society, and a new and loving escort ever waiting. This time I have nothing to do, only Society to pull against and a sleepless broken nervous system. Where it was all new blood, in myself and others, it’s today old, old. It will be better when we start travelling.

So we went to Washington. Lord Lothian was our Ambassador and no better appointment could have been made for
Second Lieutenant