

# HOW GOES THE WORLD?

## AN ENGLAND WORLD / WILL DARLING ADVENTURES EPILOGUE

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*This isn't a standalone story at all. It will make sense only if you've read Think of England, Proper English, and the Will Darling Adventures trilogy, and contains spoilers for some of those.*

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*For all the readers. Without you, books are just typing.*

# PART ONE

## TEMPUS FUGIT

*LORD WITTON receives Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Hershel of Buffalo, New York and their daughter Laura at Rodington Court. Miss Hershel is engaged to marry Mr. George Yoxall, Lord Witton's heir. Guests include Sir Archibald Curtis, the noted suffragist Mrs. Keynes, and the philanthropist Miss Carruth.*

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The house party was a joy. Archie had expected to enjoy himself with so many of his friends gathered together, but, and beyond the wildest dreams of optimism, every other guest turned out to be likeable too. That was more than he could say for *some* country-house parties he'd attended.

Jimmy Yoxall's rambunctious little nephew George had somehow become a sizeable adult man while Archie wasn't looking. Once he'd got over the shock, he found George a delightful fellow, with a charming smile and pleasant, easy-going manners. His fiancée Laura was a startlingly modern young woman, entirely free from shyness. She spoke with equal confidence to Archie about golf and Daniel about psychology; to Victoria Keynes about women's rights, and Fen about the most marvellous new designer in Paris making flattering dresses for full-figured women, and the elderly Lady Witton about how wonderful her grandson was. Archie didn't think he'd ever had that much social assurance in his life. If Laura was a New Woman, or whatever they were called these days, the world would be seeing some changes.

He'd been a little apprehensive about meeting her parents. Archie had no acquaintance with millionaires, and one read such extraordinary things in the newspapers, especially when the millionaires were Americans. Jimmy

had said they were awfully pleasant, but, as Daniel waspishly remarked, he would. For one thing, George wanted him to like them, and Jimmy would do anything for George. For another, the Witton estate could very much use a hand, especially if it was full of money.

As it turned out, Mr. and Mrs. Hershel were plain-spoken, amusing, wrapped around their daughter's finger, and just as determined to be delighted by Rodington Court as Jimmy was for them to be delighted by it. Given the state of the place, George's future in-laws were faced with something of a challenge there, but they seemed to be meeting it with goodwill.

That said, there were some advantages to an unmodernised house. The dining room was lit in the evening with candles, whose kindly light made the years fall away from the guests. Bill and Jimmy, Pat and Fen and Daniel: at dinner, they all looked to Archie almost as they had twenty years ago, with no glare of electricity to expose weary eyes and wrinkles. That in itself made him reflect on quite how much they had, or had not, changed.

Jimmy Yoxall certainly hadn't, except for his elevation to the peerage. As far as Archie could tell, he'd got through the war with his usual cheery thoughtlessness intact, fuelled by a vague conviction that things would all turn out well enough in the end if they just got on with it. Archie was a couple of years older than him; sometimes it felt more like twenty.

Like Jimmy, Fen wore her additional years lightly, at least on the outside. Miss Fenella Carruth, the frivolous, fashionable heiress, had turned her modern mansion into a hospital in the war, and kept it that way afterwards. It was now the Facial Reconstructive Hospital, offering pioneering medical treatment for those who had been disfigured in the war. She spent her days encouraging men who had suffered grotesque injuries, keeping up spirits while the doctors tried to mend bodies, and her evenings raising money because the need was a bottomless pit, but to all appearances she was as sparkling and light-hearted as ever, with a constant trill of laughter in her voice. Indomitable: that was Fen, and Archie loved her for it.

Time weighed more visibly on Pat Merton. She'd trained as a nurse as soon as the War started, and gone to the Front where she was very soon

managing field hospitals, and her face betrayed the impact of that time in the thick of things, away from Fen. Her hair was mostly grey now, but her aim had never wavered, humour and intelligence still lit her eyes, and she was still the second human on all the earth that Archie would turn to in time of trouble.

Service had also taken a toll on her brother Bill. Some people liked to sneer at those who'd done back-room jobs during the conflict: Bill had done his complex financial work in a back room for twenty hours a day at times, sleeping under his desk, and it showed. Mind you, one might equally blame his greying hair on the fact that he was Daniel's second in command, a job which would give anyone a sick headache. Archie had worked with Daniel long enough to know he made a much more amenable lover than colleague, and it wasn't as if *amenable* was the word Archie would choose for him in the former role.

Daniel. Archie watched him as he charmed Mrs. Hershel. Hair still jet black, though no longer by nature alone; eyes still dark-bright, though the skin around them was lined; once-smooth good looks battered by the weight of his responsibilities over the years. His work was hard, and it had hardened him from a painfully handsome young man into a formidable and devastating older one.

They were all older, candlelight or no, and they'd all paid the price of the years, but they'd come through. They'd all come through, from the golden days of King Edward's reign to the terrible darkness that followed, and they were here now: Archie, his closest friends, and his Daniel.

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It was a very sociable weekend. Pat and Fen were old friends of the dauntingly intelligent Victoria Keynes, and the three of them swept Mrs. Hershel off during the day for what appeared to be inexhaustible and hilarious conversation. The sporting men took her husband out for golf and shooting, while the young people alternated gazing into one another's eyes, and playing unseasonal games of tennis so vigorous as to remind

Archie his fiftieth birthday had been and gone. Daniel, who had always regarded physical exercise with dismay, took the opportunity to catch up on sleep, reading, and civilised discussion in the evenings.

It was all very enjoyable, but by late Sunday afternoon, Daniel was keen for an hour's quiet with his notebook. Archie rather thought he might be writing a poem, but didn't plan to jinx it by asking. Poetry had gone by the wayside for a long time, and it was an outlet Daniel needed.

They detached themselves from the rest of the party and settled in one of the small and pointless rooms with which Rodington Court was lavishly equipped. Daniel had his notebook; Archie had Mrs. Christie's *The Murder on The Links*; they had a bit of peace and quiet, and each other's silent company. It was all Archie needed, or ever had.

He managed a full two chapters in that serene condition, listening to Daniel's pen scratch and his occasional quiet hisses of annoyance at failure to find a word, before Bill and Jimmy came in.

"Found you, finally," Jimmy said. "Why are you lurking in here?"

"Peace and quiet, dear boy," Daniel said without looking up. "A few moments far from the madding crowd."

"Well, you're certainly that. Still, this room—"

Archie glanced around. It was a pleasant sitting room which looked to have been last decorated a couple of decades ago, making it one of the more up-to-date in the Court. "What's wrong with it?"

"Jimmy's brother-in-law was murdered in here," Bill said.

"Oh."

"We put up new wallpaper afterwards, but I don't seem to use it very often, all the same. Though it looks quite nice, doesn't it?" Jimmy said, apparently oblivious to the yellowed wainscoting and faded furniture.

"Actually, I wanted a word with Daniel."

"Oh God." Daniel removed his spectacles, which he resented more the more necessary they became, and pocketed them. "I take it you intend to drop some ghastriness at my feet?"

Jimmy, who was even more daunted by brains than Archie, had always regarded Daniel as a sort of natural wonder. One effect of this was that his most barbed remarks bounced harmlessly off Jimmy's hide. "I don't know about ghastrly. It's about a chap of mine, from the show. Will Darling."

Daniel made a gesture of anguish. "Support me, Archie, my strength fails. What rough beast is slouching towards Bethlehem now, and can someone *please* prevent it?"

"You do make a fuss," Bill said, grinning. "Jim just wants to know what's going on with the fellow."

Daniel raised a brow. "Why don't you ask him?"

"I'm not going to 'phone up and demand what's going on in his life," Jimmy said with honest horror. "Good Lord. It's just that he was one of my special chaps, a Yoxall Raider, you know. Jolly useful, and a decent fellow, and what with all that business in the newspapers, I've been rather worried about him."

Archie wasn't sure what he meant to encompass by *all that business*. There had been so much, all with Darling at the centre or the periphery. It might be the shocking Etchil affair, or the second Symposium Club murder, of which Darling had been loudly accused. It might even be the ongoing trial of Lord Chingford on multiple charges of corruption in public office, which had once again brought the Secretan family and their affairs into unsympathetic limelight.

Lord Chingford hadn't stood trial for the first Symposium Club murder back in summer. Apparently someone else had committed the crime, to the great disappointment of a scandal-loving nation, although his shocking secret marriage had been joyfully received as second best. Daniel had pushed for a charge of conspiracy to murder instead, but the case had been hedged about by secrets and special interests, and he'd been unable to persuade the Director of Public Prosecutions to carry it through. This had irritated him intensely, so he had relieved his feelings by digging out the full sordid details of a bribery scandal in the War Department and putting Chingford in the dock for it. It was, as Archie could have told the embattled earl, never a good idea to give Daniel cause for a grudge.

Daniel was contemplating Jimmy. “And why are you asking me?”

“Well, I know Darling was mixed up in that rotten Club business where we lost the Secretary—such a cursed waste, he was awfully good—and you were all over that, weren’t you? Bill certainly was. So I expect you know something. You usually do.”

Bill gave him an affectionate look. “What he means is, he suspects Darling is one of ours, and all I have to say on the subject is that he isn’t in Finance. Nor will be, while I have my strength.”

“The mind boggles,” Daniel agreed.

Jimmy ignored that byplay. “And I’d like to know he’s all right, but I’d also like to know I’m allowed to know. That is, if I know something I oughtn’t know and I didn’t know I oughtn’t know it, I might spill the beans—by accident, you know.”

Daniel blinked. Bill rubbed the bridge of his nose, as one long accustomed to this sort of thing.

“And I wouldn’t want to do that,” Jimmy concluded. “It’s why Bill doesn’t tell me anything, just in case. Not that I’d talk out of school on purpose, but I’ve lived long enough to know I’m a duffer.”

“If only more people had your self-awareness.” Daniel considered for a second. “To be quite clear, anything said here is to remain within these four walls. If the subject comes up outside them, you have no idea about it. I take it you can manage that?”

“Message received.” Jimmy gave a firm nod. “Absolutely. I would appreciate it, old chap. I have a responsibility, you see. Darling was one of the young ones in Flanders—at first, anyway. Awfully young to do what we asked of him.”

“You could have asked someone else,” Daniel remarked.

“Couldn’t,” Jimmy said simply. “There’s men who won’t kill at any price, who weren’t much use in the circs, and men who like to do it—more of them than one might think—who aren’t entirely to be relied on at one’s back if you know what I mean, and then there’s the fellows who do the job

in a practical kind of way. *You* know, Archie. Darling was that sort, and God knows the job had to be done. But Lord, now I look back, they were so young.” He paused a couple of seconds, looking into space or time, then shook the thought off. “It’s how it was. George was eighteen when he went into the tanks. But I can’t help thinking that we, the country, we let their generation down.”

“We did rather,” Bill said, with restraint.

“Anyway, I told all my chaps after the show that they should feel free to get in touch if they needed a hand. Darling never did. Didn’t surprise me. Very independent fellow, and stubborn as a mule. And I wouldn’t press, of course. But seeing his face in the newspapers with *Have You Seen This Man* —”

“I quite understand your concerns,” Daniel said. “Let me reassure you, Jimmy, there’s no need for you to worry about Will Darling. He’s mine now.”

“Do you know,” Bill said, “if I were to compile a list of the least—the *very least*—reassuring statements ever made—”

“I shan’t tolerate this insubordination,” Daniel informed him. “To clarify: Darling spent an exciting few months taking on a criminal gang in a freelance capacity, assisting one of my more erratic, if inspired, agents, which was what led to the murder accusation.”

“He was framed for that, of course,” Bill put in.

“Indeed. Let us not speak of what he got away with. I took him into the Bureau while I still could—the War Office was eyeing him up again, which was unlikely to go well for anyone—and now have him formally paired up with the other agent, much as Archie and I used to work.”

Very much like that, Archie thought. Daniel had told him Secretan and Darling’s partnership was personal as well as professional, and made bitter speeches about extravagant romantic gestures, emotional nonsense, and the stupidity of lovestruck young men. Archie, with twenty years’ experience of what Daniel hid under his cynical armour, took those for precisely what they were worth.

Bill Merton doubtless knew about the pair: he had commented more than once, sardonically and accurately, on Daniel remaking the Private Bureau in his own image. Jimmy probably didn't know and it was none of Archie's business to tell him, so he confined himself to observing, "Lucky Darling. I hope his chap's a bit more patient than you were."

"The other fellow," Jimmy said. "Would that be the younger Secretan, that swine Chingford's brother, at all?"

Everyone looked at him. He shrugged. "It said in the papers that Darling was in cahoots with the Secretan chap, and he told George they were working together on that blackmail business. George liked him awfully. Darling, I mean. Doesn't think much of the other one, but some of you fellows are awfully peculiar, so I wondered—"

"Good heavens, Jimmy, you're positively Holmesian today," Daniel said. "Yes, the less dreadful Secretan is also mine. Although I sacked him in disgrace once," he added reminiscently. "It taught him an important lesson."

"What was the lesson?"

"Not to cross Daniel," Archie said. "That's always the lesson."

"Correct," Daniel said without remorse. "Also, that lone wolves don't get the shelter of the pack."

"Eh?"

Bill patted Jimmy's arm. "He means Secretan's a secretive so-and-so—"

"Well, he's meant to be, isn't he? You all are."

"Not to one another," Archie said. "That was a rule I made when we worked together: no keeping information to oneself and going off on one's own. Made it for a reason, too." He didn't give Daniel a pointed look at that; he didn't have to. They both remembered Berlin in '06. It had taken Archie two days and some damned hard fighting to extricate him from the trouble he'd got himself into quite unnecessarily, and afterwards, once he had Daniel safe and been able to breathe again, he'd lost his temper about as badly as he had in his life. Two days of not knowing, of thinking he might

never see him again, of lying awake because the fear didn't allow sleep. The body forgot pain once it was over, but Archie would never forget that fear.

"Indeed," Daniel said. "He's a very clever man, but cleverness isn't much use without cooperation. That was a discovery I had forced upon me most unpleasantly, and it's also been something of a learning curve for Secretan. One of many," he added. "I remarked when I took him on that he would be either the best idea or the worst mistake of my career."

"Which is it?" Jimmy asked.

"The jury's still out."

Bill clicked his tongue reproachfully. "If you ask me, Secretan's a damned good agent, even if he's a bag of nerves and attitudes. And I think you think the same."

"Of course he does," Archie said. "Why, you should have seen him fretting —"

"Be quiet, the pair of you, before you ruin my reputation," Daniel said.

"Kim Secretan is perverse, deceptive to a fault, chronically overburdened by irrelevant sensibilities, and a weasel. If, as I suspect, he weasels himself into becoming a very solid asset to the Bureau and perhaps the nation, you may congratulate me on my foresight. If he doesn't, I take no responsibility."

"Not much," murmured Archie, who had heard him on the telephone with lawyers, policemen, and authorities, pulling strings with both hands while Secretan and Darling had been carving their way through their troubles.

"Well, I should think Darling would be an asset too," Jimmy said staunchly. "And he's not a weasel."

"Indeed not. He's brought out the best in Secretan, a job wild horses would have rejected as excessively strenuous, and proved an extremely handy fellow in a tight spot. Not to mention that if we return to older forms of warfare and I happen to need a siege engine, he'll be my first port of call. I have a great deal of use for you, or rather my, Mr. Darling. Although I can

only shudder at what chaos will be wrought by the pair of them in harness.”

Daniel said that last with severe disapproval. A stranger might have believed he meant it.

“Well, you should know,” Bill pointed out. “After all, you and Archie were in the field together long enough.”

“Comparisons are odious,” Daniel said loftily. “I don’t think Archie and I caused as much mayhem in seven years as the Secretan–Darling axis managed in as many months.”

“Different times, though,” Archie put in. “The world’s changed. It’s harder than in our day, and people need to be harder for it.”

“It’s still my day, thank you very much. But your general point is true. The young men—the young people, I should say, Mrs. Keynes would have my hide—have the devil of a job ahead of them. The War solved very little, and made a great deal worse, and looking ahead... I’m not consumed by optimism.” Daniel’s eyes were distant. “Perhaps I’m getting old. In any case, we have a chance to rebuild our strength now, and part of that is putting the right people in place for whenever they’re needed. I hope we’re doing that.”

“Oh, don’t fret, old chap,” Jimmy said breezily. “War to end wars, remember? I don’t think we’ll see another one of those in our lifetime.”

Archie intervened with skill born of long practice, rising as he spoke. “Well, I’m impressed by the younger generation to date. And speaking of that, Daniel, you promised to show George a few trick shots at billiards.”

Daniel’s glance was appreciative, if a touch sardonic. “You promised that on my behalf. I can barely remember how to hold a cue.”

“Rubbish. I remember that nightclub in Paris, was it ‘09—”

“Don’t remind me. Go and find George, Jimmy, we’ll be down in a minute.”

Daniel scribbled a last line as the others left. Archie waited to be sure he was finished. “So when am I going to meet your protégé?”

“Secretan? He’s not my protégé. What a ghastly thought.”

Archie gave a pointed sigh. Daniel said, as one driven to an admission, “*If* he continues to pull himself together, I might give some thought to his future at some point, should I have time. That scarcely makes him a protégé. Why do you want to meet him?”

Archie was fairly sure that protégé meant someone you protected, which made the word entirely accurate, but didn’t press the point. “I’m interested. And I’d like to get the measure of the fellow, since I expect I’ll be hearing plenty more about him.” *Because he’s your protégé*, he didn’t say, and got a mock-glare for it anyway. “Do you know what you ought to do?”

“You’re going to tell me, aren’t you?”

“Sir Maurice’s ‘quiet chats’. Remember those? Invitation to the Club, quite informal, whisky and wisdom? You should start those up again.”

“Everyone hated those. *You* hated them. They were dreadful.”

“So?”

Daniel tipped his head, considering. “I suppose another means to terrify the staff is always handy. Keeps them on their toes. I’m not drinking whisky for anyone, though.”

“So drink gin. I want to meet this Darling chap too. Maybe I can give him some tips on managing difficult field agents.”

Daniel’s lips parted. “Archie Curtis, you *dare*.”

“I’m an expert. I kept you in line for seven years. That’s valuable experience I’ve a duty to share.”

Daniel gave him the sort of look that ruined his subordinates’ days, if not weeks, then his beautifully shaped eyebrows angled into a more thoughtful expression. “Although, joking apart—”

“Who says I’m joking?”

“Quiet. In all seriousness, that could actually help deal with something I’ve been turning over. If we could head off an issue before it becomes a

problem— Yes. Yes, that might, in fact, be rather a good idea. We'll discuss it further, but thank you, Archie."

Together over twenty years, and Archie still glowed absurdly at Daniel's compliments, possibly because they were so rare. He said, "Glad to be of service," and gestured in the direction of George and the billiard room.

They headed out into the corridor, and down the stair. Archie could hear Fen gurgling with laughter in the main hall, and Pat's amused voice, and Laura and George talking over one another in enthusiastic agreement. It was a cheering sound, and a hopeful one.

Daniel touched his shoulder lightly. "Archie?"

He stopped and looked round. "Mmm?"

"Merely that I was reflecting how damned lucky I am in you. That you are and always have been a tower of strength. That, frankly, I rely on you in ways I rarely acknowledge and you probably don't notice." Archie blinked. Daniel shrugged elegantly. "It occurred to me forcibly when you mentioned Berlin, and again just now, so I thought I'd mention it."

"Uh. Well. Any time."

"Yes, my dear. I know. That was precisely the point I was making." He ran a finger down the side of Archie's cheek. "Still my Viking."

"Couldn't stop now." Archie caught his hand and they stood a moment, enjoying the touch, the togetherness.

Twenty years, and a long twenty at that. There had been arguments, danger, a lot of damned hard work. Intimacy, physical and mental and soul-deep; shared jokes; private looks. The knowledge that, somehow, ordinary Archie Curtis was what the glorious Daniel da Silva wanted and needed in life.

He had Daniel's book with him now; it had become a charm for him after Berlin, and he never travelled without it. *Songs for a Viking*: a slim, privately printed volume that had sold about sixty copies. He understood about half the poems in it, and knew all of them by heart because Daniel had written them for him, and Daniel thought *he* was lucky?

He squeezed Daniel's hand in lieu of trying to say all that, and knew he was understood. "Come on. You've got to teach the younger generation a thing or two about billiards."

"Teach George, perhaps. I expect Laura's a practised pool hustler; she seems capable of more or less everything. I wonder if she wants a job."

"If they're going to restore Rodington Court, she's got one," Archie pointed out, and linked arms with him. He didn't generally appreciate being regarded as an old bachelor when he was not that far past fifty, but it had its advantages, as the linked arms and shared rooms now appeared quite unexceptional. "Shall we?"

"Proceed at will, my dear," Daniel said, and they walked on together.

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# PART TWO

## MODUS OPERANDI

The thing about Will Darling in evening dress—a subject on which I will dwell for hours unless forcibly prevented—is that it's such a fine balance between enticement and warning.

Needless to say, he looks delightful in black and white finery, though Phoebe is quite right that he should wear deep yellow more often; it would bring out the gold flecks in his eyes. 'Hazel' is such an inadequate word: they're positively autumnal. Unfortunately, I have a very good idea of how he'd react if I offered to take him to a tailor. Ah, well: such is Will.

What was I saying? Yes, delightful in finery, but—or do I mean because?—he wears it with such obvious reluctance. Evening dress blurs the edges of individuality, building up the scrawny and slimming the large and merging every sort of man into a homogenous mass of black and white. It's a uniform, making everyone fit in: that's the point. It doesn't make *Will* fit in, because it's not his uniform. He's uncomfortable in it, and when Will is uncomfortable he sets his jaw and folds his arms in a way that, consciously or otherwise, suggests he's about to make someone else even less comfortable than himself. The contrast between the civilised clothing and the uncivilised attitude is *delectable*.

So there we were: both dolled up to the nines, albeit with Will wearing his like prison uniform, at the Club. Because 'an informal evening at the Club' is, God help us, DS's latest frolic. I assume he does these things to keep the entire Bureau in a state of tension, though according to some of the old stagers, this is a hark-back to the reign of his predecessor, V. (Or Sir Maurice Vaizey, who as far as I know never called himself anything else, but Service people do adore their jargon.)

The Club—you will excuse my not naming it—is, at least, rather more cosy than the Symposium. It's an unassuming place, the sort where the clocks stopped in 1870, and the chairs are in desperate need of reupholstery, but half the membership doesn't notice and the other half would rise up in outrage at any sign of change. How it has become the unofficial headquarters of the British cloak and dagger establishment, I could not say, but I have often considered that a well-placed bomb would have a remarkable effect on the intelligence of the nation. In every possible way.

We found DS in his usual room. The purpose of the 'informal evenings', aside from inducing nervous collapse in his staff, is apparently to talk about matters in a less formal environment than the Bureau. One is supposed to speak frankly, exchange difficult truths, relax. Obviously, nobody in his right mind would relax around DS for a second, but at least this way you get a glass of barely adequate sherry with your interrogation.

You think I sound less than appreciative of my chief? That I should be more effusively grateful? Perhaps. He gave me a chance, a lifeline, when I had nothing at all to live for. Will says 'for his purposes', but I had no purpose of my own then, not any more, and the lack, the loss, had eaten me hollow. I don't think I could have taken up an invitation to feed the hungry or tend to the sick: I wanted something that I could feel as punishing and even degrading, not heroic or praiseworthy. I suspect DS knew that very well.

I have had—and indeed have deserved—faith from very few people in the course of a poorly managed existence. It is extraordinary to me even now that DS and Phoebe and Will all saw someone worth trusting. Far more extraordinary is that I let every one of them down over the course of the Waring business, and every one of them gave me another chance.

Those second chances. Gifts beyond price. Beyond comprehension.

Needless to say I should do anything for Phoebe, and when it comes to Will—well, *Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths*, as the poet says. (Although in reality, were I to spread the cloths of heaven under his feet, he'd tell me to pick them up before they got mucky. My wonderful, practical Will.) As for DS, he gave me all the work I needed and none of the sympathy I could not have borne. He gave me purpose, he gave me the sack when I had

tangled myself up so badly that the only way out was to cut every cord and start again, and he gave me my job back, albeit apparently some time before apprising me of the fact. But he didn't ever give me sentiment, and the absolute least I can do is return that favour.

Which is all to say, I shall be as rude as I like about him, thank you.

So. There was DS in his usual chair by the fire, and a large man standing talking to him. Notably larger than Will; on the wrong side of fifty; grey hair that probably used to be fair; starting to spread a little around the midriff; black leather glove on his right hand covering the absence of several fingers. All adding up to Sir Archibald Curtis, late of the Bureau and nephew of the aforementioned V.

I'd seen him around. One does in the Bureau; although retired from active duty and not a desk-job sort of man, he still seems to have some semi-official involvement. And of course he was DS's angel in the distant past, as Will is mine now.

(While I find most professional jargon intolerable, I do adore that bit of Bureau slang—guardian angel, you understand, meaning a fellow who looks after a less physically competent agent in potentially dangerous situations. Aside from anything else, it permits me to refer to *My angel Darling* in debriefing, thus irritating red-faced men and making Will stare at the back of the room with a military expression.)

DS's angel had the stolid look of the squirearchy: foursquare, blunt, one who would put up with a great deal of nonsense, probably by ignoring it. He'd doubtless have needed to. I have tried to consider DS as a field agent and frankly, the imagination balks. Can one see off an anarchist conspiracy or German spy with a withering memorandum? Mind you, given the size of his angel, one assumes the sword was mightier than the pen. As you might say.

The angel approached. "Archie Curtis," he said, by way of introduction.

"Kim Secretan, and this is Will Darling. Pleased to meet you, Sir Archie."

(This wasn't intended to irritate, I may say, though it naturally had that effect. I used the title because Will prefers to be warned in these matters,

and I would rather annoy other people than him.)

DS's angel raised a sardonic eyebrow, for all the world like the man himself, and said, "You too, Lord Arthur."

"Secretan," I said.

"Curtis," he returned, ending debate on the matter.

Will looked between us, and did a magnificent job of not rolling his eyes.

"Sherry?"

We poured sherry and chatted a little, in an English sort of way; you will be amazed to learn the weather came up. Then DS called, "Join me, Secretan," and gestured to the single armchair opposite his.

Now, there are people, even in the Bureau, who assume Will is some blend of henchman and footman, there to stand silently behind my chair. DS is not one of them. So I was unsurprised to observe that, even as I went to join DS, Will was being steered off to the other side of the room by Curtis.

All that happened then was that DS and I had an allegedly casual professional discussion, during which I did my best to keep a surreptitious eye on Will chatting to Curtis in the corner. But the interesting thing was, DS was doing the same. Not untrusting on either of our parts, needless to say. Just...keeping an eye. And at one point I caught him looking over at Will and Curtis together, and I glanced at them too, and when I looked back DS was watching me watching them, and our gazes met.

You know those moments. Mutual recognition, mutual awareness, followed by an equally mutual agreement not to mention any conclusions that anyone might have reached. And then we carried on talking about Bureau affairs, and that was that.

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We took a taxi-cab home, so we couldn't speak until we were in the flat, at which point Will said, "What was all that about?"

“Well, in my case it was about the Janvier business and whether it was anything more than chronic stupidity and incompetence. I said nobody was that stupid. DS said, *On the contrary*, but he certainly doesn’t think Janvier is. I imagine we’ll be going to Marseilles soon.”

“South of France? Finally.”

“It’s about time we took a holiday,” I agreed, though we both suspected Janvier was going to be a ghastly mess (as indeed it proved, but that’s another story). “How was your evening?”

“I don’t know,” Will said. “Sir Archie used to be an angel himself, did you know? We swapped a few war stories—he had an interesting time of it—and compared notes on fieldwork. It was a very pleasant evening having a nice chat with a fellow professional.”

“Is that bad?”

“It wasn’t bad, no,” Will granted. “But a quid says it was bollocks. What was actually going on?”

One of my daily joys is watching my painfully straightforward Will develop a suspicious temperament. He isn’t terribly good at interpreting buried layers of meaning, at least not yet, but he can damn well tell when they’re present. I live in fear of the day some Bureau-crat decides he ought to start operating as solo agent rather than paired angel, although good luck making him do anything he doesn’t want to. He’s had his fill of that.

“Good question,” I said. “And I can’t be certain of the answer, but there was nothing in my conversation with DS I wouldn’t have said at the office. There are undeniably men for whom the context of ‘informal chat’ and good chaps together having a drink makes a difference—”

“You’re not one.”

“No. Therefore it wasn’t about me. I think Curtis wanted to meet you.”

“Why?” Will demanded.

“Possibly because of me.”

Will gave me one of his looks, for which I can hardly blame him. “You just said—”

“What I think,” I said, “is that DS is taking an interest in my career. With capitals. Taking An Interest.”

“Right. That’s good, right?” It wasn’t a rhetorical question.

“We’ll find out. But you are—with me. And DS knows that. And therefore, I suspect Curtis wanted to know you.”

“Hang on. I’m with you how?”

“Dear God, Will, I thought we established that in summer. Must I declare myself again?”

“Oh, shut up. I meant, what does a Boer War veteran know about you and me?”

“At a guess, everything,” I said. “Probably via pillow talk.”

It’s always entertaining to render Will speechless. He took that in for a few moments and said, “Are you saying, that bloke and DS—”

“DS doesn’t confide in me.” An understatement of epic proportions. “But I’m sure I told you I met him in my club? *Not* the Symposium. And...well. I saw him look at Curtis.”

Will, it is safe to say, does not have the gift of spotting people’s inclinations and affections. If there is a direct opposite of that gift, in fact, that’s what he has. At least he takes my word for these things. “Really? Sir Archie? Bloody hell.”

“I think so. And I think he wanted to meet you because DS is taking that interest, and you are my angel in every sense, and he has fellow feeling. You may possibly be acquiring a mentor.”

Will’s expression when offered help is always a picture, albeit not one you’d hang on the wall. “I didn’t ask for a sodding mentor.”

“A friend, then. Someone who knows your situation, has been in a similar one himself, and would be able to talk about things. A resource if needed. Hmm?”

That gave him pause. He is moving, albeit slowly, to accept that thinking about things is necessary, and talking about them a useful step in that process. “Right...”

“I mention it only for your consideration. But DS clearly wanted you to meet, and he usually has his reasons.”

“Right.”

“You do have a difficult task, as angel,” I suggested. “Given our relationship, the emotional burden—”

“Saving your arse is my job,” Will said over me. “If I’m saving it for myself, that’s a bonus.”

At this point *I* gave *him* a look. We exchange those on a regular basis; it saves time. He returned a rueful grin, indicating he knew he’d dodged the subject. “Anyway, you’re not that bad, as agents go.”

“I want that in writing.”

“No, really. You should have heard Sir Archie. Said DS wore his nerves raw. He had to put his foot down a few times, about risks and communications and whatnot. Told me a couple of hair-raising stories.”

“Stories about DS? In the field?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me *immediately*.”

“Pour us a drink first. Can’t stand sherry.”

I went to mix sidecars. After a moment, from behind me, Will said, “It does worry me a bit.”

I knew that note in his voice, so I didn’t turn around. I kept making our drinks.

“Because,” he said. “Because I’ve got your back and always will, and I don’t want anyone else doing that. It’s my job. But if I got it wrong, if something happened to you because I wasn’t fast enough or good enough—”

I put out two glasses. Took up the tongs, picked out lemon slices, dropped them in. Listened.

“That’s pretty grim to think about. But if I dwelled on it, if I thought of anything that might happen to you as my fault for not stopping it, that would get in my way. I couldn’t make decisions in the first place, thinking like that. Sir Archie said as much, that you have to put everything else to the side when you do the job. I suppose that’s what he meant.”

“Yes.”

“But that way, that road, that’s what got you into a mess with the Waring business, isn’t it? Because if you put too many feelings aside, or the wrong ones, you can do damage.”

“Yes,” I said again. “I’m still trying to square that circle. Or perhaps it would be better to say, find that balance.”

“Find a balance when the weights keep changing,” Will said. “I don’t know how we do that. But you’re right, or Sir Archie is. It’s not a hole I want to fall into.”

“Might you talk to him again?”

I could all but hear the shrug. “Makes sense, I suppose. I mean, if he knows where the holes in the road are, maybe he can help me dodge them. So. Maybe. Yes.”

My Will. So very reluctant to face himself, so doggedly determined to do it anyway. Christ, I adore him.

I turned with our drinks. He took his and smiled at me, with that boyish flush that creeps over his cheekbones when he’s embarrassed. Never tell him about that: he’d loathe it. “Cheers,” he said.

“To what?”

“Old soldiers?”

I raised my glass. “To old soldiers. And to DS, who might in fact be moderately good at managing his staff.”

Will made a rude face. “To the South of France, even if we have to deal with Janvier.”

“Ugh. To a stop in Paris on the way back, to see the girls.”

“Oh, good plan. To the girls.”

Will clinked his glass against mine, and gave the smile that stole my breath when I first saw it in a dusty bookshop, and went on to appropriate heart and mind, body and soul. Really, it’s outrageous of him. I should complain.

“To the girls,” he said again. “To the future. To us.”

THE END