

WILD LILY

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1

“Pa, it’s my birthday tomorrow.”

“Is it, by Jove!” His father lowered his newspaper and stared curiously at Antony over the top as if he had never seen him before, which he hadn’t much. “And how old will you be? Twelve?”

“Seventeen, Pa. I was born in 1904, if you remember.”

“Good God!” Mr. Sylvester put the newspaper down. “Seriously?”

“Yes, of course seriously.” Antony tried hard to believe his father was joking, but knew he wasn’t. What was the use? “I thought you might buy me a present.”

“Yes. Fine. What do you want?”

“An airplane.”

“An airplane? Hmm.”

His father went back behind his newspaper, and Antony waited. He wasn’t too worried; his father always gave him what he asked for.

“Go over to Brooklands, then, and see my friend Tommy Sopwith. He’ll find you something sensible. You don’t want to break your neck.”

“No, Pa. Thank you. I’ll be careful.”

Which he wouldn’t. Had he ever been? It wasn’t in his nature.

His father didn't look up again and Antony left the breakfast table satisfied. His friends had scoffed and said the old man wouldn't go for it, but they didn't know the old man like he did. They had said try him with a racehorse, but Antony wasn't interested in racing. He could have gotten one, of course, even as well as the airplane quite possibly. But just for the sake of his friends . . . ? He often thought they were only his friends for what they could get. But all the same, he needed them, stranded in school holidays in this godforsaken home. With an airplane they could travel. It must be a two-seater. He could get them to Paris one by one. They could all go up the Eiffel Tower . . .

Musing happily, Antony made his way out of the house. If he hadn't lived in Lockwood Hall all his life, finding the way outside from the breakfast room could have taken half the morning, the place was so large. It sat like a great frowning fortress on a wooded hilltop, looking down on its own lake, the farm, the grotto, the winding river . . . it just needed a row of cannons on the rooftop, Antony often thought, to dispel raiders—should they ever come. But nobody came much apart from the staff, an army of them: six gardeners under a head gardener, ten kitchen staff, myriad cleaning women, handymen, pantry boys, nurses for his sister, the garage men, the forestry men, the charcoal workers, not to mention the farmworkers scattered to the far horizons, only met in passing. One knew a few of them by name and joshed with the boys sometimes, and talked machinery in the garage, but of course none were friends. Antony was a law unto himself, with all these people to tend him, but at the back

of his mind he often felt he was missing something. A mother? All his friends had mothers. He wasn't sure about it, knowing mothers could be a nuisance: fussy, bossy, and demanding. Perhaps not. But an airplane . . . his heart lifted. He hadn't really doubted that his father would agree, but now that the words had been spoken, Antony felt an unusual frisson of excitement. For a boy who had everything, he now had a bit more than everything—an airplane!

I'm on my way, Mr. Sopwith!



“Did you know, Squashy, that Mr. Sylvester is buying Ant an airplane?”

“What's an airplane?”

“Those things in the sky, that men sit in.”

“Cor.”

Lily was kind to her brother, Squashy, who had little brain. None, said most of the village people. But he did no harm. Their father was Mr. Sylvester's head gardener and they lived in a cottage on the estate. He often took them with him when he went to work, as his wife had died when Squashy was born and he felt he had to keep an eye on them—Lily seemed to look for mischief and of course Squashy was Squashy, so they slipped easily into trouble. Not that Antony was a good influence; as the lad had so little to do, he often came larking with Lily. The two were something of a pair, although Lily, at thirteen, was a good deal younger. But she had no conception of class where Antony was concerned, and treated him the same as she treated

her village friends—that is, with her usual scorn, always the one who knew best.

“I don’t know why he don’t clip you one, the cheek of you,” her father said. “You should remember he’s the boss round here. A bit of respect would do no harm.”

“What, for Ant? He’s only Ant.”

Her father, known by his surname, Gabriel, as were all the workers on the estate, was not articulate enough to explain exactly what he meant. It was true that Antony was not the vicar or the doctor or the squire or Mrs. Carruthers, or anybody to whom Lily was quite rightly in the habit of showing respect, but all the same he was heir to one of the richest men in the county and therefore well up in the hierarchy of people to whom Gabriel touched his hat and feared to look in the eye. Even if Antony was only a kid.

Gabriel called him Master Antony. If he got an airplane he might have to up it to Mister.



Mrs. Carruthers was outraged. Her husband had told her the news. He knew that she got very upset if she didn’t know every detail of what was going on in the village or at the big house. Even if the news infuriated her it was easier for him to live with that than her outrage if she missed out on it. He braced himself.

“Sylvester’s insane! The boy will kill himself!”

“The things are safer now than they used to be. The war advanced flying no end.”

“It advanced Sylvester too. How’s he made all that money, I’d like to know? To buy his son an airplane, just for a toy! I ask you!”

“He’s a very shrewd man, Mr. Sylvester. A clever businessman. You always imply that he made his wealth dishonestly, but there’s no evidence.”

She never called him Mr. Sylvester, just Sylvester, because she ranked him as trade. She had scarcely ever met him for he was always in his Rolls-Royce when he passed through the village; he never came to church, nor to any of the village functions, but his lifestyle was widely described by his servants, who were mostly local and only too willing to gossip.

Sadly, the gossip was very boring—no women, no parties, few visitors, no empty whiskey bottles. The only items of interest concerned his daughter, Helena, whom no one had ever seen save fleetingly, very occasionally, in the backseat of the Rolls-Royce on its way to London. She was twenty-one and very beautiful. But she was blind and deaf and lived in her own quarters in the vast house with her own staff to look after her. However, those staff never came to the village. They had their own staff to wait on them. This was really good fodder for gossip.

“Think they’re royalty! Can you believe!”

“And she treated like a princess! Only a tradesman’s daughter! That’s what money can do!”

“But the poor mite—blind and deaf! Can you imagine it?”

Kinder souls spoke out:

“Why shouldn’t she have the best? No mother to love her—it’s tragic.”