

## THE RECEIVERS

Alastair Reynolds

With the ambulance sealed and the Rutherford counter ticking nice and slowly, we cleared the hospital checkpoint and sped through the lanes to Sandhurst and Rye, then took the main road east to Walland Marsh and the junction at Brenzett to New Romney. It had been sunny when we departed, but as we neared the coast, the sky turned leaden and overcast, with a silvery-gray mist keeping visibility to a mile or so. The coast road to Dungeness was a patchwork of repairs, with the newest craters either barricaded off or spanned by temporary metal plates. Ralph took it all in his stride, swerving the ambulance this way and that as if he had driven this road a thousand times, never once letting our speed drop under forty miles per hour. I held onto the dashboard as the ambulance lurched from side to side, creaking on its suspension. Ralph wasn't my normal driver, and he took a bit of getting used to.

"Not getting seasick are you, Wally?" he asked, with a big smile.

"In an ambulance, sir?"

"It's just that you look a bit green!"

"I'm fine, sir—right as rain."

"You're in safe hands, don't worry about that."

Between jolts I asked: "Been driving long, have you, sir?"

"Twenty years or so, on and off. Started off a sergeant with the Special Constabulary Unit, then got myself signed up as a private with the London Field Ambulance."

"In France were you, sir, before the retreat?"

"Steady, lad. If the Patriotic League catches you calling it that, they'll have your guts for garters. It's the 'consolidation,' remember. Well, I was there—doing this job. So was Ravel—he was driving for the French, though, and we never met again."

"Ravel, sir?"

"Old teacher of mine. A long time ago now."

I didn't know much about Ralph, truth be told. Mr. Vaughan Williams was his name, but no one ever called him anything other than Ralph, or sometimes Uncle Ralph. He was a familiar face at Cranbrook, always organizing a singsong around the mess piano. They say he used to be a composer, and quite a good one, although I'd never heard of him. Most of the chaps liked him because he didn't have any airs and graces, even though you could tell he was from a good background. I guessed he was about sixty, but strong with it, as if he could go on for a few more years without any trouble. There were plenty like him around: men who had signed up at the start of the war, when they were still in their early forties, and who had hung on ever since. Sometimes when I listened to Mr. Chamberlain's speeches on the wireless, I wondered if I'd still be around in twenty years, with an ambulance mate young enough to be my son.

We passed a gun emplacement that was still in use, two barrels sticking out at an angle, like a pair of fingers telling the Huns where to shove it, and then another one that had been bombed, so that it was just a broken shell, like a concrete-gray hat box that had been stepped on; then we slowed for a checkpoint at a striped kiosk hemmed in with sandbags. The guards had boxes hung around their necks, stuffed with masks in case the gas alarm went off. We were waved through without stopping, and then it was a clear

dash along another mile or so of chalky road with barbed wire on both sides. Out of the mist loomed a tall shape, the same gray color as the gun emplacements, and a little further along the road was a similar shape and a third barely visible beyond that. From a distance they looked like tall gray tombstones sticking out of the land. Drawing nearer I saw that the structures were all alike, although I still had no idea of what they were. I couldn't see any doors or windows or gun slits, at least not from the angle we were approaching.

"I don't suppose you have much idea what this is all about," Ralph said. "Never having been to Dungeness, after all. There are some other stations at Hythe and up the coast at Sunderland, but I don't imagine you've been there either."

"No, sir," I admitted.

"What were you doing before you ended up with the Corps?"

"Artillery, sir. Antiaircraft emplacement at Selsey."

"Shoot down much?"

"A few spotter planes. One flying wing and a couple of zeppelins. Then I got wounded in Sevenoaks."

We passed the first shape. Because the road snaked a bit, I was able to see that the front of the object didn't have any doors or windows either, and no sign of gun slits. The main part was a big concrete bowl with a thick rim, tilted almost onto its side so that it faced out to sea like a great curved ear. The bowl was easily fifty or sixty feet across, and its lower rim was about thirty feet off the ground. It was attached—or cast as part of—a heavy supporting wall with sloping sides made of the same dreary gray concrete. A windowless hut was positioned under the rim of the bowl, and rising from the roof of this hut was a metal tower that ended in a pole, sticking up so that it was in front of the middle part of the bowl.

"They've built them big now," Ralph said. "They were only about half the size when I was here last."

"I've no idea what this is all about, sir."

"Really, Wally?"

"Not a clue, sir."

The ambulance slowed a little, and we passed a concrete plinth on which was mounted a curious object, resembling a flattened searchlight on a cradle that could be aimed in various directions. Two men were sitting on chairs attached to either side of the moving part of the cradle. In addition to their gas masks they were wearing heavy black headphones. The men were gripping levers and steering wheels, and as we passed the cradle, it tilted and rotated, making me think of a sleepy dog suddenly waking up to follow a wasp. A third man was standing next to them holding a portable telephone to his ear.

"The name of the game's acoustic location," Ralph said, before looking at me expectantly. "I expect it's all as clear as crystal now?"

"Not really, sir. But you said 'acoustic'—I presume this has something to do with sound?"

"Very good. This is one of the main stations on the south coast. Those chaps we just passed are listening to the sky; that thing they're sitting on can pick up sounds from tens of miles away."

I thought about that for a moment. "Won't they have been deafened by us driving past?"

“No more than you’d be blinded by the sun if you were looking in the opposite direction. The receiver only amplifies the sounds coming into it along the direction it’s pointed—nothing else matters. Those chaps steer it around until they pick up the drone of an incoming airplane, and then they nod it back and forth and side to side until they know they’ve got the strongest possible signal. Then a third chap reads off the elevation and directional angle and telephones that information straight to the coastal defense coordinator, who can then telephone instructions to the big guns or the Flying Corps.”

“When we were told to point our guns, sir, I always assumed it was down to spotters.”

“Which was undoubtedly what they wanted you think. Not that the Huns didn’t have their own stations, but we always reckoned our coordinating system was superior. On a clear day, when the airplanes are within visual range, a spotter will always do a better job than the sound men—it’s all a question of wavelengths and the problem of building sound mirrors much bigger than the ones we already have. But when it’s dark, or the weather’s closed in like this, and the aircraft are a long way out, the fix provided by the sound stations gives us several minutes of advance warning.”

The second concrete shape was now to our right. I noticed that the rim of the dish was missing a big chunk and some concrete rubble was lying on the ground under it—it was as if someone had taken a nibble from a biscuit. A man with white gloves and a gas mask was standing by the hut directing us to continue driving.

“Looks like they took a direct hit,” I said. “What do you suppose it was?”

Ralph steered for the third shape. “Flying wing or long-range shells. Doesn’t make much difference now—the one’s as bad as the other.”

“Are the concrete things the same as the one the men were steering?”

“Same general idea, just scaled up. The men call them sound mirrors, which is what they are, really—giant mirrors for collecting all that sound and concentrating it on a tiny spot just in front of the dish.”

“I don’t see how you can steer one of those, sir, let alone nod it back and forth.”

“You can’t, obviously. But you can move the pickup tube a little, which has a similar effect. The three of them are pointed in slightly different directions, to cover likely angles of approach. On a good day they’ll pick up the bombers when they’re still grouping over France.”

I couldn’t see any shapes beyond the third one, so I assumed this was the limit of the Dungeness station. Beyond was a colorless tract of marshy scrub, as far as the mist would allow me to see. The final shape was even more badly damaged than the second one, with two chunks missing from it. A big piece of concrete had even fallen onto the roof of the hut, though the structure appeared undamaged. A guard with a gas mask box around his neck was ushering us to park alongside the hut, gesticulating with some urgency. He had a beetroot-red face and pockmarked cheeks, and he looked thoroughly fed up with his lot.

Ralph brought the ambulance to a halt, and the engine muttered itself into silence. Even through the airtight windows I could hear the slow rise and wail of a siren. The sirens went on for so long and so often that the only thing you could do in the end was pretend not to hear them. If you didn’t, you’d go witless with worry.

We got out of the ambulance, collected our gas mask boxes from under the seats, and took two rolled-up stretchers from the rear compartment, carrying one apiece. We didn’t know how many injured

we would have to deal with, but it always paid to assume the worst—if we had to come back for more stretchers, we would.

“In there,” the beetroot-faced guard said, before stalking off in the general direction of the second shape. “Be quick about it—after a shelling like this the flying wings usually come in.”

“How many injured?” Ralph called after him, but the man was already fixing his mask into place and appeared not to hear him. A seagull flew overhead and seemed to laugh at us.

“He’s having an off day,” I said, as we walked over to the hut.

“Your nerves wouldn’t be in fine fettle after spending long out here. The Huns have been bombing these listening stations to smithereens for years. Of course, we build ’em up again as soon as they’re done—the thing about concrete is it’s cheap and quick—but for some odd reason that only encourages them to keep coming back.”

“Pardon my asking, but how do you know all about this stuff, sir? Isn’t it top secret?”

“It was, although it won’t be for much longer. I don’t doubt you’ve noticed those wireless towers that are springing up everywhere?”

“Yes?” I answered cautiously, for I had seen the spindly constructions with my own eyes.

“Rumor mill says they’re something that’ll put these listening posts out of business in pretty sharp fashion. Pick up planes from hundreds of miles away, not tens. But until they’ve got ’em strung across the south coast and wired together properly, these acoustic locators are all we’ve got.” Ralph put his hand on the door to the hut. “To answer your first question . . . well, let’s attend to the chaps in here first, shall we?”

The door to the hut was stiff with rubberized gas seals, but after a good tug it swung open easily enough. I followed him inside, not quite sure what to expect. Despite the seals, the hut was damp and cold, like a slimy old cave by the sea. Although there were no windows, there was an electric light in the ceiling, a bulb trapped behind a black metal cage, with a red one next to it that wasn’t on. The lit bulb gave off a squalid brown glow that it was going to take my good eye a few moments to adjust to. There was some furniture inside: a gray metal desk with a black bakelite telephone, some chairs, some shelves with boxes and technical books, and a lot of secret-looking radio equipment, most of which was also black and bakelite. And a man sitting in one of the chairs at an angle to the desk, with a bandage around his head and another around his forearm, his shirt sleeve rolled up. As we came in, he tugged headphones from his head and put them down on the desk. He also closed a big green log book he had open on the desk, sliding it to the back. I’d only had a glimpse, but I’d seen loose papers stuffed into the log book, with lots of scratchy lines and blotches on them. I noticed there was a fountain pen on the desk next to an inkstand.

The man was a good bit older than me, although I’d still have said he was ten years younger than Ralph—fiftyish, give or take. He still had a moustache even though they weren’t in fashion nowadays. He looked at us groggily, as though he’d been half asleep until that moment, and waved us away in a good-natured kind of way. “I’m all right, lads—just a few scratches, that’s all. I told ’em it wasn’t worth sending out for an ambulance.”

“We’ll be the judges of that, won’t we, Wally?” Ralph said to me, as if we’d been working together for years.

I closed the door behind us.

The man stiffened in his chair and peered at the door with squinty eyes. “Ralph? Good lord, it can’t be, can it?”

“George?”

“One and the same, old boy!”

Ralph shook his head in delighted astonishment. “Of all the places!”

A smile spread across the other man’s face. “I presume you found out I was working here?”

“Not at all!”

The man laughed. “But it was you that put the word in for me!”

He had quite a posh way of speaking, like Ralph, but there was a bit of Yorkshire in there as well.

I placed my stretcher against the wall, coming to the conclusion I wouldn’t be needing it, even though the man would still need to come back to Cranbrook.

“Well, yes,” Ralph said. “But that was a while ago, wasn’t it? You’ll have to make allowances for me, I’m afraid—getting a bit dodderly in my old age.” He put down his own stretcher and shook his head again, as if he still couldn’t quite believe what he was seeing. Slowly he moved to examine the seated man. “Well, what happened? Did you get knocked down in here?”

“No,” our patient said. “I was outside, coming down the ladder from the pickup tube, when some shells hit the dish. Got knocked off the ladder by a couple of splinters. Dashed my head on the side of the hut and grazed my arm.”

Ralph gave him a severe look. “You were outside during a shelling? You silly old fool, Butterworth.”

“The pickup tube needed adjustment. You know how it is—someone had to do it.”

“But not you, George—not you of all people. Well, better get you back to Cranbrook, I suppose. The fellow outside said we can expect flying wings. Don’t expect you’ll be too sorry to miss them, will you?”

“That’s always how it happens,” George said. “Berthas take out our listening posts, then the planes can come in and pick their targets at leisure. You’re right, Ralph, you chaps had best be moving. But you can leave me here—I’ll mend.”

“Not a chance, old man. Can you stand up?”

“Honestly, I’m fine.”

“And we have a duty to look after you, so there’s no point in arguing—right, Wally?”

“Right, sir,” I said.

Ralph offered him a hand, and the seated man moved to stand up. Seeing that he didn’t like having to put weight on his forearm, I wondered if his injury was a bit more serious than just a graze.

Just at that moment there was a distant whump that made itself felt more through the ground than the air. It was followed in quick succession by another, a little closer and sharper sounding. Accompanying the sound of the bombs was a mournful droning sound.

“That’s your flying wings,” George said, standing on his own two feet. “They were quick about it this time—give ’em credit. Probably got U-boats watching the station from the sea.”

I heard the boom of our own antiaircraft guns—you can’t mistake a seventy-five millimeter cannon for anything else, once you’ve worked on them. But something told me they were just taking potshots, lobbing shells into the sky in the vain hope of hitting one of those droning, batlike horrors.

“Righty-ho,” said Ralph. “Let’s get you to the ambulance, shall we?”

I moved to the door and opened it again, just enough to admit a sliver of overcast daylight. At that moment another bomb fell, much closer this time. It was only twenty or thirty yards from the barbed wire on the other side of the road, and the blast launched a fan of sand and soil and rubble into the air. I felt as if someone had whacked a cricket bat against the side of my head—for a moment my good ear went pop, and I couldn’t hear anything at all. Suddenly the distance to the ambulance looked immense. My hearing came back in a muffled way, but even so the siren managed to sound more insistent than before, as if it were telling us: Now you’ll believe me, won’t you?

I closed the door hard and looked back at the other two. “I think it’s a bit risky, sir. They seem to be concentrating the attack around here.”

“We’d best sit tight and hope it passes,” George said. “We’ll be safe enough in here—the hut’s a lot sturdier than it looks.”

“I hope you’re right about that,” Ralph said, sitting down in the other chair. Then he looked at me. “I don’t suppose you have the faintest idea what’s going on, Wally?”

“Not really, sir. I mean, I gather you two know each other, but beyond that . . .”

Ralph said, “George and I go back a long way, although we haven’t clapped eyes on each other in—what? Ten years, easily.”

“I should say,” George said.

“This is Wally Jenkins, by the way. He’s a good sort, although I don’t think he much cares for my driving.” Ralph leaned toward me with a knowing look in his eye, as if he were about to offer me a sweet. “George and I were both interested in music before the war. Very interested, I suppose you might say.”

“I heard you were a composer, sir,” I said.

“As was George here. Great things were expected of Butterworth.”

I racked my brains, but I didn’t think I’d ever heard of anyone called George Butterworth. But, then again, I’d never heard of Ralph Vaughan Williams, and I’d heard from the men at Cranbrook that he really was something, that people used to go to concerts of his music before the war.

“Actually,” Ralph went on, “there were three of us back then—George, me, and dear old Gustav.”

“Isn’t that a German name, sir?”

“Gussie was as English as you or I,” George said sternly.

“You did hear what they did to him, didn’t you?” asked Ralph. “Locked away by the Patriotic League for having latent Germanic sympathies. They say he hung himself, but I’ve never been sure about that.”

“It was just a name, for heaven’s sake. He’d stopped calling himself Von Holst. Wasn’t that enough for them?”

“Nothing was ever good enough,” Ralph said.

A brooding silence fell across the room, interrupted only by the occasional muffled explosion from somewhere outside. Ralph turned to me again and said, “George and I were both members of the Folk Music Society. Now, I don’t imagine that means very much to you now. But back then—this is thirty years ago, remember—George and I took to traveling around the country recording songs. We were quite the double act. We had an Edison Bell disc phonograph, one of the very few in the country at the time. A brute of a machine, but at least it provided a talking point, a way of breaking the ice.” He nodded at the equipment on the shelves. “Of course, it meant that we had some basic familiarity with recording apparatus—microphones, cables, that kind of thing.” He paused, and for the first time I saw something close to pain in his otherwise boyish face. “In twenty-three I was shellshocked while on ambulance duties in the Salient. I was no good for battlefield work after that, so I was transferred here, to Dungeness. I was one of the operators, listening to the sounds picked up by these dishes, straining to hear the first faint rumble of an incoming airplane. In the end, I was no good for it, and I had to go back to ambulance work; but I got to know some of the names in charge, and when I heard that dear old Butterworth had been shot . . .”

“I was wounded by a sniper,” George said. “Not the first time, either—took one in the Somme in sixteen. That second was my ticket out of the war, though. But do you know the funny thing? I didn’t want it. What was I going to do—go back to music, with all this still going on?” He shook his head, as if the very idea was as ludicrous as staging a regatta in the English Channel.

“I know how you felt,” said Ralph. “I had so many things unfinished when this all began and so many more things I wanted to do. Lark Ascending—that needed more work. That opera I keep talking about—I feel as if Falstaff’s been standing at my shoulder for twenty years, urging me to get Sir John down on paper. And another symphony . . . I’ve had the skeleton of the Pastoral in my head ever since I was in the Somme, all those years ago.”

“The bugle player,” George said, nodding—he must have heard the story several times.

“They still won’t understand it—they’ll think it’s all lambkins frolicking in meadows.”

“Give them time. They’ll work it out eventually.”

“If I ever write it, old man. That’s the clincher. Find myself a spare half hour here, a spare hour there, but if I’m not scribbling letters to Adeline, I’m filling out requisitions for bandages or spare tires, or organizing raucous singsongs around the mess piano. I have tried, but nothing good ever comes of it. Most of the time I can hardly hear the music in my head, let alone think about getting it down on paper.”

“How is Adeline now?” George asked.

“As well as can be expected, old man.”

After a silence George said: “At least we’re doing something useful. That’s what I keep telling myself. Music was a pleasant dream, but now we’ve grown up, and there are other things we have to do—proper, serious things, like listening for enemy airplanes or driving ambulances.” Something seemed to snap in him then, as if he had been waiting a very long time to unburden himself. “The damage is done, Ralph. Even if you gave me a year off to go and sit in some quiet country cottage and scribble, scribble, scribble, it wouldn’t achieve a blessed bit of good. There’s too much noise in my head, noise that won’t just go away because I’m not in France or not in earshot of the coastal guns. Why, there are times when

I think the only place I can concentrate is here, in this cold little hut, listening to the noises across the sea.”

At that moment the red bulb, which had been dark when we came in, starting flashing on and off. There was a harsh buzzing sound from one of the black boxes on the shelf. Ralph looked at it worriedly.

“That’s torn it,” George said. “Gas detectors have gone off.”

“One of those bombs was carrying gas?” I asked.

“Mustard, phosgene or radium fragments—there’s no way of telling from here.” George looked at me with narrowed eyes. “Been in a gas attack, Wally?”

“Once, sir. But it’s not really gas in the radium shells. It’s little particles, but they get carried on the wind just as if they were a gas. They say there are parts of Woolwich no one will be able to live in for years, because that stuff can still get inside you.”

“Well, we’re better off than they were in Woolwich,” George said, with a kind of steely determination that told me he was going to take charge. “Now, the bad news is the seals on this hut aren’t going to help us much if the gas drifts our way. They’re old and perished, and we couldn’t spend long in here anyway before the air got stale.”

“What about the ambulance, sir?” I asked.

Ralph shook his head slowly. “No better, I’m afraid.”

“But the seals . . .”

“Aren’t what they used to be. If we ran into a thick cloud, we wouldn’t have much of a chance.”

“That’s not what they told us in Dorking, sir.”

“No, I don’t doubt that. But they can’t very well have ambulance drivers going around scared out of their wits, can they?”

“I don’t suppose so,” I said, without much conviction.

“Never you mind about the ambulance anyway,” George said. “There’s an underground shelter on the other side of the compound, just before the first mirror—you’d have driven past it on your way in. That’s safe, and it has its own air supply.”

“Will they still let us in?” Ralph asked.

“If we don’t dillydally. I see you’ve both got your masks—that’ll save us a jog back to the ambulance.” Still not quite steady on his feet, he went to one of the shelves and pulled down a regulation gas mask box. “Now, you two go ahead of me. You’ll find the shelter easily enough, and I won’t be far behind you.”

“You can come with us,” Ralph said.

“I can’t move very quickly—must have sprained my ankle when I fell off the ladder. Didn’t notice until now, what with the head wound and everything.”

“We’ll carry you,” I said. “We can even take you in one of the stretchers—that’ll be faster than all three of us hobbling along like a crab.” I opened my box and dragged out the gas mask. For some reason I didn’t feel as grateful to be carrying it as I usually did. I was wondering if what they had told us in



Dorking also applied to the gas masks.

“Open the box, George,” Ralph said quietly.

“You two go ahead,” George said, as if we hadn’t heard him the last time.

“There’s no mask in that box, is there?”

George had his back to us, like a boy who didn’t want anyone to see his birthday present.

“The box,” Ralph said again, with a firmness I hadn’t heard before.

“All right, it’s empty,” George said, turning around slowly. He had the lid open, showing the box’s bare interior. “There was a mistake. I took the mask to the compound dressing station, then left it there by accident when I came back to the hut.”

“Why did you come back instead of going straight to the shelter?” Ralph asked.

“Because I still wanted to listen, all right? The sound mirror still works, even with those chunks taken out of it. I felt I could still be some use.” He gestured helplessly at the headphones. “I still wanted to listen,” he said again, more quietly this time.

“You hear it too,” Ralph said, wonderingly.

“Hear what?”

“The music. Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about, old man. You said this was the only place you could concentrate. You meant more than just that, didn’t you? This is the only place where it comes back—the music—as if this war weren’t standing between us and everything we ever thought mattered. It’s why I couldn’t work here any longer, why I had to go back to the ambulance service.”

George stared at him without saying anything. So did I.

“I thought I was going insane at first—a delayed effect of the shellshock,” Ralph said. “Well, perhaps I was, but that didn’t make the music go away. If anything, it just got stronger. It was like hearing someone hum a tune in the next room, a tune you almost recognized—you could pick out just enough of the melody for it to be maddening. I talked to some of the other chaps, thinking there must be some kind of interference on the wires . . . but when I got funny looks, I learned to keep my mouth shut.”

“What was the music like?” George asked.

“Beautiful beyond words—what I could hear of it. Enough to break your heart. Well, mine anyway. The Pastoral, how I always meant it would sound. I could hear it, as if it were being played to me by an orchestra, as if I were just a listener in the audience. But not just the Pastoral . . . there was also the London, done differently—I always did mean to take another stab at that one, you know . . . Lark . . . and music I don’t even recall intending to write but that seems to have me all over it.”

“It’s our music,” George said.

“I know, old man. That’s what I’ve been hardly daring to admit to myself, all this time. It’s all the music we would have made if this war weren’t in the way. I think we did write that music, in some weird way, and it’s making itself known to us here. No one else hears it, of course. But you and I . . . I think we’re like antennae, or microphones, ourselves. I hear the music I would have made, and I suppose you hear your own tunes.”

“I hope they’re mine. I couldn’t bear the idea of them being yours.”

“That good, eh?”

“Lovely. Lovely and sad and stirring . . . everything I ever wanted music to be.” He closed his eyes for a moment. “But it’s so terribly quiet. Some days I don’t hear it at all. Today it seemed to be coming through stronger than most. If I could only get it down . . .”

“You mean on paper, sir?” I asked. Ralph gave me a blank look, and I said: “It’s just that when we came in, I thought I saw some papers in Mr. Butterworth’s log book. I didn’t make much of it the time, but now that I know about the music, I wondered if you’d been trying to write it down.”

George gave a short, weary laugh. “You don’t miss much, Wally. I thought I was much too quick for you.”

“Can I see?” Ralph asked.

George slid the log book across the desk and opened it again, revealing the loose papers inside. He passed one of them to Ralph. It was a pink form with typewriting on one side. “Never was much good at transcription,” he said. “You’d be faster and more accurate. But then it wouldn’t be my music you’d be hearing, would it?”

Ralph tapped his finger along the music, making a kind of low tum-te-tum noise. He wasn’t exactly singing along with it, but I could tell he was imagining it properly, just as if a band were playing in his head, with all the right instruments. “Well, it’s got the Butterworth stamp,” he said eventually. “No doubt about that.”

George leaned forward a little. “What do you think?”

“I think I’d like to hear the rest of it. This is obviously just a fragment, a few bars of a much larger work.”

“I can only write what I hear. As you say, it’s as if a chap next door is humming a tune. You can’t dictate which tune he’ll hum, you just have to go along with him and hope for the best.” George paused and looked serious. “Did you ever write any of it down, old boy?”

“Transcribe it, you mean?” Ralph shook his head slowly. “I was too scared to. Scared that if I wrote it down, the music might stop. And that if I put that music down on paper and convinced myself that it really was something I’d come up with, I’d have to admit to myself that I was going quite insane.”

“Or that the music’s real,” George said quietly.

“Now you know why I stopped working here, of course. No use to man nor boy if all I kept hearing was music instead of airplanes.”

“I hear the airplanes as well. It’s just that the music comes through when they’re not there.” He turned to me sharply. “Well, Wally, what do you make of it? Are we both for the nuthouse?”

“I don’t think so sir,” I said.

But in truth I wasn’t sure. George might have been younger than Ralph, but they were still old men, and they had both had their share of unpleasant experiences in the war. So had I, in a smaller way, and I still felt that I had my marbles . . . but what kind of condition would my head be in twenty or thirty years from now if the war just kept on the way it had?

Perhaps I would start hearing secret music as well.

“Wally,” Ralph said to me, “I want you to listen very carefully. We’re Royal Army Medical Corps men. We have a patient here and a duty to protect him. Understood?”

I nodded earnestly, just as if I were still taking ambulance classes in Dorking. “What are we going to do, sir?”

“You’re going to take him to the shelter. George will use my gas mask, and you will use your own.”

“And you sir?”

“I shall wait here, until you can return with a second mask.”

“But the seals, sir . . .”

“Will hold for now. Be sharp about it—we don’t have all afternoon.”

“No,” George said, more to me than Ralph. “He isn’t staying here. It’s his gas mask, not mine—he should be the one using it.”

“And you’re thirteen years younger than me, old boy. One of these days, for better or for worse, this war is going to be over. When that day comes, I’m not going to be much good for writing music—I’m worn out as it is. But you’ve still got some life in you.”

“No one’ll be writing much music if the Huns take over.”

“We thought the world of German music before all this started—Bach, Brahms, Wagner—they all meant so much to me. It seems funny to start hating all that now.” Ralph nodded at the still-flashing red light. “But we can discuss this later—provided we keep our voices down. In the meantime, Wally’s going to take you to the shelter. Then he’ll come back for me, and we can all sit around and joke about our little adventure.”

“I’m not sure about this, sir,” I said.

“RAMC, lad. Show some spine.”

“Sir,” I said, swallowing hard. Then I turned my attention to George. “I don’t think there’s much point arguing, sir. Perhaps it isn’t such a bad plan after all, anyway. I can sprint back with another gas mask pretty sharpish.”

“Take the mask,” Ralph said.

Something passed between them then, some unspoken understanding that was not for me to interpret. Time weighed heavily and then George took the mask. He said nothing, just fitted it over his head without a word. I put on my own mask, peering at the world through the grubby little windows of the mica eye-pieces.

We left the hut, closing the door quickly behind us. George could not run, but with my bad knee I was not much better. We started making for the first dish, with the promise of the shelter beyond it. Through the mask all the colors looked as yellowy as an old photograph, but George looked back at me and pointed out something, a band of darker yellow lying in the air across our path. Phosgene, I thought—that was the yellow one, not mustard gas. Phosgene didn’t get you straight away, but if they mixed it with chlorine, it was a lot quicker. I pressed the mask tighter against my face, as if that were

going to make any difference.

It took an age to reach the shelter, with the distance between the sound mirrors seeming to stretch out cruelly. Just when it began to cross my mind that perhaps the shelter did not exist, that it was some figment of George's concussion-damaged imagination, I saw the low concrete entrance, the steps leading down to a metal door that was still partly open. A masked guard, who might have been the same man Ralph and I had spoken to earlier, was urging us down the steps.

When the door was tight behind me, I whipped off my mask and said, "Give me yours, George—it'll do for Ralph."

George nodded and dragged the mask from his face, which was slick with sweat and dirt where the rubber had been pressing against his skin. "Good man, Wally," he said, between breaths. "You're a brave sort."

But the guard would not let me leave the shelter. The red light above the door was telling him that the gas concentration was now too high to risk exposure, even with a mask.

"I have to go!" I said, shouting at him.

The guard shook his head. No arguing from me was going to get him to change his mind. We had been lucky to make it before they locked the shelter from the inside.

Looking back on it now, I'm sure Ralph knew exactly what would happen when I got to the shelter—or he had a pretty shrewd idea. What he said to George kept ringing in my head—about how the younger man would still be able to get some of that music down when the war was over. It was like one runner passing the baton to the other. I don't think he would have said that if he had expected me to come back with another mask.

Because there was no wind that day, the gas alert remained high until the middle of the evening. When it was safe, I went out with two masks and a torch, back to the hut, just in case there was still a chance for Ralph. But when I got to the hut, the door was open and the room empty. Everything was neat and tidy—the box back on the shelf, the headphones back on their hook, the chair set back under the desk.

We didn't find him until morning.

He was sitting in one of the seats attached to the steerable locator we had driven past on our way in. He must have known what to do because he had the headphones on, and one of his hands was still on the wheel that adjusted the angle of the receiver. The other chair was empty. The flattened disk was aimed out to sea, out to France, a few degrees above the horizon.

The thing was, they never did tell me what killed him—whether it was the gas, or being out all night in the cold, or whether he just grew tired and decided that was enough war for one lifetime. But what I do know is what I saw on his face when I found him. His eyes were closed, and there was nothing in his expression that said he'd been in pain when the end came.

Now, I know people'll tell you that faces relax when people die, that everyone ends up looking calm and peaceful, and as an ambulance man I won't deny it. But this was something different. This was the face of a man listening to something very far away, something he had to really concentrate on, and not minding what he heard.

It was only later that we found the thing he had in his hand, the little piece of pink paper folded like an envelope.

Four days later I was able to visit George. He was in bed in one of the wards at Cranbrook. There were about five other men in the ward, most of them awake. George was looking better than when I'd last seen him, all messy and bandaged. He still had bandages on his head and arm, but they were much cleaner and neater now. His hair was combed, and his moustache had been trimmed.

"I'm glad you're still here, sir," I said. "I was frightened you'd be transferred back to Dungeness before I could get to see you. I'm afraid we've been a bit stretched the last few days." I had to raise my voice because Mr. Chamberlain was on the wireless in the corner of the ward doing one of his encouraging "one last push" speeches.

"Pull the screens," George said.

I did as I was told and sat down on the little stool next to his bed. The screens muffled some of Mr. Chamberlain's speech, but every now and then his voice seemed to push through the green curtains as if he were trying to reach me personally, the way a teacher might raise his voice to rouse a daydreaming boy at the back of the class.

"You're looking better, sir," I offered.

"Nothing time won't heal." He touched the side of his head with his good arm, the one that wasn't bandaged. "I'll be up on my feet in a week or two, then I'll get my new posting. No use for me in Dungeness anymore, though—my hearing's no longer tip-top."

"Won't it get better?"

"Perhaps, but that won't make much difference in the long run. They're getting rid of the sound mirrors. We always knew it was coming, but we thought we'd be good for another year. It turns out that the new system won't need men listening on headphones. The new breed will stare at little screens, watching dots move around."

Mr. Chamberlain said something about "over by Christmas," followed by "looking forward to a bright and prosperous Nineteen Thirty-Six."

"And the music, sir?" I asked.

"There won't be any more music. Wherever it came from, whatever it was that let us hear it . . . it's gone now, or it will be gone by the time they tear down the mirrors. Even if it's still coming through to Dungeness, there won't be anyone there who can hear it. Best to forget about it now, Wally. I've no intention of speaking about it again, and with Ralph gone, that only leaves you. If you've an ounce of common sense—and I think you've rather more than an ounce—you'll say no more of this matter to any living soul."

"I'm sorry about Mr. Vaughan Williams, sir." I'd called him Ralph all the time I had known him, but sitting next to George I found myself coming over all formal. "He was always kind to me, sir, when we were doing our ambulance duties. Always treated me like an equal."

"He was a good man, no doubt about that." George said, nodding to himself. Then he patted the bedsheet. "Well, thank you for coming to visit, Wally. Knowing how busy you ambulance chaps are, I appreciate the gesture."

"There's another reason I came, sir. I mean, I wanted to see that you were all right. But I had something for you as well." I reached into my pocket and withdrew the folded piece of pink paper. "We found this on him. It's one of your transcriptions, I think."

“Let me see.” George took the paper and opened it carefully. His eyes scanned the markings he had made on it, the scratchy lines of the staves and the little tadpole shapes of the notes. There were lots of blotches and crossings-out. “Did you see him do this?” he asked, looking at me over the edge of the paper.

“See him do what, sir?”

“He’s corrected me! You wouldn’t have noticed, but not all of those marks were made by me! The beggar must have sat down and taken the time to correct my transcription of my music!”

“When we were on our way to the shelter, sir?”

“Must have been, I suppose.” George shook his head in what I took to be a mixture of dismay and amusement. “The absolute bare-faced effrontery!” Then he laughed. “He’s right, though—that’s the galling thing. He’s bloody well right!”

“I thought you ought to have it, sir.”

He began to fold the paper away. “That’s very kind of you, Wally. It means a lot to me.”

“There is something else, sir. When we found that sheet of paper on him, he’d folded something into it.” I reached into my pocket again and drew out a small brass key. “I don’t know what to make of this, sir. But I’ve a personal effects locker, and my key looks very similar. I think this might be the one to his locker.” I felt as if I were about to start stammering. “The thing is, there is a locker, and no one’s managed to get into it yet.”

I passed the key to George.

“Why would he put his key in that piece of paper? Anything personal, he’d have wanted it sent on to Adeline.”

“He must have known what he was doing, sir. You being a composer and all that . . . I just wondered . . .” I swallowed hard. “Sir, if there was music in that locker, he’d want you to see it first, wouldn’t he?”

“What makes you think there might be music, Wally?”

“When you asked him if he’d written any of it down, he said he hadn’t.”

“But you wonder if he was telling a fib.”

“It’s a possibility, sir.”

“It is indeed.” George’s hand closed slowly on the key. “I wonder if him correcting my music was a sign, you know? A way of giving me permission to correct his if I saw something in it I didn’t think was right? Or at the very least giving me permission to tidy it up, to put it into some kind of order?”

“I don’t know, sir. I suppose the only way of knowing would be to open the locker and see what’s in it.”

“And you haven’t already done so?”

“I thought that would be a bit impertinent, sir, as he’d clearly meant for you to open it.”

George passed the key back to me. “I can’t wait. Go and see what’s inside now, will you? I assume they’ll let you?”

“I was his ambulance mate, sir. They’ll let me anywhere.”

“Then go to the locker. Open it and find his music, and bring it to me. But if you don’t find anything . . . I should rather you didn’t come back. I wouldn’t like to see your face come through that door and then be disappointed. If there’s something in there I must have, correspondence or suchlike, then you can have it sent to my bedside by one of the orderlies.”

My hand closed on the key. “I hope I’m not wrong about this, sir.”

“Me too,” George said softly. “Me too.”

“I won’t be long.”

I opened the curtain. The key was hard against my palm, digging into the flesh. Mr. Chamberlain was still going on, but no one seemed to be listening now. They had heard it all before.