

I found Catherine at her desk reading a letter. "This is from the golf club, their captain, Mr Greeves, has written to apologise for the discourteous reception we received at our recent visit and requesting a meeting to discuss all our demands." She handed me the letter, hand-written on Earl of Maybury Golf Club paper. I read it and passed it back, smiling broadly. "We were taken seriously after all," I said. "How very satisfactory."

"Yes, Ellen, and if the apology was not enough, Mr Greeves has invited us to be his distinguished guests at Earl of Maybury Golf Club Ladies' Summer Evening. Quite turn around, don't you think?" She put down the letter. "So what are you doing this morning?"

"I've heard young George Watkinson is home. I want to call at the vicarage to find out if he'll be available to help us again this summer. He was so useful last year: going through our paintings and so on. There's still work to be done. But I must speak to his father, I don't want any misunderstanding."

Catherine smiled. "No, one doesn't want any of that. Take care he doesn't propose again."

"For goodness sake, Catherine, that was last year. I'm hoping all that's gone and forgotten. Is there anything you want from the village?"

"Stamps from the Post Office if you're passing."

The vicarage is set in rambling grounds next to the churchyard. I propped my bicycle at the steps up to the front door and rang the bell. I was surprised when the door was opened by a grey-haired woman wearing a large cross on a gold chain. "Good morning," I said and introduced myself. "I do hope this isn't inconvenient, but I wonder, is the Reverend Watkinson at home?"

The woman stepped out pulling the door closed behind her. "I'm afraid the Reverend Watkinson is unavailable. I'm his sister and I'm staying here for a while dealing with some affairs for him."

"Oh," I replied, "It was only to ask if George would be able to continue his work at Maybury this summer. He was so useful last year."

But even as I spoke the woman was shaking her head. "I'm afraid that won't be possible."

"Oh," I said, "I am sorry. I hope everything is all right..."

We were interrupted by the sound of the vicar's voice from within, "Who is it? Who's there?"

"Nothing, William," answered the woman. "Only someone calling about George and I've told them..."

"Where is George? Who is asking?"

"William, it's all right, only someone enquiring. Nothing to worry about."

"I heard a voice..." Suddenly the Reverend Watkinson lunged into view and on seeing me, his expression changed, he pointed at me and uttered the one word: "Dirt..."

"No, Will..." said his sister, putting her hand to him. "Go back to your study. Remember you have a sermon to prepare. Remember, we chose a subject? That's right..." she closed the door and turned to me. "Miss Macpherson, I am sorry but I'm sure you can appreciate things are not as they should be."

But I wasn't listening. It was that look in his eyes, finger pointing right at me and that one word: dirt. Of course, it was only a moment, and I quickly said, "Yes of course. I'm sorry to have troubled you."

I was quite shaken. As I collected my bicycle, I glanced up at the vicarage: austere and aloof and suddenly intimidating. It seemed to suit him. As I turned to leave a shiver ran through me. I'd never felt comfortable with the man since the embarrassing episode last year and I'd vowed never to venture into the vicarage again. But to witness this today, to hear him say that one word as if... as if I was somehow tainted. But how could I know – or anyone know – what was going on in his head at that moment. I set off down the drive.

I slipped into the churchyard by the side gate. I didn't want to meet anyone. I had a most odd feeling, one that sort of shivered inside me. I took the top path, a narrow path behind the hedge to come to the corner by the wall where my brother rested and there I paused. I remembered being here with my mother in the snow at Christmas. The vicar appeared to us then and I remembered my mother's remark: 'Your vicar's a blunt sort of man. And what did he mean by a steadying hand on certain young ladies?' Suddenly, I was troubled and annoyed at the same time. Why was I letting this person have this effect? He, this man of God, had called me something horrible and the hand that pointed... the same hand that one year ago had... I found myself staring at the stone that bore my brother's name and my own hand pressed to me as if to make sure that everything about me and inside of me was me and only me. I continued though the graveyard. When I reached the Shelham family resting place I paused in its shadow to let in the quietness there, soft hum of bees, distant calls and twitter of birds. My gaze came to rest on my ring. So bright in its simple innocence. So treasured.

At the Post Office, I propped my bicycle away from the entrance as this was always a busy place. On the wall were two noticeboards, one for church notices the other for parish affairs and, as usual, there was some jostling with those wanting to read the latest village news and those hurrying in and out of the Post Office. I stood aside and let them pass. It was then I noticed Angela Russell closing the church noticeboard. She saw me and came over, saying in a low voice. "I think it's most regrettable..." she indicated over her shoulder at the notice she'd just pinned there. "You won't know of course..."

"Know what?" I asked.

"The Mothers' Union notice of future meetings," she explained. "We wanted to invite Lady Catherine to talk to us about Maybury but the vicar was there and this person he introduced as his sister. It was very strange: the way he spoke, awkward, as if finding the words was difficult. His sister had to prompt more than once. Then when our chairman, Joan, mentioned about asking Lady Shelham, he said that that wouldn't be appropriate." She leaned closer and her voice dropped to a whisper. "Ellen, it was embarrassing. There were things said that were not nice about you and her Ladyship. Really, it was quite embarrassing."

Even as she spoke I was thinking of the disturbing encounter I'd endured only minutes earlier but Angela wasn't finished. "I'm so sorry, Ellen," she said, "We never gave it a thought. You know, that the vicar would object, and then he seemed to get all tied up and couldn't explain. And to cap it all this sister of his took over. Yes, she did. She said we had to be mindful of temptations and bad influences. Now Mrs Roberts – you know, the farmer's wife – well, she was on her feet pretty quickly. 'Excuse me,' she said, 'What bad influences are you talking about?' 'The vicar has decreed,' said this person. 'That is sufficient.' 'Well, I've never heard anything of the sort,' went on Mrs Roberts, 'And if I might ask, madam, what is your concern in this?' Well, by now everyone was up in arms, talking all at once. Joan, our chairman, declared the meeting over and got up to leave. Mrs Roberts told her to stay and turned to the woman, saying, 'It's you who should go, not our

chairman. You're not a member and it's not for you to advise us mothers. That sort of talk is not welcome here. It's for you to go,' and when nothing happened, Mrs Roberts took a step closer. 'Madam, d'yer hear me?' Well, you know Mrs Roberts when she gets on her high horse... 'I'm here to support my brother,' said the woman. 'He is vicar here.'" Angela paused and her voice dropped. "But the vicar seemed... well, all at sixes and sevens. Confused, staring about him and muttering such things as 'rooting out dirt and demons of desire and wilful sin.' Really, Ellen, it was most upsetting."

Such is Angela, a steady, educated woman, and I had much admiration for her but on that day she was quite nonplussed. We walked High Street together and I thanked her for telling me. We came to her cottage gate and she took my arm. "That woman singled me out," she said. "She told me I must not allow Lizzie to visit you again. I told her that my family was my business. She's a nosey troublemaker, that one, even if she is here to help her brother." On that we parted.

The coffee pot was still warm on the range, a cup and saucer nearby, milk jug on the cool marble slab. It was how we were: each would think of the other. I poured my coffee and sat on the kitchen window seat, kicked off my shoes and stretched out my legs. I wanted to take off my stockings... so I did. My legs were browning, the result of wearing shorts. We often wore shorts – ex-army tropical kit – and we didn't care what people thought. I drew up my legs and let them be uncovered. But today I presented properly dressed at the vicarage because of my respect for others. I expect others to respect me. They live their lives and so do I. Here, we are two women who live together. That is all. It is how the Good Lord made me and that was that. I opened the window to let in fresh air and common sense.

I didn't hear Catherine enter the kitchen. "I saw you come up the drive,' she said. "Any coffee left? Did you get my stamps? Oh..." she'd seen me, bare feet and bare legs, by a window open to the world. "I see..." she said, "Foot loose and fancy free. So what happened? The vicar didn't propose again, did he?"

I slowly turned to this woman I lived with – who knew me better than myself – and my tongue was tied as I had no answer for her. I stared out of the window at blue sky and soft white clouds until they blurred with the staring, until I blinked and said, "No, the vicar called me dirt. It was not nice. In fact, it was horrible." I related it all. Nothing was left out.

Catherine stood by the table, cup in hand, looking at me. "You poor, poor dear," she murmured. "What on earth happened? What was it about?"

"What do you mean: what was it about?" Now I stared at her, the upright steadiness of her. I said, "I rejected the man. A year ago I said no but it's still there: rejection and resentment. In his mind I'm dirt. That's what he called me. Even if the man's gone strange in the head, dirt is dirt. I mean, is there anything else it could be?"

"My, you are in a state," she said.

I shrugged.

"Did he touch you or anything?"

"Not this time."

"What do you mean: not this time?"

I folded over until my forehead rested on my knees and I rocked gently, eyes tight shut. "That's when it began," I said. "That evening last year, the meeting at the vicarage and when everyone else had gone he..." I took a deep breath. "He produces two glasses of sherry and sits by me and his hand... I can only say it came about as if in some quite

matter-of-fact way as if he had a God-given right to place a hand on me. 'We should be married,' he said and then his fingers sort of... Catherine, it was as if he was offering me bread and wine at the altar rail... you know... that superiority... the looking down on a kneeling woman as he presents the chalice. Ugh! You know what I mean. We put up with it because that's how it is: normal. He's the vicar and we're in church. But that night, when I asked him to please take his hand from me, he didn't... just grinned at me and said, 'Ellen, we're made for each other because God has...' well, he didn't get any further because I hit him. I hit a man of the cloth so hard the wine was sent spinning across the room." At last I unfolded myself to see confusion all over her face. "Yes, Catherine, it's hard to believe, isn't it. But it happened. You must never tell anyone, though. Never, do you understand? No one would believe us, anyway."

She came and sat behind me on the window seat and said gently, "Poor you, and you didn't tell me."

"How could I?"

"But we tell each other everything."

"I couldn't until today. That man, our vicar expected to own me and I said no. From that moment I was dirt."

"Oh Ellen... Ellen..." I felt her head sink against me. "I'm sure the man cannot be himself..."

"You weren't there."

"And you never told me. We've always talked, haven't we? How we are here: companion ladies. Isn't that how we are? The feelings we have for each other that have always been there."

"But not dirty."

"No, of course we're not dirty. Whatever that means."

"We hold hands."

"But not in public."

"We did in childhood," I shot back. "Holding hands as little children... like little children do and, yes I know, sometimes we still do."

She pressed her ring finger over mine. "Fondness from innocent childhood."

"But never in public."

"No, never in public."

"Catherine, this Sunday we go to church. Face people down!" and I thumped the seat with my hand so hard that it hurt.