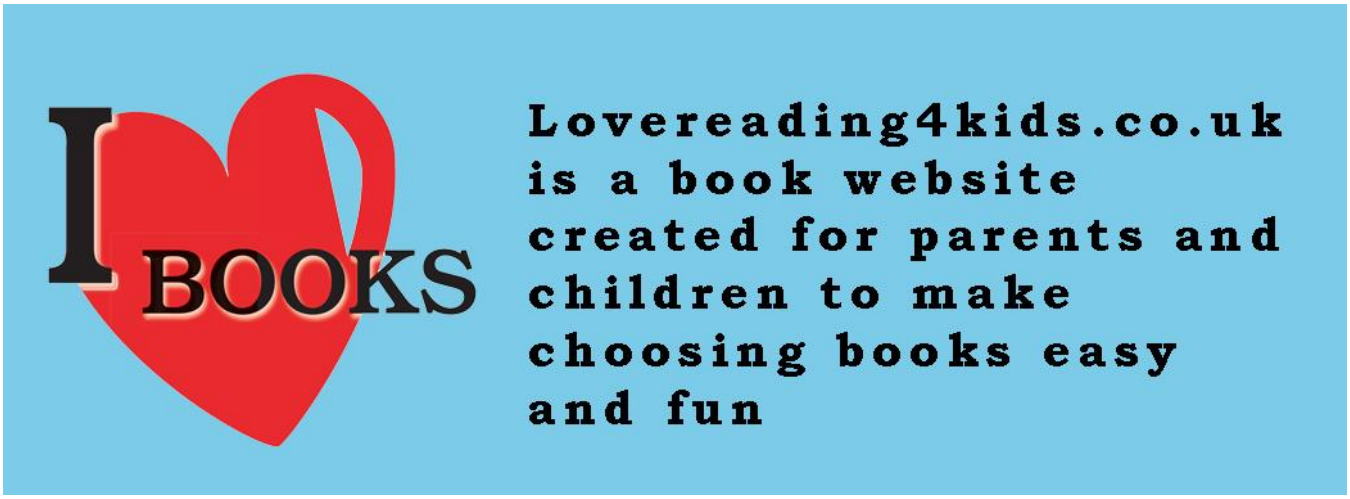

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'Pa, it's my birthday tomorrow.'

'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 aeroplane.'

'An aeroplane? 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 got one, of course, even as well as the aeroplane 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 aeroplane 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 farm workers 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 aeroplane . . . his heart lifted. He hadn't really doubted that his father would agree, but now 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 aeroplane!

I'm on my way, Mr Sopwith!

'Did you know, Squashy, that Mr Sylvester is buying Ant an aeroplane?'

'What's an aeroplane?'

'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 had no brain, 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 gaffer 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 to, 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 to and feared to look in the eye. Even if Antony was only a kid.

Gabriel called him Master Antony. If he got an aeroplane 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 aeroplane, 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 whisky bottles. The only items of interest concerned his daughter Helena, whom no one had ever seen save fleetingly, very occasionally, in the back seat 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.'

'And the boy too. He could do with a mother to keep him out of bad ways. He runs quite wild.'

'Such a bad influence on those nice boys – the vicar's lad, John, and Cedric Butterworth – easily led, I'm afraid. Even that clever lad Simon, the one with his nose in the air, he's very much taken with Antony. They spend all their time up there when school's over.'

'Well, not surprising, considering there's the lake to swim in and tennis courts and servants to bring out lemonade—'

'And now an aeroplane! Can you believe it!'

'There'll be a death up there, you mark my words. Asking for it, a death for sure!'

Antony decided to invite his friend Simon to go to Brooklands with him to meet Mr Sopwith. He would want someone to talk it through with and Simon had more brain than the others – sometimes, Antony thought, more brain than was

comfortable, by which he meant more than himself. Simon's father was a professor of some sort, much respected in the village, a real gentleman they said. Simon went to Eton, like Antony, but was given much extra tutoring by his father at home. He was said to be a brilliantly clever boy, unlike Antony.

Antony's father was out all the next day, as usual, so Antony ordered the Rolls and asked the chauffeur, Tom, to pick up Simon on his way out of the village.

'I say, I like this!' Simon waved to the unsurprised villagers as they purred away down the high street.

Tom was laughing. 'Two little squits like you in this motor! You don't know your luck, Master Antony.'

'I do, you idiot. You know I do.' Antony was not sure he wanted Tom's familiarity in front of Simon, but Tom was not one to take it too far. They got on well. 'You think you'll be able to service an aeroplane? We'll have to have some instructions,' he added.

'I managed to move from horses to motors, so I daresay I can move from motors to flying machines. They got an engine the same, haven't they?'

Tom, a young man who missed the Great War because of a history of tuberculosis, was obviously going to enjoy having an aeroplane on the premises, and Antony felt his excitement rising as the Rolls wound its way through the network of Surrey lanes towards Brooklands, not far from Lockwood. The area was graced by the homes of the rich; they flashed past in the shade of their private woodlands: so beautiful, like

jewels set in emerald lawns – why on earth, with all these alternatives to hand, had his father chosen hideous Lockwood? Antony wondered. Presumably for its grounds, which were undeniably beautiful and very extensive. Good for landing an aeroplane, luckily, unlike these tree-girt mansions that saw them pass. Antony had already earmarked his airfield – a strip of land below the lake, beyond the grotto.

Perhaps Tom and some of his mates would be able to build him a hangar down there before next winter . . . he could not believe his luck, as the Rolls turned down the tarmac road marked Brooklands – his father saying yes.

He had visited Brooklands before, so was not surprised by the sight of the untidy conglomeration of huts and workshops that huddled on the edge of the famous racetrack, high-banked in a great ellipse all round them. It was hard to believe that during the war this place had been a hive of activity where the great designers and producers of military aircraft thrashed out their ideas: even then it had not looked impressive, but now it was decidedly down at heel, with dismantled aircraft, old cars and motorbikes scattered all over the place. The name SOPWITH appeared in large letters on a row of the sheds, but the great man, they were told, was not there.

'He's over at Kingston most of the time now, set up his works there. He a friend of yours?'

The man they spoke to was patronizing, but obviously impressed by the Rolls-Royce, uncertain.

'He's a friend of my father's.' Antony spoke with the assurance of the Eton boy. 'My father said he would find me a

suitable plane. That's why we're here, to buy one. My name is Antony Sylvester.'

The young man's attitude changed abruptly at the mention of the name Sylvester and thereafter the two boys – and Tom, hovering in the background – attracted a number of interested parties. They spent the afternoon in a blissful whirl of technical talk, pushed to see this one, that one, try this cockpit, what visibility eh? – this rudder is out on its own, handles like silk . . . get in and we'll give it a roll . . .

Rolling meant taxiing across the airfield without taking off. It was the beginning of learning to fly. Antony was given the controls and the chance to try it for himself, and he went zigzagging across the unkempt grass in hair-raising fashion, terrified he might take off by mistake – it easily happened, apparently: 'Suddenly the ground ain't there any more. So not too much throttle, be careful now.'

Be careful. Simon knew it wasn't in his friend's nature and was relieved that he himself wasn't offered the chance to try anything. He saw too how the name Sylvester carried weight. His father had told him several times 'to go carefully with the Sylvesters', but was unable to elaborate when questioned. Just a shrug and, 'I don't think I trust that man.' Simon pointed out that he rarely saw the father, only Antony, and with Antony came perks, like today.

The machines were mainly planes left over from the war, fighters being dismantled for parts. Several were two-seaters, carrying a pilot and a gunner, or a photographer; some still had a gun mounted. Some were monoplanes, some biplanes.

Antony realized there was no way he could choose in one afternoon, and decided the best thing would be to sign on for some lessons and choose to buy when he knew a bit more. A flying school was on the site, so he signed himself up, giving his age as eighteen. In spite of his father thinking he was twelve, he knew he passed for eighteen without much trouble. He wasn't questioned.

Going home in the Rolls they reckoned they had spent a very good day. Just before the car came into the village and approached Simon's house, a sprawling old place half-hidden back from the road in a tangle of trees, Simon said to Antony, 'What does your father do, that he carries such clout? When you said the name Sylvester their attitude changed in a trice.'

'*Do?* How should I know? He makes money.'

'Doing what?'

'I don't know. He goes up to London a lot, to see politicians and things. Manufacturers.'

'Manufacturers of what?'

'Money!' Antony laughed. 'What does *your* pa do? Does it matter?'

'He writes books. No, it doesn't matter. Just wondered, that's all.'

The Rolls stopped outside his gate and Simon got out. His mother was getting tea and a fire burned cheerily, sparks flying across the dog-worn hearth-rug; his father was writing at his desk and a smell of baking emanated from the kitchen. Simon thought of Antony driving on to godforsaken Lockwood Hall and grinned to himself, not feeling envious at all.

‘How was it?’ his father asked.

‘Good. Very interesting. Ant looked at a lot, and has signed up for flying lessons.’

‘Oh, showing some sense for once. Knowing him, I half thought he might be coming back in one.’

‘It won’t take long, I reckon.’

‘Well, I might as well tell you now, you won’t be going up in it. I forbid it.’

Simon laughed. His father was a cushy old thing and there was plenty of time for argument. Anyway, Simon thought he might not want to, after all, when it came to the point.