CHAPTER ONE

RUMOURS OF WAR ENGLAND 1914

They are not long, the days of wine and roses.
Ernest Dowson, 1867-1900

On 17 July 1914, the *Times* announced that "the country is now confronted with one of the great crises in the history of the British race." The Great War started less than three weeks later. But the crisis to which it was referring had nothing to do with German aggression. It was the prospect of civil war in Ireland.

The Great War was such a momentous event, it is tempting to assume that it cast as great a shadow over the years leading up to it as it did over the years that followed. It did not. There were, it is true, rumours of war brewing in Eastern Europe, but, as J B Priestley later said, "there had been for some years so much vague talk of war that we shrugged it away." Those who did take the threat of war seriously saw a future conflict in terms of sabres flashing in the sunlight and the thunder of dusty hooves.

The Great War exerts such a powerful hold on our imagination that it is impossible for us to conceive of warfare without harking back, if only subconsciously, to the familiar but still terrifying images of Flanders fields. The people who lived before 1914 had no such collective memory to draw on. The future was – as it always is – totally unknown, totally unknowable.

But, while we, like the Edwardians, cannot know what the future holds, we can at least understand the past. Or can we? The conventional view of the Edwardian era is of a golden age shattered by a cataclysmic war.[1] In reality it was no such thing. For most people, life was, in Siegfried Sassoon's words, "an unlovely struggle against unfair odds, culminating in a cheap funeral." At least a third of the population lived at a level of subsistence far below anything we would consider acceptable today.

[1]Although, strictly speaking, the Edwardian era ended with the death of Edward VII in 1910, I have followed standard practice in using the term Edwardian to refer to the whole of the period up to 1914. After the death of Edward VII and the accession of George V to the throne in 1910, some contemporaries started using the term Georgian to distinguish the new age from that preceding it. However, the coming of war in 1914 formed so decisive a break with the years of peace, that the term quickly fell into disuse.

The word Edwardian conjures up not so much an age as a lifestyle – the leisured existence enjoyed by the upper classes in the years leading up to the Great War. But the upper classes accounted for less than 10% of the population. Most of those who did not share that lifestyle lived lives so different that they might as well have been living on another planet. Yet the upper classes did not, for all their wealth, sleep easy in their beds. According to Lady Violet Bonham-Carter,

> the spirit of the age was violent and tempestuous. There were the suffragettes hurling bricks at 10 Downing Street, and attacking ministers with dog-whips, hatchets and pepper-pots; in industry there was a wave of strikes and lock-outs, and a great bitterness between employers and employed. The Edwardian era was, in fact, one of acute contrasts – violence and tranquillity, affluence and poverty, and such gaiety as we have never seen since … But dire, grinding poverty was in the London streets – crossing-sweepers holding out their hats for pennies, children in rags, down-and-outs sleeping on benches in the parks … One's conscience was disturbed and haunted.

The Edwardians fostered the myth of social stability with a fervour that came from an awareness of the forces working to undermine it. While the myth did not ultimately save them, it has survived, so that today we see the Edwardian era as a lost era of carefree innocence. A more fitting symbol for the age can be found in its most dramatic event – the loss of the *Titanic*. Like the doomed liner, society, seemingly impregnable in its pride and glory, was ploughing blindly on towards some unknown fate. Writing years later, J B Priestley dismissed the common assumption that Edwardian high society

> believed in its permanence, had no suspicion that anything would ever be

The Edwardians fostered the myth of social stability with a fervour that came from an awareness of the forces working to undermine it. Here the Duke and Duchess of Connaught are seen arriving at the Bath Pageant in July 1909.

> changed, and therefore existed in a complete smiling self-confidence. On the contrary, obscurely, just below the conscious level, there was a vague feeling that the end was almost in sight, that their class was now banging away in the last act.

That perhaps explains why the loss of the *Titanic* not only had such a powerful impact on public imagination at the time but continues to haunt us to this day. It was the symbol of the age and a portent of impending disaster.

The Edwardians had much to be anxious about. First, there was the question of Irish Home Rule, which the government was incapable of resolving, and which, by the summer of 1914, had brought Ireland to the brink of civil war. Second, there was the growing tide of industrial and political unrest. The threat of a European war was a poor runner-up to these two concerns, as was that other thorn in the side of the establishment, the women's suffrage movement. After all, suffragettes could smash windows, burn churches and attack ministers, but they could not bring the country to its knees.

These concerns. however, were very much those of the upper classes. What bothered most people was that prices were going up and wages were not. In real terms, wages dropped by around 13% between 1900 and 1913. By modern standards, they were appallingly low to begin with. While the average male white-collar worker earned £340 a year – the equivalent of around £15,000 today – the average male industrial worker made just £75 a year – less than £3,500 in today's terms. Women factory workers were paid even less – as little as £30 a year, less than £1,400 in today's terms. The very best a working-class man could expect to earn was around £90 a year – equivalent to £4,000 today. The working classes accounted for over 80% of the population. Most working-class families spent between one-seventh and one-twelfth of their entire income on bread. When bread prices rose, as they did when harvests were bad, the effect was devastating. We still use "the bread-line" as a term for subsistence, but for our great-grandparents it was not just a figure of speech. And bread prices were only as low as they were because cheap wheat was imported from North America. Incredible as it may seem, the Tories actually proposed abolishing Free Trade and introducing tariffs which would have sent the price of bread soaring.

In these circumstances, it is easy to see why there was industrial unrest. Many workers had nothing – or very little – to lose. There were probably very few who espoused the doctrines of Karl Marx or the French Syndicalists, but all wanted a fairer deal for the working man, and many were happy to be swept along by the oratory of political agitators if it was a way of achieving that end. It is hard for us today to comprehend the scale of industrial unrest in the years leading up to 1914. In 1912, almost 41 million working days were lost through industrial action. Compared to that, the waves of strikes that swept through Britain in the 1970s pale almost into insignificance. In 1970, for example, one of the worst years since the Second World War, less than eleven million working days were lost. It is easy to see why H G Wells

Afternoon tea in a middle-class garden. Before the Great War over two million women were in domestic service. Most of the people who employed them did not think of themselves as rich or even particularly privileged. It was simply the way things were.

The feeding of the five thousand, Edwardian style. There is no record of where this gathering took place – it may have been a Sunday School picnic or a treat by the lord of the manor. There are a few smiles, but the overwhelming impression is how unhappy most of them look. It is not surprising. Life for many people was an unremitting struggle against dirt, disease, discomfort, poverty, and hunger, with nothing to look forward to except a one-way trip to the workhouse.