

Return to Maybury

The Journal

of

Ellen Macpherson

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Preface

Memories are strange, they turn up unexpectedly. They often conflict and confuse each other. For so many years they have lain dormant waiting to be brought into the light and then often in the wrong order. So my memories of our return to Maybury are a hotch-potch of everything we experienced. I say we, that is Catherine and me, but writing *Return To Maybury* after all these years is entirely my initiative. Catherine remains quietly amused by the whole thing.

Catherine and I were born and brought up at Maybury Park the ancestral home of the Earls of Maybury. Catherine is the daughter of the 5th earl. My mother was his housekeeper. And here lies the twist in my story: we girls share the same birthday.

From that day we were closer than sisters. Despite the difference in our social status we were allowed to associate as children and a life-long friendship ensued. I was Catherine's lady's maid for three years until World War 2 broke out when, together, we enlisted. We were nineteen.

My story is that of Maybury Park post-war. A war that changed our world. In 1940 Maybury was turned into a recovery hospital for the military. On our return in 1945 this wonderful once-vibrant home to a large family - we always thought of ourselves as a **whole** family - was empty and sad, and now owned by the National Trust. And we were alone. Together we set about putting everything back as it was. A formidable task. We are still doing it.

We still occupy the same grand rooms with large connecting bathroom that we had on our return. For years we had scraps of paper on each oak door saying 'Catherine' and 'Ellen' and when these fell off - they often did - we stuck them back on with sticky tape. The big change came when, some years later, the National Trust appointed a house manager. A lovely man who was clearly for-warned of these two women who grew up in this great house, went to war and were the only ones to return. I'm sure he thought us formidable. But we were not, we're just very particular. But the paper names had to go and with them came the new order: to staff and visitors alike we are Miss Ellen and Lady Catherine and we have engraved brass plates fixed to our doors.

And we now have our own adjoining kitchen as the one downstairs that had served generations of family was to be for 'visitor experience' only.

So please be aware that this is a collection of anecdotes, stories, tales and incidents, just as they come to mind.

Ellen Macpherson

PROLOGUE

1940 We Go To War

It was a lovely September day in 1940 when we left to join the London Ambulance Service. It was our joint decision, Catherine and I, to do our bit for the war. We were nineteen.

The Summer lingered, as if all was well with the world. We arrived in London and took the tube to the recruiting centre. We had not eaten since our very early breakfast but we were more apprehensive than hungry. All so very strange. Lots of people and the tube was very noisy. Was that why no one spoke? Didn't London people speak? The bombing had already begun.

The recruiting office was open when we arrived and others were entering, but Catherine took my arm and drew me to one side. "Now remember what we agreed, Ellen," she said in her usual authoritative way but underneath she was, I knew, nervous.

I needed no reminder. The agreement was never to reveal that she was the daughter of the Earl of Maybury, that she was never to be known as Lady Catherine Shelham, and that I was never to reveal that I was once her lady's maid.

"Remember, Ellen, we're simply Catherine Shelham and Ellen Macpherson."

Two naive 19 year olds who just happened to be born on the same day in the same great house.

I could not help thinking of Maybury and doing so tearfully, such were happy memories. Looking back, everything was a whirl. His Lordship had been laid to rest, his widow had returned to her family in South Africa, and the house was taken over by the War Office and turned into a recovery hospital.

One day the army arrived and everyone left. Thankfully the soldiers helped move the artworks and furniture into the West Wing to be locked away. Such a sad time. So many generations of the Shelham family had lived at Maybury with their loyal servants and now all was at an end.

Before we set off for London, Catherine and I spent two weeks with Catherine's grandmother at her country home. I was always a little scared of Lady Eleanor. A lady of great dignity and presence. She was quite formidable but always kind. But to others... let me say she would not put up with nonsense and silliness. Catherine adored her.

Those two weeks with Lady Eleanor would determine our future and that of Maybury. But how could we possibly understand when there was a war to be gone through.

3. Return

At last I am demobilised. London and VE day was unforgettable. I was flown back from Italy just in time to join the celebrations. It was the last day I wore my uniform; one easy step to Civvy Street; sergeant to spinster. I departed my unit with memories, sad and happy, and some trepidation as to the future. Catherine's latest letter described her arrival back at Maybury...

You cannot imagine the state of the house we loved so much. Yet the Poles who still remain here are making sterling efforts to sort things out.

I imagined her ordering them around. Dear Catherine.

I stayed a couple of weeks with my mother. My mother was Housekeeper at Maybury before it was taken over by the military at outbreak of war. She went to live with her sister and I was thankful to see her comfortable and content. Five years of war seems a lifetime, so many changes.

My case is heavy. The train is full. It is late. A long day and I'm glad to be sitting by an open window because of cigarette smoke. Five years in the army and I still dislike cigarettes. I hope Catherine has not taken up the habit.

How I longed to see Maybury again. I couldn't wait to see Catherine. I hoped she had not changed. I'm sure I was changed. I hoped she was well. There I go again: the maid to a lady. But it could not be the same: a lady and her maid. No longer. How would we be? The war in which we both served was over. We survived. Memories hammer in my head... *O hurry train, do!*

At last! I drag my suitcase out of the carriage and my kit bag not opened since Rome. Where are the porters?

"Miss Ellen, Miss Ellen!" I look up to see a young man. For a second I do not recognise him. "John? Is it young John?" My case and kit bag are taken from me. "Oh Miss Ellen, how good to see you again. Welcome back to Maybury!"

Young John barely reached my hip now he meets me eye to eye. Son of the farmer, like father like son, the ready smile and ready hand. Now a young man who drives the farm van... holds the door wide for me. I am so elated that I blink my filling eyes and look away.

Army life had changed me. I had survived. I was twenty-four. I felt confidence where I did not before. Life at Maybury was closeted. Worked and honed over centuries by so many where each knew their place, whether above or below. But now, what now? Had army life prepared me? Had Catherine's letter prepared me?

The van jerked to a halt. "There, Miss Ellen... m'Lady's over by the shrubbery. See!" and he pointed across the gardens.

I flung open the door. Her back was to me, she was talking to someone. That stance, hands on hips, feet apart and dressed in trousers... Oh joy!

I ran across the gravel drive now flattened and weed-ridden, over the unkempt lawn that once saw parasols and tea parties. She was in close discussion with a

man in uniform. On seeing me the man snapped to attention. Catherine looked round.

"Ellen!" The voice had not changed, and when we clasped and hugged each other I knew that most important of all that tiny bit of us was not changed. When eventually we parted and she made to introduce me... but the poor man was gone, overwhelmed by two women who seemed suddenly to have returned to their childhood.

"That was Major Whatski..." she said breathlessly, "I can never pronounce his name never mind spell it. But you're back," and she hugged me again. "Dear, dear Ellen, you're back." Now I was propelled forward. "Let me show you - I must show you everything. No, let me see you. Oh my..." she held me at arm's length, breathless. "My, I do believe you've grown." Five years and a war, from girls to women. Of course both of us had grown. She was talking wildly now. "I must show you everything. Everything's changed. We have to go round to the courtyard because the front door's stuck fast. Would you believe it? Really, Ellen, we're here. We have returned to Maybury!" Such was our relief and delight that we were laughing and hugging quite uncontrollably.

So that was how I returned to Maybury. The simple joy of being back here and I couldn't help remark, "It's not so bad," as we pushed through God knows what on our way to the kitchen. The table where we servants once sat for our meals was where it always was and scrubbed clean too. "No, not so bad," I repeated.

A man in RAF shirt-sleeve order appeared, stood briefly to attention, before going to one of the cupboards. "One of the Polish airmen," said Catherine softly. "Can't go home," her voice dropped lower. "Less than a dozen of them but such useful chaps and very, very, you know... respectful. You'll soon get used to them."

We went through to the back stairs and ascended. She hooked my arm and led the way. She gabbled on, half turned, and gabbled more. Nervousness was catching but I took a deep breath. "Where do they live?" I asked.

"Servants' quarters." Catherine had reached the landing. "Our rooms are here. We have a large bathroom between us. Quite luxurious."

I hesitated wide-eyed. "But these are the special guest rooms."

"Not now. They're ours. All the rooms are ours. The whole house is ours, Ellen. Except for the Poles and they're moving on now. Some are going to work on the farm, and that's good. They're really good chaps." She was rambling, glancing about her. I took her arm, "Come on, show me our rooms."

I lay on my bed because fatigue had hit. I had seen Catherine's room, but now I was in mine and the moment I lay on my bed I was out. Yet, behind my closed eyes was grey. Often, this would happen, closing my eyes and I'd see grey. The last months through Italy when we were nearing Rome it would happen regularly, every night, sometimes when catching up on sleep during the day. I was getting used to it but now it was there again as I lay on my new bed, fresh sheets and eiderdown prepared, according to Catherine, by Mrs Roberts, the farmer's wife. And there was Catherine now chattering on through my greyness. Despite wanting to lie here for ever I opened my eyes. She was in the doorway as if waiting to be invited in. She said, "I wondered whether I should leave you to catch shut eye."

"I'm all right," I replied sitting up. She joined me, and so typically and just as I remembered, sat by me perfectly properly, hands folded in her lap. So proper after these years of war and that made me smile.

"Why are you laughing?"

"I'm not laughing. I'm happy, that's all."

"You will be staying, won't you?"

I stared at her. "Staying? What do you mean? This is my home. Haven't I just returned to my home?"

"Yes, you have, thank God."

I reached out and squeezed her hand. It was trembling. "Why did you ask?" I said.

"I wanted to make sure, I suppose."

"Catherine, this is my home. I've returned to my home."

"So have I. Isn't it wonderful?"

I simply looked at her refusing to speak the word *miracle*. I looked at her in utter wonderment and simply said, "You look well."

"So do you. Still got your figure."

"So have you."

"The army kept us in shape, thank God. I like your blouse, pretty."

"A present from my mother."

"And you have colour in your cheeks."

"So have you."

"Maybury air."

"You look like..." I paused feeling my eyes begin to fill. "Even in army trousers, you look good, Catherine Shelham. I take it you do your own hair now."

And now we could laugh a little.

I wondered when the appraisal might stop and although at times we both blinked back tears, we could not help smiling.

"You're laughing at me again," she said. "And you still haven't said how you are."

"I'm well, thank you. Very well. Yes, army life served me well... and before we go further, there is a lot to tell but it can't be done all at once."

She sighed, "Ah, yes... same for me, I think."

"It's the future now. And we're a bit older but not much and while your hair and your figure have survived well enough, those army issue trousers... well, Catherine Shelham..."

"Ellen, will you stop it!"

So at last we relaxed but as to how far, who could say?"

4. Maybury 1945

Catherine knocked on my door for dinner. I opened it to see she had changed into a dress. She said, "The Poles are quite strict about mealtimes." I asked if I should wear a dress. "No, just as you are. That skirt goes nicely with the flowery blouse."

I hoped there wouldn't be too much about the war. I was not ready to talk about it. My mother wanted to hear everything and it was difficult at times. I expect someday I'll find it easier.

We arrived at the kitchen. This was where meals were served now. They all stood as we entered, tidily dressed if a little varied. Someone turned off the radio. The kitchen table was set out with ten places and just then, I felt I really had come home. It was a little overwhelming. The men, eight in all, were various ranks, some with RAF wings. Major Whatski was Polish army and head of table, he welcomed us. "Lady Catherine, if you please," he indicated the chair to his right. "Miss Ellen," he nodded to me and indicated the chair to his left. He then made a short announcement in Polish and bowing slightly toward me as spoke the now famous name, Monte Casino. When he had finished everyone clapped. I felt the colour rise in my cheeks. Then someone along the table said, "You drove an ambulance at Monte Casino. My brother was there. We survived." A murmur ran round the table. Catherine raised her voice above the rest. "Yes, we all survived," and her gaze came to fix upon me. The Major rapped sharply on the floor with his stick to say grace after which we all took our seats.

Two of the company served. The meal was simple stew and potatoes. I had become used to eating the army way with mansize helpings but despite the delicious aroma, just then my appetite seemed to slip. It was all slightly overwhelming. Everyone patiently waited until all were served, plates of bread set out, and the two servers had also taken their seats.

Small glasses were passed down the table followed by a bottle of, I guessed, vodka. We each filled our glasses. I could not help watching Catherine. I wondered what was in her mind at that moment. This was her house, a long history of her family's heritage now taken over by outsiders. She caught me watching her and raised her glass. I did likewise. A sipped carefully, a few sips later and I began to feel more comfortable.

The dishes were cleared away, the glasses topped up, and the Major with a flourish produced a box of Cadburys Milk Tray. A buzz of satisfaction went around as these were a rarity in those days of rationing. Soon the room relaxed entirely, cigarettes were lit and curls of smoke began to rise into the air. My neighbour tried to engage me in conversation but his broken English and the many competing voices made this difficult. I felt sad for him, he was somewhat older than the others. Did he have a family somewhere? And then everything was turning grey and I had to shut my eyes. Tiredness, alcohol, I didn't know but Catherine was saying, "Gentlemen, I think it time we took our leave. Please enjoy the rest of your evening."

5. After Dinner

Catherine and I sat on her bed. She had a bottle of wine and two glasses. "From the cellar?" I enquired, she replied, "The daughter of an earl knows where to look. So we drank fine red wine.

"But you don't smoke," I said.

"That I avoided. Did you?"

"Oh yes."

"My French general would invite me to take a cigarette and of course I would accept but only to toy."

"Did he invite you to other habits?"

Catherine stared coyly into her glass. "He propositioned me."

"Good heavens!"

"Ellen, don't tell me you, a medical orderly in the British army, was never..."

"Catherine, I was in uniform. And I was strict."

"And like you..." she swirled the wine around, "my uniform preserved my chastity."

"Catherine, you're tipsy."

"We both are. Would you like to hear about my French general?"

She was going to tell me anyway.

"We left London ambulance about the same time, didn't we. As I remember we both saw the same recruitment poster. I joined up but being fluent in French and passable in German, I end up in a basement in Baker Street which turned out to be part of SOE. Pretty boring after the Blitz. When this French general arrived and I was assigned to him as translator, he mentioned he needed a driver so I volunteered. Well, he seemed an interesting sort: grey haired, moustachioed, rows of medals. He made enquiries about me and upon learning about my family he insisted on addressing me as Countess. Would I drive him to Paris, if you please! Oh, yes, I said. How little I knew." She reflected a moment, her glass empty now. "Paris had just been liberated, the car carried his ensign on the bonnet and the people just went mad when we drove up. At the time I'd no idea as to his job but he did have presence. Famous family, and he knew how to use it. We always stayed at the best hotels. The country had just been freed and we were wined and dined. And he insisted I join him at table. I always wore uniform – full dress for dinner, of course, with court shoes. Like you, uniform was my armour."

I could imagine her: trousers during the day, skirt and heels in the evenings showing off her legs.

"But as to what his role was... exactly what, I couldn't say. Intelligence of some sort. We travelled through what was Vichy France, met contacts in the Resistance and gathered information. But when the Allies advanced into Belgium we followed. The Battle of the Bulge was an experience, we got caught in the retreat. Not good. But eventually we made it to Germany and then turned south to follow the advance all the way to Munich. We arrived at Dachau one warm evening..." She paused and her eyes were closed. "My God, that was an experience, the first concentration camp. I hardly dare think about it. And to realise that this was going on and no one knew. Or made out they didn't. It was indescribable." She put down her glass and called for mine, and swung off the bed to retrieve the bottle. "The general wanted me to translate documents. All those names and what happened

to them. I shake thinking about it, Ellen. Dear God, I do." The bottle was shaking in her hand and I took it from her.

She sat and sipped her wine quietly now. I would have preferred to have stayed silent but it was as if she was in a different place and couldn't stop. "Unimaginable. Death, and the smell of it... everywhere, you couldn't get it out of your head." She fell silent again then blinked and her face cleared "I had a letter from him soon after returning to England. He told me that some of his wife's family were in Dachau. He never said at the time but apparently it was in the records. Shocking to think I translated documents about people so close to him who were incarcerated there. They survived, thank God. He never revealed much. Unthinkable, isn't it?"

We refilled our glasses but Catherine's revelations set me all a-shiver over my own memories. I think being like that, close together as we were, helped. And so we remained quietly sipping our wine. Then she said, "But you know, Ellen, what the war did for us girls?" she beamed and fluttered those long eyelashes at me. "Uniforms got us out of corsets!"

I stared at her. She was laughing. Within minutes we were both uncontrollable, the ludicrous idea of uniform and corsets. It was not humour, this was blanking out. Now we know these things but then no one did.

I said, "I never wore a corset."

More laughter.

She said, "I know you didn't but I had to."

"Not all the time. Occasionally for dinner. I remember lacing you up."

"Yes, if grandmama was dining with us, and we girls came down not properly dressed she would send us straight back to our rooms. We would miss dinner and have to scrounge leftovers in the kitchen afterwards."

"Catherine, you do exaggerate. That happened once and it wasn't you but an older cousin that Lady Eleanor never liked."

Her eyes went quite wide. "How do you know?"

"My mother told me. She knew everything. In any case, when I was your maid you never went down to dinner not properly dressed because I saw to it."

"Really, Ellen... really. I do think sometimes your mother and my granny must have been... Well, they must have been witches. And now she's gone..." her words died and she pressed her fingers to her face.

I gave her a little squeeze and a hug. "It's the war," I said gently, "It gets to you more when it's over, doesn't it?"

"Yes, silly flashes of memory, as if something's been forgotten but it hasn't gone away." She took a breath and straightened, her face serious again. "Ellen, why did we come back? Others didn't. Those men downstairs... they ask. Not in words but in their eyes. Why us? When we left in 1940, did we ever think we wouldn't return? It never occurred to me. Now I can't get it out of my head. We were the lucky ones, weren't we?" Tears welled but she blinked them away. "Something granny told me that someday I'd return to Maybury Park. That day she saw us in the garden, gaming around, and I expected to be told off for allowing you too much familiarity. Instead she told me that someday I would return to Maybury and you would be with me. I had no idea what she meant. But that was granny... one never questioned. Now the war's over and I wonder if I'll ever understand. How could she know we'd return to Maybury? Dear granny, I do miss her so."

6. Home Again

I was woken next morning by a commotion in the corridor. Sounds of heavy feet and my eyes jumped open. For a moment I lay there in the dark wondering where I was before noticing sunlight beneath the heavy curtains, the huge bed, oak panelled walls and realised. O my... this is my home. I'm at Maybury!

Then came urgent knocking on a door along the corridor and the voice of Major Watski and Catherine answering, I couldn't hear what was said but her tone told me she was cross. Keys rattled, more words exchanged, apologetic almost, door shutting, heavy feet hurrying away.

Just as my eyes began to close again there came loud voices from below my window. I got out of bed and looked out to see handshaking and bear hugs as the Polish airmen said goodbyes to the Major now in suit with case and kitbag. They marched their separate ways, he to the front, they down the back drive to the farm. I propped my elbows on the sill and wondered. Demobbed and happy? I hoped so, a tiny few of the many thousands setting off or, like myself, returning home. All of them, proud. Old comrades parting, each following their own senses and desires. A swell of satisfaction filled me on their behalf.

By now there was no thought of returning to bed which was as well as next came a knock came on my door. I opened it to see Catherine.

"Good morning, Ellen. I hope that didn't scare you."

"No, why?"

"Major Whatski... such a sudden sort of fellow. May I come in? How did you sleep?"

I stood to one side as she swept in with a murmured 'thank you'. She wore the Chinese silk dressing gown I remembered well, the one with dragons. It smelt a little bit of mothballs. "Oh my... it's good you're back," she said. "You did sleep well despite the din? But they're good men, really they are. Oh my, oh my..." she put her arms out to me and hugged me. Her whole body was trembling. "I was so afraid..." her face pressed to mine. "We may not have come back. Can you believe it?" Yes, there were times of great fear but now... but now at last we relaxed and I held her at arm's length to look her over and reassure myself.

I invited her to sit on my bed. She ruffled her hair, still dark and wavy, and fluttered her eyelashes at me and that made me smile. Each moment a little more of Catherine showed but I could not help but wonder at what five years at war had done to us. So easy to show mischief, laugh, make fun and joke, but deep inside... what was there? The Chinese dressing gown parted a little to show crumpled army issue pyjamas with buttons missing. Until then I hadn't noticed that her feet were bare.

"Haven't you got any slippers?" I asked.

"Oh, Ellen, yes... but there's so much to be done. As for that noisy fellow, Watski... you know what he wanted? Only to say he's leaving for America. He handed me a huge bunch of keys. He had all the keys to Maybury, would you believe. I had no idea there were so many or which is which. Can you believe it?"

No, I could not and eventually managed to excuse myself to take a bath.

What luxury! That bathroom - so much space that I mislaid my towel. I soaked in the bath too long and Catherine burst in just as I was getting out.

"Oh, so sorry..." she said, "I forgot..."

"It's all right," I said. "Army life didn't include privacy."

She stood there, eyes wide, pyjamas undone, reaching out to me. "Let me hug you again."

"I'm wet..."

"I need to hug you." She grabbed my towel, flung it around me and pulled me to her. "We came back," she said close to my ear. "We did it, Ellen, you and I. We returned to Maybury. Can you believe it?"

"I've made your pyjamas wet," I said.

"They'll dry." She held me at arm's length and a smile came in that remembered mischievous way. "Well, you've grown all right. Right places, too."

I managed a smile in return. "So have you, seems to me."

Now she laughed. "Remember comparing? Girls then, giggling in our secret place by the lake."

Once, five years ago, we were young. Then we went to war.

She stopped at seeing the scar on my side.

"Nothing," I said. "Tell you about it sometime."

"Of course. But you're well."

"Both of us," I replied.

"We've lots to tell each other."

Five years ago we were nineteen.

Breakfast was not as I remembered Maybury breakfasts. Of course it could not be, no smells of bacon or fried bread. As for the kitchen: no, that wasn't as it used to be either. There was kit about, the range hadn't been leaded, cupboard doors with handles hanging off. Yet for all it was work-worn, the Poles had maintained some orderliness. The pantry was well stocked, mainly army rations but also fresh eggs and vegetables.

"That's Mrs Roberts," said Catherine. "She seems to have taken the Poles to her heart."

We enjoyed boiled eggs that morning. We sat opposite each other at the great kitchen table that the night before had hummed with male talk. We studied each other, grinned at each other. But this was special, we knew. The more we thought of it the more special it became. The words of last night hung over that table: *we returned*. But today was today and now it was the house that was calling, already beginning to draw us into itself.

"We must see it all," said Catherine. "Make sure it's all right. Every room and cupboard. Be such fun, don't you think? And it's all ours!"

Her enthusiasm caught me. The upshot was we set off immediately after breakfast. But Maybury is a mansion and with rooms locked and so many keys to go through by mid-morning we hadn't got very far. But Catherine was back home, as if five years had never existed, and I had to hurry to keep up. Oh yes, she was absolutely back home!

"We must go over it all, Ellen, we really must. I've sorted a little but not very much. You see, some of the Poles are still around and one can't intrude. So much to do. Really, there is, would you believe." She was speaking in short bursts as discovery after tiny discovery was made. "Look at this..." and "Look at that..." burst upon burst. She turned to me and saw I was smiling.

"Ellen, why are you smiling?"

"It's you," I replied.

"Really, whatever next..." and she couldn't stop. "Mrs Roberts did our rooms and the bathroom, making sure everything's there. Bed linen, towels, food in the pantry, and a few flowers. My goodness, the way that woman gets on with things. As if she's housekeeper here, not the farmer's wife."

I asked after Mr Roberts. "He's well enough although I haven't seen him. Busy with the farm, I should think. Now shall we start downstairs?"

It was a shock to see the dining room where once Maybury entertained a king and queen. The great dining table was pushed to one side with dining chairs placed on top upside down, the legs poking up into a dust sheet. It was the shame of it: the sight of bunk beds, each with locker and mat. There were places where photos had been fixed, drawing pins and paste. I imagined pictures of wives or girlfriends, children even, stuck all over the oak panelling. Once so diligently polished, everywhere was now looking very tired, as for the paintings and ornaments I once knew so well, nothing remained. The grand fireplace was in an awful state and ash was trodden into the oak floor. Where there was once a sideboard from which the family was served, now there was a small table and chair, and a duty roster.

"Catherine, this isn't a dining room, it's a billet."

"Shocking isn't it. But they are getting the floor cleaned up. The Poles are trying, you know. Oh come on, let's go into the Hall. We can't go outside, though, because the front doors are jammed solid."

I stopped. "Half a mo... what's that over there?" Just under a window was a gramophone. "Was this here before? I don't remember..."

Catherine shrugged, "Perhaps the Poles brought it. Look, there's a record on it. Let's try it." Before I could stop her she was winding the handle.

I took a sudden step back. I felt myself sway.

"Ellen, are you all right? Ellen?"

I remember seeing Catherine's face as though through a mist. I remember trying to speak and no words coming. Very, very peculiar and then it seemed the mist cleared and she was gripping my arms and saying my name and asking me if I was all right.

"Yes," I said. "It's the gramophone."

"What about it?"

"I can hear it..."

"No you can't. It doesn't play." Her grip on my arms tightened. "Ellen!"

My head cleared. "It's nothing. Just... nothing." I blinked my eyes and looked around. "Come on, where next?"

And so we walked through the Hall with Catherine still going on about bits of damage here and there and how good the Poles were at clearing up and polishing. At one point I noticed a piece of carved moulding was missing from a door. I think I even closed and opened it again to make sure it was all right.

"The wonderful echo, Ellen... doesn't it remind you? The magnificent skylight, the grand staircase. Remember how we all had to be quiet in the Hall. Do you think the military respected silence in the Hall? They weren't supposed to use the Grand Stairway."

"I'm sorry," I replied, "What was that?"

She was staring at me again. "Ellen, you're being strange. Whatever is the matter?"

I shut my eyes tightly but I was still seeing and hearing...

"Ellen..."

"It's all right. I'm all right. It was just something. But I'm all right now."

"Are you sure? It's quite a shock seeing all this, isn't it."

"Please let it be. Where were we?"

"I was saying how we had to be quiet in the Hall," but she was still staring at me. "You were scared of something."

"Nothing to worry about," I said. "All over now. Come on, we've got a lot to see." But I found myself staring at some gramophone records next to a telephone on a small table and Catherine saying, "I don't think it's connected."

I asked, "Do we need a telephone?"

"Probably not," she replied watching me curiously. "Ellen, you're being very strange. Are you poorly or something?"

"No. I'm all right. Come on, let's see some more." We continued the tour. And as before she led the way. We passed sand-filled fire buckets with stubbed-out cigarette ends in them and I said, "I would not have allowed that." We came to a notice NCOs ONLY another saying GYMNASIUM and Catherine paused. "Ah, yes... they used the ballroom as a gym. Not good, I'm afraid."

The elegant double doors were badly scuffed. "Wheelchairs," she said. "As for the floor... well, we were never into dancing." Which was true. His Lordship was far more interested in riding and shooting. The ballroom was filled with the accoutrements of physical exercise: vaulting horses, benches and wall bars, a couple of wheelchairs were pushed into a corner. "Oh... the mirrors..." I said at seeing two of the magnificent Victorian mirrors with wall bars bolted over them. Both were cracked.

"And the piano..." replied Catherine going to the instrument. "Not only stains from cups and glasses but look at the graffiti scratched into the top. Oh such a shame!" She paused to rub one of the names. "None of them in English so we can't know who they are." She cautiously touched the keys, and winced. "Nor is it in tune. Oh dear..." She closed the lid and we went out.

"I think the furniture is stored in various rooms," she said. "At least that was how the Major put it but I'm not sure he knew everything. He said some rooms were empty apart from bits of junk. Here's one that's open." We went into what was once a withdrawing room to be greeted by smell of stale smoke and antiseptic. The floor was gouged where beds had been pushed around and... "Is that a bullet hole?" I pointed to a small neat hole in the oak panelling. "What on earth were they doing with firearms in a hospital?" Of course there was no answer, these were trivial events of a time that was now gone. But to me each and every one was real. I must have stared at that bullet hole for a long time because Catherine asked me again, "Are you all right?"

I don't think I answered her. Instead I led the way now and we tried the second dining room door which was locked as was the connecting drawing room. We tried a few keys and the second door opened to reveal a darkened room with blinds and under dust sheets chairs, sideboards, a chest of drawers, serving tables, and a dining table. Catherine pushed through to find a dust sheet firmly tied down. "The other piano..." she whispered. "Ellen, it's the Bosendorfer! And it's still locked, would you believe. Oh my. Was it out of bounds, do you think?" That sort of satisfied us that not all was bad and we made sure the door was locked after us.

At the far end of the corridor were the service stairs at the bottom of which was a notice: OFFICERS ONLY. We looked at each other. I shook my head. We returned the way we had come.

We went back to the kitchen for a cup of tea. I was sitting at the kitchen table while Catherine went to look in the footmen's room. "You know," she said on returning, "I've never been in there before. Another room I knew nothing of."

"It was always kept locked," I said. "The footmen kept it spotless for His Lordship's riding boots, outdoor clothing, guns, everything ready for the next hunt or shoot."

"I never had anything to do with that," she said.

"You weren't for the sporting life."

"Ellen, it never appealed."

"So what will happen now?"

She sat opposite and was looking hard at me. "More to the point, how are you now?"

"What do you mean?"

"You had a funny turn. What happened? Come on, tell me."

I took a deep breath. "Yes, I did, didn't I. The gramophone and the records, all those cigarette ends, and the smell. Smoke and antiseptic. Silly isn't it. Here I am, back home and I have heeby jeebies." I felt my head begin to swim again and gripped the table.

"Ellen!"

"I'm all right. Suddenly came over me. We all knew about it. We'd all seen men affected. Never thought it would be me." I saw Catherine's hands move to cover mine where they pressed onto the table. For a moment or so we were like that. "Things just flashed at me. Tell you sometime..."

"Want to tell me now?" she asked softly.

I shut my eyes and that gentle holding of hands helped. "Not sure. I couldn't even tell my own mother." But just then bits of it came pouring out of me. Even now, as I write this years later, that one event hasn't mellowed with the passing of time. The warm evening, tents set up, a table, everyone sitting eating, chatting. There was this old gramophone and someone had put on a record when a plane came over. No one really bothered because of the lull in the fighting and it would be one of ours anyway. But it turned. They call it friendly fire – not that that matters – Oh, the noise of it... deafening. Catherine's kneading fingers held mine steady. I must have stopped speaking because I heard her gently prompting me to go on.

And so I did. "It was total chaos. The orderly sitting next to me was thrown across me. The plane was gone. A sort of silence settled. So quiet I heard the poor chap sigh as he died. Then I'd pushed him aside and was shouting orders, dragging stretchers. I don't know how. I don't know which was my blood. But seeing that gramophone in there..." I couldn't take my eyes from Catherine's fingers. How strong they were. "It was how I got made up to sergeant. Promoted in the field as stated in my service record."

"But you came back," said Catherine.

"Yes, I came back."

After we finished our tea we went outside and walked around to the front. The house looked all right in the Summer sunshine, the odd broken window, ivy was taking hold, gardens overgrown but.... There I paused and drew breath. "So proud, isn't it?" I said. "Even if the front doors won't open."

"Our home," she replied.

That meant everything. We held hands tightly like we were still children. As if five years hadn't happened. So we sat on the portico steps of the doors that wouldn't open and we were silent. When I asked what happens now, everything was pulled back to the there and then, and the magic of the moment was broken.

Catherine shrugged. "Who knows? I don't. I have a letter telling me the National Trust is now the owner. Do you know anything about them? By Government decree in lieu of death duties. I have no say in the matter. But Maybury was always my home and no one has ever said I can't return to my home. You as well, Ellen." She got to her feet, pulled me to mine. "Come on, let's make it our home again."

And so, like children, we skipped and twirled around those portico columns. Inside, we sang in the Hall so our voices echoed up the Grand Staircase and we didn't care one bit.

The damn gramophone is still there. I have moved it, threatened it, but it's still around. It doesn't play but I sometimes I hear it. Strange how memory makes mischief. Nowadays, it has visitors pause to peer at it. Of course no one knows it's significance. Why should they? I've only ever told one and Catherine would always respect a confidence. In any case, it is only similar to the one I remember vividly twisting and tumbling through smoke and mayhem one balmy Italian evening...

7. The National Trust

Today we have a visit by the National Trust. We have no idea what to expect. Catherine said that we should listen and not interrupt. I thought how could Catherine not interrupt, Maybury being the whole of her life. Five years serving our country was but a short interruption into centuries of inherited responsibility. So we gather our thoughts and await this visitation. As for not interrupting I cannot imagine either of us abiding by that.

Catherine received a letter from the agent, Mr Knox, advising of his visit. The letter was courteous but brief. Catherine read it out and passed it to me. It told us little, no indication of what was expected of us or what the National Trust would do – the house was in desperate need of repairs. As for ourselves, were we trespassers?

"The fact is, Ellen, we are a pair of penniless spinsters who live in a mansion in huge grounds that was once looked after by dozens of people for centuries and is now owned by someone else."

And all this when I'd hardly had time to draw breath following my return. But it was something I admired about Catherine: she always thought of Maybury as the greater family. She also had a way of turning things on its head. "But, my dear Ellen, when the day comes, what shall we wear?"

Obviously my surprise showed.

"Don't tell me you haven't considered clothes."

The upshot was that we took a tour to the East Wing. When Catherine's mother hurriedly departed in 1939 she left behind many of her fine clothes. We found what was once her mother's room and, fortunately, we also found the key to it. The room was as it was untouched under a film of dust. It was unnerving to see it like this but the wardrobe was still there.

"Come on..." said Catherine. "We're here for a purpose." But as her hand slid between rich silks, I was conscious of memories and of how much change had come about. Catherine was never close to her mother, I never once saw affection. There was, however, a secret admiration for the older woman's style and presence. Now, post war, these high fashions seemed outrageously inappropriate yet there was, I knew, fascination.

"Ellen, what do you think?" she said drawing out one particular dress. "A possible, do you think. Or this?" then, "Oh no we mustn't..." and she pulled her hand away. "That is one of Grandmamma's." I was about to look inside when the door was closed decisively. "We mustn't touch."

As it happened, wearing what we stood in, army shirts, dungarees and scarves about our hair, seemed entirely appropriate and as it happened, served our purpose.

The little black car hesitated at the entrance. We were watching from the upstairs landing. So here was the new owner and I don't think I'd ever seen a car so dwarfed by the Maybury gates. It began the long drive to the house and as it did so left behind a thin plume of blue smoke. I felt rather sad for it.

"Is that him?" Catherine came to stand by me. "To think that Rolls Royces and Lagondas once swept up through those gates."

Of course, the front doors being stuck we had to walk around from the rear to welcome our visitor by which time he was staring up at the impressive portico. Catherine stopped and pulled me to one side. "Ellen, I'm not at all sure about any of this."

"Well, we know the roof needs repairing and the heating and the boiler, windows broken. Everything needs attention." I took her arm reassuringly. "Come on, we're dressed for the part, aren't we?" With that we strode across to meet him.

Mr Knox was a smallish man who raised his hat with a flourish. "Lady Shelham?" he enquired of us in turn.

"Catherine Shelham," answered Catherine putting out her hand. "And this is my dear friend, Ellen Macpherson."

"James Knox. How pleased I am to meet you."

He seemed affable enough and I relaxed somewhat.

"We have to use the rear entrance," said Catherine, "I'm afraid the front doors are stuck fast."

Mr Knox followed as we retraced our steps to the courtyard and went through to the kitchen. "This is where we live now," she said. "We have to make do, I'm afraid." He didn't reply and so we proceeded through to the front of the house, entrance hall and grand staircase. The whole time Mr Knox was looking around, occasionally pausing, then smiling, occasionally asking a question and always polite. Catherine asked, "Have you been to Maybury before, Mr Knox?"

"I have not had that pleasure," he replied. "But I have a little knowledge. The history is most interesting. As are the works of art, of course. That was in the third earl's time, was it not, Lady Shelham? I understand your grandmother, Lady Eleanor, was instrumental in preserving much of the most valuable. That is as I understand it to be." By now he was leading the way. "Ah... yes, the Georgian staircase, quite magnificent ..." He cast his eyes around. I don't think anything missed him. "Ha-ha, I see signs of a military presence." He was pointing at the ceiling. "Damaged plasterwork. High spirits, do you think?"

"Mr Knox, this was a convalescent hospital," I said pointedly.

"Please, I do not wish to be critical."

"And we are trying to do whatever we can," added Catherine.

"Of course..." he replied glancing at our attire. "I wonder, can we go upstairs? Quite splendid. Robert Adam, do I see over there? Oh yes. And scuff marks on the balustrade. Pity." Catherine brushed passed to lead the way. "The grand stairway was supposed to be out of bounds to the military," she said.

"Ah yes, the war. It must have been upsetting for you sharing the house with the army."

Catherine turned to face him. "We were not here, Mr Knox. We were **in** the army. Five years, much of it abroad serving our country, would you believe. Now, I'm sure you will want to see much more but shouldn't we discuss certain matters first? I mean, Miss Macpherson and I would like to know our position."

Mr Knox placed his hat on the newel post. "Yes, I'm sure you would but in truth I don't know."

Catherine stiffened. "You don't know? Are you saying you cannot advise us?"

"Only as regards works of art, valuable decoration, that sort of thing."

"What of the house?" I said.

"Very hard to say, I'm afraid."

"Hard to say, Mr Knox. Hard to say," exclaimed Catherine. "Well, let me say this to you, Maybury is our home, and that is **that**. Now, I seem to have forgotten something so please excuse me. I'm sure Miss Macpherson will be able to help you."

I had to hide a smile. Catherine could be quite brusque when she chose. When she was gone Mr Knox said, "Oh dear, have I upset Lady Shelham? I'm so sorry." I assured him everything would be all right.

We went into one of the rooms I knew had one or two paintings. He nodded and said simply, "Oh yes, these are not that special but they'll be safe enough, I'm sure."

This was my cue. "We are worried about the roof, Mr Knox. Rain is getting into some rooms that may have more valuable items."

"But not in these rooms," he replied, returning to the corridor. "This wing seems perfectly dry. In any case, I will have the more valuable paintings removed. All I can say is do what you can, Miss Macpherson." He stopped suddenly and I almost walked into him. "I think it better if I see for myself. I'll go this way. That is if you don't mind."

He hurried off, merely waving when I called after him to say some of the rooms were still locked but there'd be a cup of tea in the kitchen when he was ready...

I returned to the kitchen. Catherine was boiling the kettle. "He seems to know a great deal," I said. "But only about the art. I think he must have met Lady Eleanor."

So now we just sat and waited. He arrived by the back stairs. "Interesting," he said. "Most interesting. The military haven't been as destructive as with other properties I've seen. For that we must be grateful."

"Oh we are, Mr Knox," said Catherine. "We had Polish soldiers and airmen and we found them most helpful." She got up to pour the tea. "We're still consuming the rations they thankfully left behind to augment our coupon allocation. Please excuse army tea."

We sat at the table. We watched expectantly while Mr Knox ferreted in his briefcase. I have to say, until that day it had never struck me as to the significance of what had come about. Never again would this fine mansion be home to a great family. Those times were forever gone. We could only hope and looked forward – and with some anticipation of involvement – to the future. Not for one moment did we ever consider that we would not be part of Maybury. And I cannot express my relief on hearing – when eventually Mr Knox got his papers sorted out, "There are no plans to change anything. The estate will stay as it is. The farm will remain with Mr Roberts as farm manager, and the many estate cottages all with their tenants." He looked at us as if to say that was it. But he went on to declare that the National Trust was in no position to offer much more than guidance, and we, as remaining family in residence – and knowing the property far better than he did – would be much better placed to deal with it. A wry grin spread across his face as he said this. It was as if he was pleased to wash his hands and leave us to it.

For a moment we simply sat there. I looked at Catherine, we both shrugged. What did we expect? We had no idea.

"There we have it, dear ladies," he said, the grin broadening. "We will of course remove some items, works of art, possibly some furniture..."

Catherine smacked the table. "Oh no. Nothing will be removed until we are satisfied as to what it is." He sat back in surprise.

I added quickly, "We are in the process of listing everything."

"Nothing, Mr Knox," repeated Catherine, "Will be removed until we are satisfied as to its connection with my family."

That set the tone for the remainder of the meeting. How sure we were of our position we didn't know. But Mr Knox seemed to accept it. "As I stated," he said, "The National Trust is in no position to offer much help. It is for you ladies to do as you feel best."

"Surely you will carry out repairs," I said while out of the corner of my eye I saw Catherine draw herself up again. "Mr Knox," she said, "We have just returned from the war. We are not ladies of **means**."

"Lady Shelham, let us be clear, Maybury came to the National Trust because of the foresight of your grandmother. Lady Eleanor anticipated that war would bring an end to Maybury as she knew it and, realising the earl's parlous finances and likelihood of bankruptcy, made approaches to the Trust. At some point we see it as a valuable public asset – a national asset, even. But these remain uncertain times and we are pleased that you and Miss Macpherson are here to, shall we say, be custodians. I'm sure you will do admirably. Now, if you will excuse me, I'll take another little wander by myself."

That was it, really. We went outside and sat on the balustrade overlooking the rose garden, or what remained of it under the blanket of weeds. Catherine didn't speak. This was her home – as it was mine – and to see and hear all this was at one and the same time, upsetting and heartening. Mr Knox reappeared after a while, doffing his hat as he came towards us.

"Well, Lady Shelham, Miss Macpherson, the house is in better shape than I expected. Some properties returned to their owners after the war are far worse. I see the guttering on the East Wing corner hanging off allowing water onto the wall. It could fall so please be careful of it."

After more odd bits of advice, he took his leave, the little car leaving behind its thin trail of blue smoke as it phut-phutted down the drive.

"That settles it," I said, "I'm going to fix that gutter."

Catherine glared at me. "Ellen, that is dangerous. I will not allow it."

"Oh come on. You'll see. I've got an idea..."

Quite simple, really. There was an old tarpaulin dumped in one of the stables: that and a ladder should suffice. What confidence! Catherine grumbled but together we dragged the tarpaulin, followed by the ladder across the courtyard, and managed to prop the former against the wall with the latter.

"There, that should keep most of the water off," I said.

Catherine simply shrugged but I know she was pleased.

"We've done something," I said. "However small, it matters."

8. The Estate Office

One morning, I think it was a week after my arrival, Catherine announced she would open the Estate Office. This was once the domain of Mr Prior the Estate Agent who was – at least as far as I was concerned – the most important person at Maybury.

Mr Prior dealt with everything to do with house affairs. The family, even His Lordship, deferred to Mr Prior. It was to this office that everyone, family or servant, would come for money. Every Friday, at midday I would come for my wages. Twelve noon was when all servants of middle level came to receive wages, these would include lady's maids, valets, head cook, head footman and head gardener. We formed a tidy queue in the corridor. Senior staff, His Lordship's butler and the housekeeper – who was of course my mother – came in the morning and they would not queue. Seniors also collected the wage packets for the lower servants in their charge. Family members, of course, would come whenever they wished but generally avoided Fridays.

Mr Prior dealt with it all. Wages and bills, money for the various tasks and purchases for the household, family and servants. From what I knew, Maybury was very open-minded and free-thinking compared to some other large houses, and we were thankful for that. Thinking these things made me sad that those times were past. Let us hope Catherine and I would be able to restore some of the Maybury sense of well-being and happiness once more.

But that morning Catherine was not happy. She was still upset about my mentioning payment for Mrs Roberts (I'm sure she considered I had over-reached myself). Finding the right key to the estate office was getting her more annoyed. I switched on the corridor light but the bulb was missing. The bunch of keys jangled and rattled as each was tried. Eventually the door was opened.

"Ellen, is there a light in here?" Fortunately, there was.

The furniture, however, had been pushed back as baggage and boxes were stacked against it.

"This has been used as a store," I said. "Look at the desk. Mr Prior was always so tidy..."

Catherine swore. "For God's sake! There's stuff everywhere, just dumped. Broken boxes spilling papers, and the safe... Ellen, I need the key to the safe." The safe, too big and heavy to even think about moving, seemed totally unconcerned. Its brass plate stared back at me from the huge and forbidding door.

"So sad to see this," I said, looking about me. The panelled walls still had old photographs of Maybury Park in better times. I straightened one of them, a hunting scene, another of His Lordship and the Rolls Royce and chauffeur, one of Her Ladyship with friends taking tea in the garden. There was a formal portrait of all the family, and next was one of a young Catherine in the nursery, a birthday party with friends and at that my breath caught: her birth date was mine also. I was gripped by the picture, the date was my birthday as well but I was not in the photograph.

"Ellen, are you helping or not?"

"Yes, of course. Sorry."

"What are you staring at? What is it?"

"I was just looking at the picture. Do you remember?"

"Yes, of course, but I need the key to the safe. Will you help, please?" She was getting tetchy, trying the drawers in the desk, shuffling things about. For me, this office was once the centre of life here, orderliness and authority, and I shivered as if something cold had touched me. Then a violent screech and crash shattered the air. I jumped, clamped my hands to my ears and my head snapped round to see Catherine clutching at a metal filing cabinet. She stared at me. "For God's sake, the bloody drawer was stuck."

"Oh that noise..." I said and rushed out of the office.

I can't say what propelled me but I ran along the corridor and down the main stair, along the back corridor, passed the kitchen, and into the courtyard. Only the sound of an old metal filing cabinet so why should it have that effect? Should I go back? The sound was still in my head. Was it seeing the Estate Office like that? The photographs? I hurried through the garden, the far gate into the park and... there I stopped. The house was behind me but I would not turn to see it: dark, distant, forlorn, frowning or laughing at me and I would not look back. Oh mixed up mind! What was I doing? I straightened and took a deep breath and pushed at memories... and walked on. But where to? I was near the rose garden, how overgrown it was, and I passed by. I skirted the big lawn once so cared for, with the huge cedar in its centre, and took the path into the woodland.

Of course I felt a fool. Just rushing out like that. What would Catherine say? She'd say, "What on earth got into you?" "Why did you rush out like that?"

I came to the Dingle. Here was where, as little children, we founded our 'special place'.

I don't believe anyone else ever discovered our secret. To us then Maybury Park was huge and meandering with woods and water, tall trees, lakes and burbling streams. We thought the Dingle magical. Of course, the magic was that we girls could ignore our difference there: that of rank and station. Our secret special place made us equal.

And so here I was again. The huge oak was the centre, either side was wooded valley, before it the lake. We used to sit with our backs to the oak. That day I put out a hand to the trunk to feel the rough bark that hadn't changed in a hundred years. I stole a glance over my shoulder but all was silent, still and secret.

And so I regained myself.

There, under our oak tree, my eyes tight shut, I was hearing my bumping heart, waiting and waiting until eventually it settled and I came to open my eyes. How thankful! Oh, how thankful to be here in this place where there was peace and memories of happy times.

I lay back, wriggled to get my back comfortable among the roots, and thought, yes, here was the same. Time had not touched here and my fingers squeezed the mossy grass.

I allowed my eyes to close again and next I knew was Catherine staring down at me.

"I guessed I'd find you here," she said, her face dark against the sky.

"Yes, in our special place," I replied.

"We were children then."

"Have we changed?"

There was no answer because everything was changed.

"The Dingle is more grown, isn't it?" She stood, hands shading her eyes to see across the water. "We made this our special place. I wanted us to come here together. You know... the way we used to. But you came without me. Why?"

"Because you shouted at me."

Her hands fell to her sides. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

"I'm sorry too," I said. "Something came over me." I wanted to explain but felt unable.

"I used to think about the Dingle," she went on, "Of being here when we were children. I'm sure you did... the way we used to. Good God, Ellen, you must have the same feelings, this place was so special. The lake, the trees... this dear old oak." She was staring up at it and suddenly she was blinking as if tears were close. "So damned peaceful."

I patted the ground by me and waited for her to sit. We were close, touching. For a while we said nothing, simply being there seemed all that was required. She had letters in her hand. I waited for her to say what they were instead she gazed absently at nothing. Then she said, "What was it that came over you?"

"Oh occasionally I see or hear something that makes me jump. Like the gramophone I came across the other day. Bad memories that I push away. Oh come on, it must be the same for you. And I know this is our special place and I should have waited for you."

She shrugged. "I found the key to the safe. Would you believe it was in full view on the desk with some old papers. These letters were there as well, gathering dust. God knows who put them there. One for you." She handed me a handwritten envelope. "There's one from the London solicitor who looked after my family's affairs. He wants to see me urgently although the date is months ago. A few others about which I know nothing. What of yours?"

I tore the envelope open. "Birthday greetings, postmarked 1940."

"Good for you," she said. "Our birthday and you had birthday greetings."

"Nothing for you?"

She didn't answer. Catherine had no siblings and her mother left the instant it became clear the earl had died bankrupt.

"Ellen, there was only ever you and my grandmother."

I reached around her and squeezed her. She was still staring into the distance. I said, "Remember coming to the Dingle and sitting back to back?"

"When we were cross with each other."

I wriggled round until my back was against hers. She asked, "Why are you doing it now?"

"Aren't we cross with each other?"

"Really, Ellen, now you're being silly."

"Well, what were you cross about?"

I felt her shrug, "I'm not sure," she said.

"Then it's you who's being silly."

We lapsed quietly into our own thoughts, comfortable against each other. Then I asked her, "What were you looking for in Mr Prior's office?"

"Money."

"Money? Why?"

"Hard to believe, isn't it? Daughter of an earl, who once lived in luxury and is now penniless?"

"Tell me more," I said.

"I don't know. I really don't know. Habit? The old way of it? Go and see Mr Prior, he knows everything and can do anything. What happened to the contents of the safe? Where's my army pay? My pay warrants were posted here."

"You had your pay warrants posted here? Addressed to whom?"

"You."

"Me! I was in Italy. And I'm not your next of kin."

"I declared you to be my next of kin, address Maybury."

I twisted round to face her. "I don't understand. What do you mean?" I could hardly believe what I was hearing. Catherine – my Lady Catherine – reduced to beneath her own maid-servant. It took a minute or so to sink in then I said, "But you were paid cash on demob."

"Clothes, Ellen, doesn't one have to have some style. I was coming home, for goodness sake. I didn't spend it all but... well, things didn't occur to me, that's all. Surely you know what I mean."

I thought a moment. "Not earning for the first time in our lives. Yes, I know what you mean. So we're equals, aren't we?" and I pulled her arm through mine.

"Are we?" she asked. "You told me your mother paid your warrants into the Post Office for you. It seems all mine are lost. And compared to how this huge property once was – and of which we are now custodians – we are penniless." She looked at me and, at last, a shine came to her eyes. A grin, wry at first, then cheeky like the Catherine in the photo at the birthday party. "But we're both in it together and if that makes us equals I'm glad."

"I'm glad too." I sensed that times past may be giving way and a little encouragement wouldn't be amiss. I said, "We'll do whatever it takes together. And I'm sure your warrants will turn up. Even if I have to cash them for you!"

9. Inventory

Mr Knox's visit had left us rather in shock. The National Trust would not be able to provide anything, either for the property or for us. It could have been very depressing. The fact was we were left this mansion, a grand and once much-loved home, and we were more determined than ever to make it loved again. Maybury Park was – as far as we were concerned – ours!

Now, the army had taught me one thing above everything: the importance of order and organisation. I was inspired to list everything, make an inventory of furniture, paintings and artworks, even tableware and household. We agreed, Catherine and I, that this was very important as we had no idea what state the house was in after five years as a military recovery hospital.

We also decided to do this individually. Catherine was curious about downstairs saying she would like to find out about kitchens and larders, sculleries, and what the servants did. I said she must not forget the butler's and housekeeper's offices, footmen and maids, tack rooms, gun rooms, boot rooms, and outside lavatories. I had to hide my smile on seeing the look on her face.

I would do upstairs. I took a deep breath of anticipation for here was just as unfamiliar to me. Looking back, it was how a great house was: everyone had their place and rarely stepped out of it.

The house had two wings, East and West. Catherine and I occupied the East Wing and the two spacious 'state rooms' with adjoining bathroom. The West Wing had many more, but smaller, rooms. I thought to begin my explorations here as we believed this would where everything might have been placed when the house was taken over by the military.

The West Wing was joined to the main building by the octagon room. I knew this room, but only from the outside. Its distinctive shape formed the corner of the imposing front aspect of the house. This was one of His Lordship's studies – he had two, the one downstairs was where he entertained important visitors. But the octagonal room was very private. I paused at the door, the solid oak door was closed. There was a time when I would never have ventured here. Only his valet and butler would ever be called to attend here. Sometimes, however, if his Lordship was out, my mother as Housekeeper might visit. She was the only person to hold keys to every room and as His Lordship was renowned for untidiness and would wear dirty outdoor clothes indoors, she would see to it that a maid attended.

However, those times were gone. Now I held the keys, and upon trying a few the door swung open easily. Was I surprised to find the room had been used by the military? Whoever it may have been would they have known about its history? Now, a bunk with a worn mattress was in prime position near one of the windows. There were three windows, each with different aspect. I stood in the centre and could see all of Maybury. Well, nearly all, there was the drive, the park, gardens, the farm in the distance. A table was near the bunk and on it was a wireless set with the lead connected to a table lamp. Near the door was a coat stand, the type I recognised from my time in barracks. From all this I guessed that the room must have been occupied by a senior staff member, probably an officer. The floor, however, was like all others, scuffed and scratched, and the carpet gone. Ornate wallpaper that would have been His Lordship's choice, was now grimy and

damaged in places. A roster with standing orders were still pinned to the wall, dated and signed by someone. There was also an indecent drawing which I tore down and screwed up. A dartboard hung from the picture rail, around it was pock-marked where darts had missed. I took that down too and put it outside. I switched on the table lamp and the radio lit up, after a few minutes music started to play. It was that time in the morning for Music While You Work and I sang along to it. I opened a window and leaned out to see the tennis courts, now untidy with gathered leaves and the net collapsed. I remembered that Catherine loved her tennis. Never horses or guns for Lady Catherine. Catherine was always her own person and never a favourite of His Lordship. I doubted she came to the octogen room.

This was how I came to choose the octagon room for my work and from that moment all thoughts of its previous occupant went right out of my head.

By the time I had cleared everything to do with the military out of the room, I was really in the mood for change. I moved the table to where I could see out and found myself a comfortable chair. The wireless set stayed, though, as I would enjoy listening to that over forthcoming days and weeks. All I needed now was something to write on and write with. I thought of my fountain pen given to me by my mother on my 21st birthday but decided that that was too special. Pencils were more suited to making notes. As for paper, that was another post war shortage so I'd have to hunt around the house for that.

Where better to begin than right there in the West Wing. This wing, as I have said, ran at right angles to the main building, with the octagonal room linking the two. I knew little of this part of the house. Catherine's governess occupied a room near the far end but when I walked the corridor I could not be sure which it was. All the doors in the West Wing were similar. I tried each in turn and finding them locked had to go back for the keys. Preparing an inventory was clearly going to take time and I still had no means to record what I would find.

Eventually though, a key was matched to each door. This was a relief, not least because the open doors allowed light to flood the corridor, that in itself was satisfaction. As if I was waking up the house from a long, long sleep!

As to what I found, well, that was a disappointment. Furniture was stacked high, tables on top of tables, desks, dressers and sideboards pushed against walls, dustsheets thrown over. In some rooms it was nigh impossible to move. As for finding paper... I shook my head.

Returning to the octagon room I put on the wireless. The news was on and one item caught my attention: 'as our armed forces demobilise they leave behind huge quantities of materials from weapons to paper and...' at that point I remembered the dining room and large box on which the gramophone was standing, and the label on the box which at the time never registered because of the unfortunate flashback I experienced.

But by now I was eager with excitement at discovering things I knew nothing about and... well, being in charge. I sailed down the grand staircase, along the corridor, into the dining room, and there it was: the box with the gramophone on top. By now, so enthused was I, that that instrument held no fear and I heaved it off. I pulled open the box at which I could not help but exclaim out loud: "What on Earth did they want with hundreds and hundreds of *fluid charts*. These were all

young men, for goodness sake!" But that didn't matter, the plain backs were all I needed. Now for pencils...

Next, in the corner of an otherwise empty drawer in a discarded desk in another room, was a pencil. Broken but that was soon remedied with my penknife. On a wall in yet another room was a clipboard still holding a roster for duty corporal. The roster was quickly disposed of.

Armed with clipboard and fluid charts I could begin my task. I went back to the octagon room and taking the first of the fluid charts, turned it over and wrote *Octagon Room*.

This was how I would describe all of the rooms. Each would be given a number – simpler than attempting complicated description. I would put sticky tape on every door of each room. Then I'd do a rough plan of where things were and descriptions – as far as my limited knowledge would allow. And I quickly realised that this was giving the house its new beginning! From that moment Maybury was alive once more but I had no idea where it might lead.

10. A Letter From My Mother

"I thought I'd find you here," I said to Catherine when I came one day to our special place down by the lake. It was a lovely afternoon and after having spent the morning cleaning and polishing, it was good to be out.

"I came to see the swans," she replied. "The young are quite big now."

I sat beside her. "I've received a letter from my mother," I said. "She's sent a photograph." I passed it to her.

"Oh my... when was this taken?"

"Well, judging by what we're doing: serving on the cake stall at a church Summer bazaar, I think we were twelve. But my mother has more surprises. It concerns your grandmamma. Let me read you a little:

When you visited me just after the war I wanted to tell you about something Lady Eleanor said concerning you. At first I wasn't sure whether to tell you or not - it was very confidential - but now Her Ladyship is gone, and you're now back at Maybury with Lady Catherine, I think it's time you should know.

One day Lady Eleanor took me into her confidence - I remember exactly, you were just twelve and it was you she wanted to discuss. You can imagine my surprise when she said you must continue your education after fourteen and that she would see to it that you attended the High School to get your school certificate.

When you were sixteen her Ladyship wanted you to join her household to receive proper instruction for a lady's maid. Well, you can imagine my astonishment, what was this about? I was thinking: does she expect you to take over when her own Miss Johnson retires? Oh no. It was made perfectly clear: you were to be Lady Catherine's maid when she returned from school in Switzerland. I was flabbergasted. To be lady's maid at so young an age was unheard of and Catherine the same age as well! But then, you two had been close from the day you were born, so it did make sense. But I have to say I told her Ladyship I thought you a good deal too young and too forward - oh yes I did - but she replied, "Mrs Macpherson I have confidence in your daughter where I have doubts about my granddaughter which is why I'm sending her away". Can you imagine?

I put down the letter and waited for Catherine's reaction. "Well, Granny told me a little," she said, clearly surprised. "So I was sent away to Switzerland to make a lady of me and I arrive back to find you're my maid. But that about having schemed with your mother... well, I did not know that. Dear Granny, whatever next."

I looked again at the letter. "There is something else my mother says:

Her Ladyship was very clear, His Lordship gone and the title with him, and with the expectation of another war no one knew what might happen but on this she was quite clear: it would be for Lady Catherine and you to look after Maybury.

But Catherine seemed elsewhere now. Was it what my letter had revealed? Or had the peace of that place with its family of swans consumed her entirely? Carefully folding my letter away I was set thinking. The whole time we were at war, letters were anxiously awaited, eagerly read and precious memories saved. I had all of Catherine's and I know she had all of mine. That a maid should correspond with her lady...

I smiled to myself. Then, an association like we had was most extraordinary. It contradicted all conventions of the time and one's place in the world. That I, child of a servant should be permitted to form a friendship with someone of title was unheard of. I firmly believe that Lady Eleanor had in some mystical esoteric way knowledge of the future that Maybury would be secure in our hands. The war, of course, brought about the means. Those five years prepared us, toughened us, and all remaining barriers of old-fashioned England would be simply pushed aside.

The swans had moved on and Catherine was flicking pebbles into the water. I noticed that her hair was growing back nicely, thick and dark to her nape. At one time I would have been responsible for how she looked. I would have made sure she was always properly groomed and dressed. She was always considered the beauty of the household.

I let my eyes close against the sun. The pebbles had stopped. Catherine asked what I was thinking.

"About your grandmother and how she managed to do this."

"With your mother's connivance it seems."

"Two remarkable women, don't you think?"

"Without doubt," came the murmured reply.

11. Housekeeping

I went into town for the first time since arriving back at Maybury. In the five years I had been away little seemed to have changed and I was pleased to see that. I needed to do a little shopping but my first errand was to the Post Office. I was welcomed at the counter by a smiling young man who I suspect was not long out of school. I produced my pass book and he carefully noted the entries made by my mother of my army pay. I made a withdrawal to do some shopping.

My next stop was the chemist. I was pleased to see they had toothpaste, rather expensive but that was how things were now. On his counter were lipsticks. I think the chemist had made lipsticks right through the war and offered them in a couple of shades at a reasonable price. I admired his canniness and I bought two, one each for Catherine and myself. Next stop was the hardware shop in the side street off the square for washing powder and shoe polish. All told, it was enjoyable and satisfying to be here and doing these things once more. And spending some of my army pay because I do consider it was very well earned.

When I got back to Maybury I noticed Mrs Roberts with pony and trap departing down the drive to the farm. When I mentioned this to Catherine she replied, "That's right, Mrs Roberts collected our laundry."

"Oh," I said, "I thought we did our own laundry."

"She offered to do it for us. She also brought some eggs."

I didn't comment further. I was already aware that Mrs Roberts did quite a lot for us. She called in regularly to take our ration books for grocery shopping which she did for her own family. But she was also bringing us some provisions from the farm. Of course it was well known that rural communities often benefited from local food production, but doing so was not correct.

"Do we pay her?" I asked at which Catherine fluttered her eyelashes in that irritated way she had and didn't answer. "Then I will see Mrs Roberts and offer to do so."

"I won't let you," she shot back.

"I will pay her with my money."

"Ellen, I will not have you using your money for Maybury," and with that she left the room.

Nothing more was said. She was obviously put out. But we had lunch for which I used two of the fresh eggs to make scrambled egg. On fresh toasted bread this was really delicious after the usual reconstituted egg. Catherine washed up. While she did so she mentioned our tableware. "Why do we not use the house silver now that you have made a discovery?"

This was true, I had found in one of the sideboards stored in the West Wing, some of the original silverware. "Yes, of course we can but..." she looked hard at me. "We don't actually own it."

"Well, we don't own the house but we live here. It seems to me we don't own anything but still manage." She thrust her hands deep into the soapy water and stared at the wall. "And I haven't thanked you for the lipstick. That was remiss of me for such a very kind thought."

"Oh come on... let my dry up," I said and nudged her out of the way.

It was how we kept house. We had a system of sorts. Shared duties, alternated cooking and clearing up. I taught Catherine some basic home skills as we went

along, and I have to say she was quite receptive to this. But the regular appearance of food from the farm, which was prohibited because of rationing, troubled me. Of course, the fact was we had no income. We were not in paid work. The needs of the house filled our entire lives. The house provided a bed and a roof but absorbed all our energies in trying to put it back to its former self. That I had savings of army pay and was prepared to use it was a sensitive issue. This clearly troubled Catherine but I do not think she understood much about money and, worse, was reluctant to discuss it.

However, I had made up my mind to visit the farm. I was still uncertain as to why Catherine had taken against me seeing Mrs Roberts, surely she would not want the farm to be out of pocket on our account. In any case, knowing how close my mother was to the farmer's wife, it would be the polite thing to do. Since returning to Maybury I was receiving letters regularly from my mother and she always asked after Mrs Roberts.

So that was decided, then. But as for telling Catherine, I would choose my moment.

12. Mrs Roberts

My first visit to the farm since returning to Maybury and I was looking forward to it. As I walked down the back drive, through the gate at the end and onto the fields, I was pleased to see how well they had done, ricks were high, it had been a good harvest. Approaching the farm it seemed little had changed, except for a new structure where there was once a tumbled barn. It was little more than a metal roof on long legs and now being filled with bales from the harvest. I waved to one of the Polish airmen working there. Carrying on into the farmyard I came upon Mrs Roberts' pony and trap. I stopped, so pleased was I to see all this. I stroked Tibs' nose, he seemed pleased to see me, and for a moment I simply stood there. It was like nothing had changed. I looked about me and took in deep breaths of good farmyard air. How good it all felt. As if five years had slipped by unnoticed! I ventured into the stall and saw the neat figure of Mrs Roberts searching the straw for eggs.

"Mrs Roberts."

"She looked round in surprise. "Well now, Miss Macpherson, how good to see you." She put down the bowl of eggs and came over. "My, you look well after these five years if you don't mind my saying." She wiped her hand on her apron before offering it to me. But I was a little nonplussed: being addressed as Miss Macpherson was quite unexpected.

"Please call me Ellen," I said.

"No, no... we don't do that. You're no child now, serving in the war and all that. Oh no. Lady Catherine asked that I use her Christian name and I answered her in no uncertain manner, 'No, m'Lady,' I said, 'Forgive my forthrightness but Her Ladyship will always be addressed properly in this household'. As will you, Miss Macpherson. Now, you'll join me for a cup of tea, I'm sure."

And with that she picked up the eggs and led the way across the farmyard to the house. "Mr Roberts is over at the bottom fields," she said over her shoulder. "He's finishing the gathering in. Johnny's there and a couple of the Poles. They're good workers but what a shame they can't go home to their families. But that's the world now, isn't it, Miss Macpherson, as I've no doubt you know better than most. Come along in now, don't mind your boots, we're only in the kitchen. Leave the door, it's always open."

I did as bidden. She was a small person but I remembered my mother saying 'such a vigorous heart'. The description intrigued me but I saw how well it fitted. A chair was pulled out from the table and I sat down. The kettle on the range was singing, tea was spooned into the pot, the kitchen was spotless. It all made me feel so good, so utterly natural, and I felt more at home than ever. Through the window I could just make out Maybury chimneys over the parkland trees and I breathed again of good country air.

The table was simple: large white cups and saucers, bowl of sugar, jug of milk. No tablecloth, the table was well enough scrubbed. The conversation began as I expected: about the war and all that. Oddly, I felt less averse to talking about it and sat back as Mrs Roberts described how well the farm had done, children grown up, the Polish airmen, and so on. And I was thinking, what have I got to say? Or have I forgotten? I found myself staring at her and she stopped. "Miss Macpherson, are you all right?"

I must have been staring blankly. "Oh yes... thank you. Yes, I'm all right but I..." I saw my hands beginning to tremble and clenched them. "Sorry, but I have these sort of recurring flashbacks. Things I had forgotten. Or thought I'd forgotten. Sorry..." and I forced a smile.

"You were a nurse, weren't you?" Mrs Roberts asked.

"Medical orderly."

"Is there a difference?"

"Not in the thick of it." The answer came out before I could think.

"I was a nurse before I met Mr Roberts. First War, but we weren't sent abroad. It can't have been easy what you did. I admire you."

I quickly looked out of the window, seeking out the distant Maybury and trying to clear my thoughts. "I'm sorry, Mrs Roberts, I find it difficult sometimes. My mother wanted to know all about what I did and I really couldn't tell her. Not the things she wanted to know. Silly things, yes, but the rest is... well, sort of blocked. As if it didn't happen. Even now, I go to my dressing table and see my medals in drawer and they don't seem to belong to me. But I came to see you and the farm, not blather about the war. I'm sorry."

"Her Ladyship was the same. Not wanting to say what she did. I expect she opens up to you, though, being friends since babes like you were. Runs deep, does that, but it's not for me to pry."

She refilled our cups. I stared into mine and felt her gaze on me. I was silent, embarrassed almost, like a wall around me had crumbled away.

"Your mother writes to me," she said. "Of all the Maybury folk she's the only one to stay in touch. Most left for the war. Some didn't come back. We were pleased beyond belief when Lady Catherine arrived. Then you. Mr Roberts and me are very glad you returned safe and well. The new owners, this National Trust, they let us get on, they don't interfere and we don't ask for anything. What more could we want? Except for her Ladyship and you at back at the house. No, we can't ask for more."

I felt my eyes fill and I blinked. "That's very kind of you," I said.

"It's how I am. Now, I got eggs for you to take back." She got up and went to the scullery. "I'll put them in a basket. Keep it for next time."

"But we should pay..."

She stared at me. "Pay? Why?"

"Mrs Roberts, it's what we must do now. Isn't it?"

"Well now, is this what the government says? Then let me tell you all through the war the house had food from the farm. When the hospital was there, they had food every week and glad of it they were. So you'll have same as before. As I told her Ladyship, so I'm telling you, nothing's changed, Miss Macpherson, the house and the farm will go on. Now, there's a some potatoes fresh from the field as well as eggs. You hold onto the basket till next time. We've a couple of pigs ready soon so we'll have some nice joints of pork before Christmas."

It was all a bit overwhelming and I was stumped for words. But it was time to go. I thanked Mrs Roberts for the tea at which she offered me a lift back as she had to take dinner to Mr Roberts and the workers in the top field. "Tibs will be wanting to go so you come along," she said and to be sure, the pony flicked his ears as we approached. "There now, good boy," said in his ear before hoisting herself up to take the reins. I sat by her, my feet dangling like hers, and the pony set off with a trot.

The sun shone and the farm seemed as it always was. And it set me thinking about those times when Catherine and I used to play in these very woods, bathed together in the lake, and accounted to no one. We might have been sisters. More than sisters: twins! That we were not made no difference. Now we return and... but Tibs had stopped and Mrs Roberts was smiling and saying, "Drop you here by the gate? Here, give him this." She handed me an apple.

I smiled and thanked her again. It had been a long time. The elegance and peace of it. I listened to the easy clip-clop of hooves until they were lost in the timeless hush of elms and oak. The meaning of Maybury overwhelmed me and I cried, freely cried, as how thankful I was to be here once more.

13. Intimate Letters

I was pleased to see that care had been taken when the house was closed on outbreak of war as dustsheets were everywhere. The first rooms I investigated were similar to the ones Catherine and I had adopted in the East Wing, comfortable with connecting bathroom and views over that side of the park. Four-poster beds with hangings were still in place, sideboards and dressing tables. Further along the corridor were smaller rooms filled with other furniture. Here, I came across chests of drawers, one still contained neatly folded linen, a sideboard had cutlery wrapped in newspaper, another had a china tea service. When I reached the end of the corridor and the furthest and smallest room, I came upon the desk.

Since settling to the task of listing every item put away for the duration, I had become curious as to what might have happened to certain special pieces. I was thinking of the pictures by famous artists, these would have been very special in His Lordship's time and, I imagined, would have been accorded special care when the house was closed. But as I went through room after room I wondered about certain items of furniture, tableware, and so on, that was considered valuable. Had these been removed along with certain works of art to safer locations?

But to my surprise and I have to say, satisfaction, this seemed not the case.

This room was dark, curtains drawn, and I had to feel my way around. I came upon the desk against a wall. Carefully, I drew back the dustsheet and gazed in wonder at a small *escritoire*. It was exquisite. Such a beautiful piece with gold and pearl inlays and delicate carvings, curves and sweeps – I do not think there was a single straight line. I found the matching chair and put the two together. I took a deep breath, this was from His Lordship's private study – the very same I now occupied: the octagon room. I imagining Himself sitting here, although I never saw him of course – a lady's maid would never venture into so sacred a place. Yet it was easy to lapse back into those times: of knowing one's position, one's duties and expectations. Should I carefully restore the dust sheet and step away? But I had set myself a task of listing all I came across and so I uncovered the desk fully and placed the chair with it. I sat upon the chair. I opened the lid of the desk. What audacity! And there was more. The delicate drawers were unlocked and slid as smoothly as the day they were made probably two-hundred years before. And inside... I could not believe it but there were his things! His gold fountain pen, quite beautiful, and a plain black one and which I have to say was not unlike my own. How that realisation helped, bringing me closer, more equal... I might have looked him in the eye! I ran my finger over the blotting pad and tried to make out back-to-front writing. A line of cubby holes along the back contained a bottle of Waterman's ink, scissors, sealing wax and matches, silver cigarette case with matching lighter. I found an ivory letter opener and next to it a pad of expensive writing paper. I opened all the drawers, I could not stop myself. I was about to close everything when I caught sight of a letter. It was tucked into Maybury stationary and would easily have been missed but for its colour pink and waft of expensive perfume. My eyes went wide at what was written there:

*My Darling M,
Thank you for my new home. When will you come to enjoy with me?
Your loving A*

There were others, I counted over a dozen. And now blatant curiosity got the better of me completely. Brief as each was – and I read only a little – my head was set in a whirl. But as to the writer, there was no clue. The recipient was clear enough: M was His Lordship. Each began: *my darling M* and signed *your loving A*. I would not read them all – a few words sufficed.

As to who had written them, the loving A, I was at a complete loss.

In short I was left breathless. I glanced at the desk once used by many Earls of Maybury. I could imagine them all... I imagined him and this... what dare I call it? What lady would know? Or even a lady's maid? Except, of course, I was no longer so obligated, and here was I holding a collection of love letters. I may have been breathless but my hand was quite steady as I placed them back into the stationary pad. I was about to return them to the drawer when another letter caught my eye. Now, of course, it was impossible to stop myself. It was a typed letter from a London property agent referring to the purchase of an apartment at an address in Kensington stating: *we should be pleased to receive payment in full*. Pinned to it was a hand-written note asking *if His Lordship would kindly clarify purchase of this London property*. The note was from Mr Prior, His Lordship's agent who clearly knew nothing of this.

I sat back to consider all of this when another oddity caught my attention. The corner of a pound note peeked from one of the cubby holes. There was a roll of them, the elastic band that once held them had perished. I counted fifty pounds. Collecting everything together, I went to find Catherine.

She was shocked. She said she would burn everything. For a moment I really thought she would, including the fifty pounds. Her face was one of dismay which quickly turned to anger. "How dare he! Would you believe it? My mother, oh yes, I knew she had affairs. But my father..." hands pressed to her face she twisted away. I had never known Catherine so distraught and I was quite shocked. The poor soul was never close to either parent – largely ignored by both – yet finding these letters – just shoved into his desk as if it didn't matter who came across them. It was as if she had been slapped in the face. Without a second thought I pulled her close and just hugged her. God knows, what else could I do?

At last she straightened. "Well, that's settled then. I will reply to that letter from the solicitor and request a meeting. I will ask him to explain this property in Kensington that my father bought for..." she pulled a face as if a bad smell was about, "Whoever she was."

I found a safe box with a key and I dusted it out, and decided that this would be the receptacle for all personal documents that we came across. As for the fifty pounds, Catherine rolled them up and tied them with string and placed them in her dressing table drawer.

"Everything will be safe," she said. "From now on, Ellen, we are guardians. Everything about Maybury and the family will be in our care."

I nodded thankfully. From now on anything of delicate nature would go straight into that document box.

14. The Solicitor

Discovering his Lordship's intimate correspondence decided Catherine to make the appointment to meet the solicitor. I didn't query as to how the solicitor could possibly offer anything as regards his Lordship's private life, or even if it was relevant, but Catherine had made up her mind.

"You must come with me, though," she said firmly.

Nor was I sure how my presence would help but I agreed. Catherine sat at her dressing table to write to the solicitor there and then.

Then the question of what to wear arose. But reminding Catherine that dress was still utility wear and coupons were required was met with silence. It was not easy. The war was only weeks past and military uniforms were still very much in evidence. One could say that to have worn our uniforms would have been perfectly acceptable but, no, we had moved on.

I suggested we try her Ladyship's wardrobe again and this time Catherine was more enthusiastic, but I added, "I will go while you write your letter. I have a few ideas and I promise not to disturb anything of Lady Eleanor's, but your mother had some really fine outdoor clothes and I can't imagine she took any of those to South Africa."

I opened the wardrobe wide, it was huge – I don't think there was ever one larger at Maybury. I found dresses, warmish ones as it was nearing Autumn. I chose first of all blue, Catherine's favourite colour, and then a gorgeous red. I took them back to her room and laid them on the bed.

Barely half an hour passed and she appeared in the blue. "Well, what do you think?" Clearly my surprise showed. "Oh come on, Ellen, you know I can't resist blue."

"I did think on this occasion, visiting London, the red would be..."

"No. The red is for you."

"Me! How can I...?"

"Very easily, my dear Ellen."

"That was not my intention, Catherine. Both were for you to choose from."

"So I've chosen. Really, Ellen, we've been through a war, you are no longer a maid to me or anyone else. You will look gorgeous in red. That's it, I've decided. What about hats? And shoes? Remember, I've got nylons from the GIs I met in Paris. We will look London in the eye!"

There was inevitably some titivation required. But the wardrobe produced an elegant fur stole for Catherine and a very nice jacket that would go perfectly with my red dress. With a bit of millinery modification – no nets and needless frill – and we each had a hat. As for shoes, Catherine had the same size as her mother while I preferred a pair that my mother had given me. Finally, accessories: gloves, handbags, and hankies.

Catherine had a reply from the solicitor by return with an invitation to visit that week. The suddenness was puzzling but we were, by then, looking forward to visiting London once more. That caused twinges of anxiety: memories of bombs raining down, but we'd be together and that would help. But Catherine was surprised when I said I must go to the Post Office beforehand. I explained it was to draw money for the train fare.

"But I have the fifty pounds you found in my father's desk. Surely that's enough for us both, isn't it?"

"More than enough but I will pay for myself."

This made her obviously uncomfortable. "Ellen, you've often paid for odd things since we've been here and now when I'm able to pay you refuse it."

"That's not the point. We agreed from the start..."

"Yes, I know, we're equal – penniless and equal – but..."

I cut her short. "Catherine, the equal thing is important. Very important, don't you see? You tell me I'm no longer your maid just as you're no longer m'Lady, so let's be properly equal. It's how we are now. I will pay my own fare."

We rose early to travel for the London train. Mr Roberts said his son Johnny would chauffeur us to the station. What we did not expect was Johnny driving up the door in the Alvis. He said he'd been quietly working on it and had found some petrol but we didn't enquire where. With the maroon paint polished and we in our finery, the car made a wonderful start to the day.

The station wasn't busy, a few other travellers, mainly men in suits and hats and carrying briefcases. We were at the ticket office window when Catherine – still a mite sore, I suspect – looked at me enquiringly. "Our tickets... what shall we get?" She had the roll of pounds notes still in the elastic band.

In a sudden flash of inspiration I said, "I pay for two ordinary returns and you pay for us to go first class. How's that?" Well, I think the ticket clerk saw the funny side of it.

The train was late but we found an empty compartment.

"Sorry," I said as we took our seats.

"Why? Whatever for?"

"Over the fares."

"Don't. It's as much to do with me."

"Catherine, we're independent women now."

She looked at me. "You know the situation, Ellen. I'm still not sure what independence means. I've been dependant since I was born, either on the family or the army. Yet I suppose I'll find out sometime."

"It's the same for both of us," I replied. "But I've never felt more at ease than I do now." I put my hand on hers. "We've returned to Maybury, Catherine, and that's all that matters. Let us relax and enjoy putting it back together. Think of all the things still to be discovered."

"More about my father's philandering?"

"No, that's not..." but she was grinning at me. After a while she fell asleep with her head resting on my shoulder.

Mr Shoesmith was not how I expected a solicitor to be. He was young, dapper with thick hair and a moustache. However, we also were not as expected. His clerk introduced us with great courtesy and we were greeted by his gaze darting wonderingly from me to Catherine and back. "Err... Lady Shelham?"

Catherine presented her gloved hand. "Catherine Shelham, and this is my dear friend and companion, Miss Ellen Macpherson. She and I have lived at Maybury since we were born."

His puzzlement grew. "Ah yes... your Ladyship and Miss Macpherson. How pleased I am to meet you both." We shook hands, removed our gloves and smiled,

and said how pleased we were to be there. He offered us cigarettes from a silver box and we both declined, he closed the box without taking one himself. And I really felt so good in that gorgeous red dress, and Catherine too, gorgeous in her blue dress. She had such style! But just then I think we both did. Oh yes, we did that day. And what a day...

However, I'm not sure that Mr Shoesmith anticipated my presence at the meeting. He began by declaring the meeting was confidential and concerned Lady Shelham's personal affairs and would I like to take coffee with one of his lady staff.

"No," said Catherine, "Ellen must be here with me."

He placed a heavy ribbon-tied file on the desk. "Lady Shelham, please understand these are matters of a very private nature."

Catherine said, "I'm sure you're right but it is my wish that Miss Macpherson remains. And I have a matter that troubles me that I hope you will be able to help with."

"Of course, Lady Shelham, but this..." and he pulled the ribbon of the file undone, "This is essential and I insist, confidential," and he looked again at me.

"Of course," I said, standing up. "Catherine, we'll meet later and then you can tell me everything." I smiled and patted her hand.

I was shown into an outer office and offered coffee by a secretary. Such an old-fashioned place that reminded me of Maybury with oak panelling and creaking floors. Ribbon-tied files were everywhere, on filing cabinets, in drawers that didn't close properly. I imagined his Lordship visiting here, going over divorce papers or discussing bankruptcy. No one spoke to me, the secretary typed continually, clerks passed back and forth. The coffee failed to arrive. Eventually I got up saying I would be at the milk bar around the corner.

I have to say I was apprehensive about visiting London. Memories remained close to the surface and too easily disturbed. But everywhere seemed normal, people and cars, as if it was always like this. We'd taken a cab from the station to the solicitors and I'd seen little. Now walking, I'd come across a great gap where shops and houses should have been. We've come to call them bomb sites, and it's as if they've been there forever. I stared at how Nature had taken over, pink willowherb was everywhere – in the country it's called old man's beard, fluffy whisps blowing about but here, it was growing out of rubble and tumbled walls. I could not help but stare. Weeds shared the insides of houses where families once ate and slept. Was it here I pulled out people? Broken, burnt, dead, talked to them whether alive or not and put them in my ambulance. This street or next? Somewhere else? And people walking by as if it meant nothing to them. I joined them, walked with them until, thankfully, I came upon the milk bar.

Inside was a different world. As if those times never happened and I stirred a strawberry milkshake and sipped it satisfyingly until the secretary found me.

"Miss Macpherson, the meeting is over and Mr Shoesmith invites you and Lady Shelham to lunch with him." She smiled. She seemed so young, as if the war was before her time. I smiled and thanked her, and realised she was probably my age.

Catherine could barely disguise her desire to reveal what had taken place. One moment animated, laughing, the next gazing at me and pulling her lip between her teeth. But it was a nice lunch, expensive, thankfully we were not paying.

A cab was arranged to take us to the station. While we sat in the waiting room Catherine took a sheet of paper from her handbag. "I don't know where to begin," she said, staring at the paper. There wasn't much of it, typed on one side only. "I never expected this, oh God, I did not." Her hands were trembling. "But it's not bad. Just so unexpected. Rather frightening, really." She handed me the paper.

No, it was not expected. I did not know what the meeting might reveal but neither of us did. Naïve, you might say. A few lines on a sheet of paper and our lives changed forever. Catherine was the sole beneficiary of her grandmother's estate which included properties in Mayfair and Westminster, estates in Scotland, industrial lands in the North. In addition there was an annual income of £2000. All in a few type-written lines.

Catherine saw my face. "It's for Maybury, Ellen," she said quickly. "Granny made it clear. You remember, don't you? When we stayed with her before we joined up? How she explained about the future of Maybury and how it was down to you and me. She had it all worked out."

"But £2000..."

"Yes, on the first of January every year. Mr Shoesmith gave me a cheque for this year because he wanted to hand it over personally. Here it is." She opened her handbag and took it out. "Ellen, this is much more than my army pay. Two thousand pounds. Every year, Ellen."

But I did not enthuse, I could not, and it showed.

"What is it?" she asked.

I looked about me, at waiting room windows in need of cleaning, my feet on the worn quarry floor. "Yesterday we were equal," I said. "Penniless was how you described it. Our whole plan for Maybury – for our future – was based on what we didn't have. Simple equality. And now, that has gone. Because you're rich again."

She looked at me in utter surprise. "How can you say that?"

"Well, it changes everything, doesn't it? Oh, Catherine, all our lives there had been this huge divide. Yes, I know... our growing up together... from tiny children... being as one but everywhere there was the reality. The divide. Then, suddenly, the war's over, we come back and... suddenly we're equal. No divide. And there is Maybury, waiting for us, a pair of penniless women starting from scratch with **nothing**. Now, today, everything's gone back to where it used to be." My fingers twined. I wanted to throw the lace gloves away, the hat with its trims and pretentious nonsense. And now I was seeing Catherine turn away from me. She was hurt and I was hurt, and I wouldn't have hurt her for the world. For once she had no answer, the euphoria evaporated. Her face said it all. It was as if I'd torn out of her all her lovely memories of her dear grandmamma.

At least on the journey home I held her hand.

It was dark when we arrived and I was so glad to see Johnny and the Alvis. He proudly wore a chauffeur's cap, touching his finger to the peak as he held the door for us. But it was not how I wanted it to be and I was ashamed. The Alvis swept through the gates into Maybury Park as if nothing had happened.

I soaked in my bath. I stared up at the ceiling and thought, how quiet the house. This was why we were here and I immediately burst into tears.

I dried myself and pulled on pyjamas and went into my bedroom. Catherine was sitting on my bed, she held up two glasses.

"A nightcap," she said. "I think we deserve it, don't we." She patted the bed beside her.

"I'm not sure if I do," I said.

"Oh, really, Ellen, do sit down. It's only a small sherry to drink a toast." I did as requested. We clinked the glasses. "To Maybury," she said and we each sipped a little, licked our lips, and did so again.

"I'm glad about your money," I said. "I was naughty. It was selfish of me and I'm sorry."

"You mustn't say that, Ellen. Never, do you hear? This money is **ours** for Maybury. It's Granny's way, God bless her." Her lips were quivering but those dark, dark eyes never wavered. "You're more important than any amount of money, do you hear?"

15. Catherine's Pistol

Catherine told me about how she came to have a pistol.

She was driving the French general across Europe following the Allied advance into Germany. The British army did not issue side arms to junior NCO ranks and the General thought that was out of order so he presented Catherine with a pistol. I found it one day. We had been back at Maybury a few weeks now and with Autumn approaching, we were making preparations when I came across the pistol in her dressing table.

"Ellen, what are you doing with my dressing table?"

"I was moving it a little."

"Oh why is that?"

"To make it easier to pass with the coal scuttle."

"Ellen, you are no longer my lady's maid."

"No, I am not and you no longer need a pistol."

We both stared at the open drawer and the pistol half concealed by a fold of silk. Her face was one huge 'Catherine' smile. "That was *mon général*," she said proudly. "He gave it to me should I need to protect my honour." Her smile relaxed a little. "Come on, Ellen, I was only a corporal, you were a sergeant, you must have had a pistol."

"Medical Corps were not advised to openly carry firearms. I kept my revolver under the seat in the ambulance." I carefully moved the pistol with one finger, it was silver and sleek, not at all like my clumsy service revolver. "Did you ever have to use it?"

"Once," she replied.

"Oh really."

"Yes, we were not supposed to be where we were." Now it was my turn to smile: Catherine was so meticulous about her map reading. She fluttered her eyelashes at me. "Ellen, please, this was very serious. It was getting dark and I needed to check my compass. So I got out of the car and walked a short distance but we must have crossed into no man's land. Only briefly, no one was quite sure – not even the Germans – and this fellow suddenly appeared, rifle at the ready, and coming toward me. I said 'stop there or I will shoot you'. In German of course. He put up his hands but not very high and, would you believe... the fellow grinned. Yes, grinned at me, just like you're doing now." She paused. "Then he just walked back the way he'd come, would you believe."

"So you didn't shoot him? Oh Catherine, and I thought you were going to be so heroic."

I might have been amused but a thought struck me. "Is it loaded?"

"Of course not. At least ..." we both stared into the open drawer.

"Don't you think you should check it?"

She pulled open another drawer and there was the magazine and a box of ammunition. "It's perfectly all right," she said and shut both drawers.

"Should it go to the police station?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Or we keep it to protect both our honours."

Of course that wasn't the whole story. The rest came out shortly after when Catherine had one of her nightmares. That night I was woken by her shouting *mon général, mon général!* I rushed into her room to find her sitting bolt upright in bed.

I called out her name at the same time keeping my distance. Eventually, she turned to me, face sheened with perspiration. "Come on," I said, "Tell me, what was it? Quickly, you need to say before it goes. What was it about *mon général*?"

Slowly she began. "There was a German soldier... and another. I shot the first. Then a violent burst of fire. The General was there... pulling me back. God, I was so frightened."

I let her talk, just let her connect. I sat on her bed and eventually a sort of story emerged, a hotch-potch of mixed memories. A story of Germans lying in the road and the General with a Sten gun and ordering her to turn the car. Her breathing settled and she continued, "I remember two of them coming toward me. I aimed and... but my memory is such a muddle. When I shut my eyes now I hear that din again. Ellen, I tremble at the thought of it. But I turned that car round and we drove back to a US army check point in the dark. I even asked for petrol and supervised filling the car. I still see this little GI with the jerry can and he had such a happy round face and called me ma'am. Ellen, I am so mixed up because..."

"Go on," I said.

"I thought I'd fired and when the General checked my pistol he said, yes, it was me. Ellen, I shot a German. He congratulated me, would you believe. As for remembering... just a muddle until tonight."

She was visibly shaking. I was too because I knew what was going on inside her head.

16. The Reverend Watkinson and George

My memories of our village vicar before the war was of an elderly man in a cassock who always welcomed the Maybury family but had nothing to say to the servants. On my return to Maybury, I found the next incumbent, the Reverend Watkinson, rather different. He was younger and on the whole seemed accepted by the village and church folk. I have to say I quite liked him, at least initially.

Let me be clear from the outset: I am not a religious person. It is not every Sunday that I go to church and I avoid church affairs, being so occupied with Maybury. However, as young girls, both Catherine and I were quite active at church fetes and bazaars but that was normal for youngsters. The war put a stop to all of that. And on our return, of course, everything was changed. We were all that remained of the family and now sole occupiers of the great house and park. And here, I think, is where the Rev Watkinson saw himself stepping into the picture. Evidently, he learnt of the long association enjoyed by his predecessor and had ambitions to rekindle some of that.

I was never quite sure why. We were but two, Catherine and I, of limited means so what could we possibly provide? But in my innocent way I accepted his interest in us as simply the kind of thing a vicar would do.

He introduced himself to me one afternoon in the front garden. I was on my knees among the rose bushes trying to clear weeds yet without much success, and this strident voice made me jump.

"I'm sorry, did I startle you? Do please forgive me."

Somewhat embarrassed I got to my feet. "No, it's perfectly all right."

He introduced himself presenting his hand without concern for my grubby one. "Bill Watkinson. I heard the army had gone and house was occupied once more and came on the off chance. Hope you don't mind." He was beaming, a tallish be-spectacled figure with clerical collar, the latter being the only indicator of his office.

"Miss Ellen Macpherson," I replied. "Lady Shelham will be somewhere. Was it her Ladyship you came to see?"

He laughed loudly. "It was to meet both of you. I understand you both served with during the war and with distinction, so I hear. A difficult time now thankfully behind us."

I looked at him, wondering what the war had to do with his visit. He must have guessed my thoughts. "A military calling was not available to me," he said adjusting his spectacles.

"Shall we go into the house?" I said stepping onto the gravel drive. "I'm sure we'll find Lady Shelham there. We don't use the front doors so we'll go round to the courtyard." He collected a sporting-sort of bicycle that was propped against the portico and wheeled it along after me.

"The kitchen is where we live, I'm afraid. The house was used as recovery hospital for Polish soldiers and airmen. We're trying to put it all back together but it is a long job."

"I take it that is you and Lady Shelham?"

I explained briefly that the owner was now the National Trust but everything was left to us.

"So you're by yourselves?" He was looking about him, the table, the range in need of blacking, the unpolished floor quarries. "Do you feel safe?"

"Well, it's safer than what we were doing for the five years before."

He beamed at me. "Of course. But two ladies alone in a mansion... Please forgive me. It is not to pry. "

"Mr Watkinson..."

"Bill," he interrupted.

"I hadn't given the matter of our safety much thought."

"Should the local constabulary be made aware?"

Feeling uneasy now about this interest in our situation I excused myself to find Catherine. I was not sure where she might be but went first to our rooms, then to the West Wing, but no Catherine. On returning I heard his voice from the kitchen.

"Lady Shelham, how pleased I am to meet you. Miss Macpherson has gone to look for you. Ah, here she is."

Indeed, I was and in time to see them release hands and Catherine smiling broadly.

"Ellen, you've met Mr Watkinson..."

"Bill," he interjected.

"And I presume she has told you about Maybury?"

"Shall we have tea?" I said going to the range to put the kettle on.

Later over supper, Catherine and I discussed the visit.

"Do you think he was nosey?"

"Ellen, really! Of course not. Well, curious, maybe. He wasn't interested in the house. He'd met the Roberts at the farm and learnt about us from them. I quite liked him. Typical vicar, though, but thankfully not old fashioned. Should we encourage him, d'you think?"

"Well, I suppose we should take more interest in the village. There's Armistice Day soon."

"Yes, and they'll expect the presence of the family, or what's left of it. Have to polish our medals, Ellen, do our bit."

To that I made no reply.

And so with best of intentions we attended a meeting in the church hall convened to plan for that day. It seemed everyone was there, scouts, parish council, Mothers Union. The British Legion was in full force with this being the first Armistice Day since the end of the war. The Reverend Watkinson called everyone to order. Was it his voice, a distinctively 'pulpit' voice? He had presence and was clearly used to taking charge..

The room fell silent. Catherine whispered, "He'll go far. Bishop next, do you think?"

I smothered a grin and nudged her in the ribs.

We were invited to the vicarage afterwards but we declined explaining that we were walking and the nights were drawing in.

"Shame," said Catherine as we set off back.

"Why?" I asked.

"I would have liked to meet his wife."

"How do you know he has one?"

"Don't vicars always have wives?"

To my surprise barely a week later we received a message inviting us to tea at the vicarage. The note on plain paper was dropped through the letter box.

"We ought to go," I said. "You might meet his wife."

"I expect it's about Armistice Day."

"Probably."

"What shall we wear?"

I had never been to the vicarage. Catherine, being family, of course, had. "I was very young," she said, "And I remember my mother didn't want to go. She always found those things so boring and I could understand that: I was bored and ignored. I don't know why I was there. No one said a word to me."

"Well, I'm sure that won't be the case today. I'm sure you will be the star."

"For Armistice Day? Really, Ellen, you think the most ridiculous things."

As it happened, we were both wrong.

The truth was tea and cake was simply a ploy. There was no Mrs Watkinson, instead the Reverend introduced his son, saying that George did very well at the Grammar School. "Mr Venables, the headmaster, was most pleased, he suggested classics at Oxford."

I said, "I remember Mr Venables. He taught me French."

"My governess was French," added Catherine.

The Reverend looked at us over his glasses.

"But I chose art college," said George casting a quick grin at his father.

"What sort of art interests you?" I asked.

"Art history, and war art. We were surrounded by war posters, weren't we? So simple but so effective. You were in the war weren't you Miss Macpherson?"

The question took me by surprise. "Yes," I said.

"May I ask you about what you did?"

His father intervened, "George, please, I'm sure Miss Macpherson would rather not to talk about that."

"It's perfectly all right, Mr Watkinson," I said. "I was in the Medical Corps."

Looking back, I think it did me good in an odd sort of way, to talk about such experiences to a younger person. After all, I was his age when I joined up, and in those five years I had done a great deal of growing up, oh indeed I had! When the Reverend invited Catherine into his study to discuss parochial matters, George and I settled into easy conversation.

The boy was much less interested in the actual war than the people affected by it. I told him about Italy and how the Italians were always polite to me. He listened attentively when I told him about helping a lady having a baby. I have to say I was struck by how grown up he seemed to be. We chatted away when suddenly he dropped his voice. "My father really wanted me to go to university. But I was much more interested in art."

Suddenly, I had an idea. "George, I'm making an inventory of everything at Maybury. You can imagine, it's a huge task, and there are a lot of paintings. Would you like to help? Assuming, of course, your father agrees, and I must discuss with Lady Catherine..." his answer was all over his face: it was alright.

When Mr Watkinson and Catherine reappeared I suggested George pop up sometime "Just to see around and if everyone's happy..." well, Catherine was enthusiastic and that was enough to sway the Reverend.

When it was time to leave, Mr Watkinson asked if we cycled and when we said we didn't have bicycles he announced, "George and I cycle a lot. I have a bicycle suitable for ladies that I don't require. We'll bring it up to you."

Catherine and I glanced at each other and thanked him very much.

We were out next day when the bicycle arrived. It was propped against the old horse trough in the courtyard. We took turns to try it out.

Some days later a message arrived addressed to me.

*Dear Miss Macpherson,
Please may I come to Maybury
next Saturday afternoon?
Yours truly,
George Watkinson*

Saturday afternoon came and I was in my octagon room when I saw George cycling up the drive. Shortly after came footsteps along the corridor and a knock on my door and George easing it open. "Lady Catherine told me you'd be here, Miss Macpherson, I hope you don't mind."

Mind? Why on earth should I mind? And so I introduced George Watkinson to Maybury art. He needed little guidance so I made myself comfortable in a chair with pencil and clipboard while he went round the room describing each picture and the artist. I thought, so much easier with two people. Easier still when one of them knows something about art.

17. I Am Invited to the Vicarage

I think it was George's third visit to Maybury when he mentioned his father's interest in Maybury history.

Having been born and brought up in the house it was surprising how much we didn't know about it. Since our return I have discovered rooms I never knew existed and furnishings I had never seen before. Catherine discovered the 'downstairs family' she had little idea of. As for the many and various *object d'art*, such items were really beyond both of us. Put bluntly, for all we considered ourselves 'family', we hadn't much idea about Maybury or its history.

George's interest had really fired mine, he had brought a fresh eye. But I was less sure about his father. George and I had formed a good working relationship and I was a mite uncomfortable that the Reverend might upset that.

Catherine, however, thought his background in Classics could be beneficial and so I decided to invite him. I suggested a day and he and George duly arrived, propping their bicycles against the horse trough in the courtyard. Catherine and I gave a tour of the house. I found myself apologising more than once for the troubled state it was in.

"We're doing what we can," added Catherine, "The military presence caused much suffering to the grand old house. It's more than just cleaning and repairing, there's so much we're discovering. We must record everything we find. It's awfully time consuming. Thankfully, George is able to help." She turned to the young man who swelled up and grinned broadly.

At first his father said little and it was not until we reached the upper floor of the West Wing that he made comment. "Ah, these evidently escaped military interest." We had come across paintings George had picked out. "Do you know the value of these?"

Catherine looked at him, surprised. "How can we? There's been a war. Not even the National Trust has answers. My grandmother saw to it that the well-known work was removed to safer storage but as for these and much else, who can say."

"This is where George helps," I said, "Identifying some of the artists is very useful."

At this the vicar beamed. "Bless my son... he does so enjoy coming here."

We neared my office in the octagon room and seeing Catherine and George were lingering behind, I invited him in. "This room was once occupied by the commanding officer." I went over to the window and looked out. "I think these are the best views of the Park."

Mr Watkinson came to stand by me. "I'm sure they are, Miss Macpherson. This scene must be very familiar to you."

"Yes but not from this room. This was his Lordship's private study. I never came here."

"But you were staff?"

I looked at him directly. "We were servants, Mr Watkinson. I was lady's maid to Lady Catherine. Everyone knew their place."

"And now you're partners? Is that the correct term, do you think?" He stared at me from behind his glasses.

"As far as we're concerned Maybury has always been our home."

"Now you share this great house. How extraordinary."

"I looked round at him. "Why do you say that?"

"Alone here. Not like army life."

"No, not at all like army life."

"Do you miss that?"

Suddenly, memories snatched at me. I turned to the window but he was close and we brushed against each other. A faint smell of maleness came and I recoiled. "I'm sorry," I said.

"No, it's my fault. Please..."

I moved away, went to my desk as if to seek something there but it was its usual tidiness and I was aware of him watching me again.

"Miss Macpherson," he said. "I think you may be interested... something I have at the vicarage. A newspaper report from pre-war days describing a Maybury outing to the seaside. You may like to call sometime to see it."

"Thank you," I replied. "I will tell Lady Catherine..."

"Oh this concerns staff – or should I say, servants – rather than the family."

A line of perspiration was gathering on his forehead. I said, "We no longer distinguish between the two. We think of ourselves as a whole family now, Mr Watkinson."

"A gracious resolution, if I may say. One that accords with a new post-war world. May I take it you will pay a visit?"

"Mr Watkinson..."

"Bill," he replied leaning toward me. "Please call me Bill. May I call you Ellen?"

Before I could answer, Catherine and George reappeared. She was quite excited. "George has been telling me that documenting the art in the first room is finished. That's very good, don't you think?"

"Of course," said the vicar. "But now I think it time we took our leave. George, are you ready? So, Ellen, we have a meeting at the vicarage for Remembrance, you'll be there no doubt. Shall we say, after that?"

The instant they were gone Catherine asked, "What was that about... and it's Ellen now, is it?"

"Take no notice. He says he has an old newspaper report of a servants' day out. I expect it was one of the annual outings to the seaside, nothing more."

"But he wants you to stay after the meeting. Will you go?"

I sniffed. "It would be discourteous otherwise, wouldn't it?"

"But I'm not invited."

"Catherine, I'm sure that was an oversight."

"Should I be chaperone, do you think?"

"That won't be necessary."

"Take my pistol?"

I poked her in the ribs.

18. Proposal of Marriage

Upset had turned to anger by the time I arrived back at Maybury. It was dark and fumbling for the key under the plant pot by the back door did not improve my temper. Inside, I took care to be as quiet as possible to avoid waking Catherine. I crossed my room, went straight into the bathroom and, without putting on the light, closed the door to her room. Then, when I switched on the light I could see the mess I was in.

Upset and angry, I could have cried. At seeing my state? Or being so foolish? I had at least the sense to remove my shoes in the kitchen. But my coat, my hair... it seemed mud was everywhere.

But at last I calmed and ran the bath, thankfully there was sufficient hot water. Dropping my clothes in a pile to be dealt with in the morning, I got into the bath... and reaching for the soap it slipped from my fingers and fell to the floor taking with it the tin mug we kept by it. The clatter was enough and I waited. Waited until the door to Catherine's room opened and she appeared in typical pose, hands on hips.

"Sorry about the din," I said.

She came in, pulling her dressing gown to and saw me sinking down into the water, "What on earth..." she began. "Do you know what time it is?"

I shook my head.

"After eleven. What happened?"

I took a deep breath, "Do you really want to know? Can't it wait until tomorrow?"

"Well, just look at you. Did you fall off the bicycle?"

"I walked."

"Walked! Why?"

"I left the bicycle at the vicarage."

The look on her face told me this wasn't going to wait until tomorrow. I said resignedly, "The Reverend Watkinson – Bill, as he insisted on being called – asked me to marry him."

There was a pause. "Good God."

"Yes, I suppose to him it was by the goodness of God that I was asked to be his wife."

"What did you say?"

"Catherine, what do you think I said? No, of course!" She drew up the bathroom chair and sat down by the bath waiting for me to continue. "Of course I couldn't accept his gift."

"You mean the bicycle?"

"Yes, the bicycle."

"But, Ellen, that was given to both of us. And it isn't like a ring, is it? You'd return an engagement ring..."

"Catherine, I wasn't having any of it."

She retrieved the soap and the mug, and stared at me. "Is that mud in your hair?"

"Yes. I missed my footing in the dark."

"Let me wash it."

"You will not!"

"Yes, I will."

"Not in the bath. You can't rinse hair in the bath."

"I can with the tin mug. You washed mine enough times, so I will do yours. Please be still, now."

There was no arguing with Catherine when she was in that sort of mood. So like her grandmamma, the dear Lady Eleanor, and who was I to argue?

Of course, next morning at breakfast, the whole story had to come out. That the meeting about Remembrance Sunday having rambled on and when it was finished and everyone else had gone home, he asked me stay. "'The newspaper cuttings, Ellen'. I said it was rather late but he wasn't to be put off. 'Please, Ellen, this way, I have them in the dining room'. From then on it was Ellen this and Ellen that. Goodness knows... he was so... you might say carried away. Then he poured out sherries."

Catherine paused tipping cornflakes into her dish. "Liquor as well. So how did the question of marriage arise?"

"He had the newspaper laid out on the dining table. I knew the pictures: a day out to Weston, we were all there at the seaside: my mother, Mr Hoskins, Mrs Hoskins, footmen, kitchen maids, everyone..."

Catherine sighed, "Please get to the point."

"When I said I'd seen the newspaper he sort of went quiet and placed his finger on the picture and said, 'Who is that?' 'Why that's my mother,'" I said. 'I see the likeness,' he said. 'You are so like your mother,' to which I said, 'Yes, she was housekeeper.' 'And the others? Who are they?' He was so insistent. 'Come on, tell me, who they are.' I pointed to them one by one. Suddenly, he was getting very excited and spilling his sherry and topping it up. 'I see you, Ellen! And arm in arm if I'm not mistaken with...' 'Oh they're footmen,' I said. He was trembling now and had to put his glass down. 'The fellow there... he has his arm around you.' He was glaring at me over his spectacles now. Catherine, I was a bit scared I can tell you. 'Was the fellow a boyfriend? He glared right at me... right at me. 'Ellen,' he said, 'why aren't you married?'

"Well, you can imagine, I was speechless. But he wasn't done! 'Why aren't you?' he demanded. 'Attractive girl like you should be married.' Then, out of the blue came this, 'You should marry me.'

"I was shaking. I didn't know what to say until without thinking I just came out with, 'Are you asking me?' He sort of sank back in his chair. 'Yes, I suppose I am,' he said. 'I mean, in due course. I never meant to ask, not now, although it's been in my mind.'

"For God's sake, Catherine, what does one do. Was this real? A man of the cloth proposing to someone hardly known to him? Well, I ask you?"

Catherine was staring at me. "Was that all?"

"What else do you expect?"

"Well, I was just thinking, that's all. You know... Did he try to...? You know."

"No, I don't."

"Try to kiss you!"

"Good God, no. He's a vicar isn't he." I hacked a crust from the loaf of bread. "Catherine, the man was tipsy. I walked out. I just walked out. He called after me saying I'd left the bicycle but how could I accept a gift – even a bicycle – after that?"

At that very moment, I saw him through the kitchen window. The Reverend Watkinson was propping our bicycle against the horse trough. He'd cycled up, riding single-handed while guiding ours by the handlebars. I was impressed by such cycling proficiency.

I went to the door but before I could speak he announced, "Good morning, Ellen, I am here to apologise for last night and as you see..." he indicated the bicycle and looked at me hopelessly. The urge to laugh came which I suppressed. "I hope you will accept my apologies. It was wrong of me to be so shamefully presumptive. I am very sorry." He was crestfallen, shoulders sagging.

"Mr Watkinson, does George know about this?"

"No and I wish that he never does."

"Then it is done with and forgotten but..." I paused a moment. "But we will remain Mr Watkinson and Miss Macpherson. I'm sure you will understand my meaning." I felt rather sorry for him. His gaze flickered over me from behind the small round spectacles but I looked back at him proudly, rather womanly, I thought. To think that last night, had I accepted, then he would have owned me.

"Thank you for returning the bicycle," I said.

Catherine could hardly contain herself. "I heard everything. Oh, Ellen, you did do well. But what on earth came over him?"

"A big head? Muddled by liquor, perhaps? You know, Catherine, army training, rigours of combat, did us well, didn't it."

19. How Times Have Changed

When Catherine went to the village post office it turned into an upsetting experience.

The post office is in a line of small houses and shops along the village green. One door serves both post office and a busy sell-everything sort of shop. Both are run by the same person, a plump woman who I remember as a child selling little bags of sweeties for a ha'penny. On entering it's usual to call out 'shop' or 'post' so the owner knows which one to bustle into.

But on Catherine's visit things had changed. There was a girl behind the post office counter.

Catherine asked if she could purchase a wireless licence.

"Where for?" came the reply.

"Maybury," said Catherine.

"And the name?"

"Catherine Shelham."

"So you're not 'lady' now."

Catherine was taken aback. "I beg your pardon, what was that?"

"You're not a lady now, was what I said."

Catherine collected her thoughts. "I came for a wireless licence. You do issue them here, don't you? Is there a form to fill?" After some fumbling behind the counter a form was produced, followed by a pen and inkwell by which time Catherine had her fountain pen ready. "Shall I do it?" she asked and so the form was pushed toward her.

The girl folded her arms. "Number of wireless sets and number of occupiers."

Catherine filled in the form.

"Just the two of you now, is it," came the response. "In that great place. No earl, no ladies, no maids, butlers, footmen, chauffeurs. Next Labour government and you'll be out as well and the place turned into flats for bombed out families."

Catherine made no reply but paid the ten shillings and the form was stamped.

This was how Catherine related it to me when we met afterwards at the village cross. She was angry and upset at another of the unforeseen changes to come out of the war. I think we both had the same thoughts: that principles we were brought up to value seemed now to have been swept away. However, there was an unexpected outcome that very same day. We were crossing the green toward the church when a man approached. He stopped a yard or so away. I was not sure but I thought I recognised him. He nodded to me and addressed Catherine. "M'Lady, if you please could I have a word?"

"Yes, of course," said Catherine.

"It was my daughter in the post office. I'm afraid she's a bit headstrong and..."

Catherine put her hand up. "You're aware of what happened?"

"I am, m'Lady. She told me about it and I'm very sorry."

"You need not be. As far as I'm concerned your daughter made her opinion known but she provided what I wanted and that is an end of it."

The man thought a moment. "That is most generous of you, m'Lady."

"It is nothing of the sort. No harm has been done."

It came to me who the man was. "Were you once a gardener at Maybury?"

"That's right, Miss. Joe Hoskins the name. My father was head in his Lordship's time."

Catherine asked, "What do you do now, Mr Hoskins?"

"I work for the council. Not what I was brought up to but that's how it is."

"Would you work at Maybury again?"

"I would, m'Lady, but so much depends now."

"On what, may I ask?"

"War changed so much."

"Oh, how is that?"

"Gardens turned over to vegetables. Council got us allotments now, m'Lady. You must have seen."

"No, we haven't. Have we, Ellen?" We looked at each other.

"Where abouts, Mr Hoskins," I asked.

He pointed along the road. "The bend where the Park comes up to the village, they knocked a hole in the wall and put allotments there. Good soil. Vegetables and fruit does well. I got one, postman got one. Village folk glad of them, I can tell you."

"I'm sure they are. Yes, indeed," said Catherine. "Thank you, Mr Hoskins."

The man nodded graciously and we parted. Catherine stopped when we reached the church lychgate. "You know my family gave much to the village, money for the church, built a number of cottages. All a very long time ago now. But in my father's time things slipped rather. Now the war has changed everything." She winced. "Once we were a whole family – servants as well, you and us – and we did all these things. I don't like to hear bitterness. But time moves on and we must move too. I didn't know about allotments. Nevertheless, I'm pleased to hear about them. We have to move on, isn't that so, Ellen?"

All this set me thinking. Around us, as far as the eye could see, was Maybury, from the village across the great Park. I could just make out the house in the distance against the wooded hills. Nothing seemed changed in hundreds of years and one kept returning to the dilemma: what had happened? What was it about us? Would we have been here centuries ago? A lady and her maid attending to village matters? Most likely. Yet in just six years... but Catherine interrupted my thoughts, "Ellen, did you hear me?"

I turned and smiled at her. "Yes, Catherine, I did. I'm sorry, I was thinking."

"Good thoughts, I hope. What were they?"

"About Mr Hoskins. He should return to Maybury."

"Yes," she replied. "But how?"

Walking back we mulled over the question. By the time we reached the house it just came out: we must employ him, yes, of course we must. It didn't occur to us that he might refuse, and when Catherine next met him in the village and raised the matter, that was what happened: he refused.

"I'm sorry, m'Lady but I got a job already. I think I said as I work for the council now. The big house closed and the war came and all that. Not the same now."

And that's how it seemed. That is until Mrs Roberts appeared one day from the farm and caught me struggling with weeds in the front rose bed. "Mr Hoskins used to keep these gardens lovely," she said.

"Well now, strange you should say that..." and I told her about how Catherine and I had met his son and what came of it.

"Well now, what did her Ladyship offer?"

"Offer. What do you mean?"

"Well, Joe Hoskins will be on a decent wage at the council and steady work it'll be. Have to match that."

I had no idea. Nor had Catherine. But Mrs Roberts definitely had. When next she called she had this to say: "I took it on m'self, your Ladyship, and spoke to Joe Hoskins. He'll do a turn in the garden of an evening. A couple of hours, four evenings, that'll start things off and it'll be twelve shillings. If this is what her Ladyship wants I'll see to it."

I had to smile. I knew Catherine's response. "Mrs Roberts, thank you, it is most thoughtful of you but I will speak to Mr Hoskins myself." Then to me later she said, "Really, Ellen, Mrs Roberts assumes to be agent, housekeeper and provisioner to the new post-war Maybury."

But this was how Joe Hoskins became the first to be re-employed at the gardens of Maybury Park.

20. Wolf Whistles

We had just returned from town on the bus and noticed a crowd gathering along the main road. The bus stopped and we alighted. Everyone was gazing along the road from where, in the distance, came the rumble of vehicles. Curious now, we waited with the rest. It was a convoy. A jeep with four helmeted American soldiers led the way, a huge Stars and Stripes waving from it, then lorries, some covered, others open, and full of servicemen, lorries after lorries, all with white stars, trucks and more trucks...

"They're going home," said Catherine, "They're going home, Ellen." Suddenly she waved. "Oh my goodness, what a sight."

The noise, the smell of exhaust, and I pressed my hands to my head. Not for noise or smell but the surge of emotion at seeing this again... but words fail me. The faces of young men, happy young men, going home, smiling, laughing, smoking, young faces and I waved too. Then came the whistle, piercing the din. I saw him, fingers pressed to his lips and I waved again. It was as if it was all for us. Gathering breath, I leant against a wall and pulled Catherine next to me. "It seems like yesterday," I shouted over the noise, "Only yesterday... oh my goodness..."

More whistles came, faces pushed between others, disappeared, reappeared. Full of grins and smiles, and so young, and it seemed to go on and on until... until... there came the last one, the last jeep and the last flag... and it was over.

"My oh my..." said Catherine, "I never would have thought. No, I would not." She was blinking, a speck of dust perhaps or a memory pulled from somewhere, some dark place hidden in her head. I hooked my arm through hers and we stared at each other, hugged a bit. "Who can say?" I said.

"About what?"

"Oh, I don't know. Just thoughts."

The afternoon settled back to as it was and all that remained were murmurings yet one voice came above the rest, "Well, the cheek of it! Yanks whistling like that at our girls."

It was a middle-aged woman, well dressed, fox-fur about the shoulders, and looking straight at us. I'm not sure why we were singled out, there were other girls there. Catherine tugged at my arm and we walked away. We didn't speak until we reached the village.

"A penny," I said.

"Another reminder, I suppose."

"People don't realise, do they? We were in it with the Yanks. I was glad to hear wolf-whistles then."

21. Another Nightmare

I had slept in ambulances, under canvas, under fire even, and mostly I had managed. For Catherine, though, her war was spent in SOE, in London to begin with, and from there as driver to a French general gathering information about Vichy collaborators after D-Day. As such she had the benefit of military accommodation or hotels, so even across war-torn Europe she had a measure of comfort.

But war is frightening. Yet one is trained to ignore and carry on. And when it's all over we expect to be as before. That is not possible. Physical changes are evident, death and destruction, but the mental damage goes unnoticed because of the constant ignoring and carrying on. It's like a time bomb in the mind. Nightmares often result. When Catherine had her first I was there, thankfully.

I heard her shout, it was the middle of the night. In the warm weather we slept with our doors open. I tip-toed through the bathroom and into her room. She was in quite a state. "Stop! You keep away or..."

"It's all right," I said as gently as I could while feeling around for the bedside light but, typically, it was a cumbersome piece of furniture and wasn't close enough. In the dark I stumbled onto her bed.

"I will shoot you!" with that I received a hefty thump on my nose.

"Catherine, Catherine... it's all right, it's only me, Ellen." At last I found the light switch.

"Ellen, did you hit me?"

"No, you hit me. You've had a nightmare." She was sitting up, hand pressed to her face.

"You hit me," she whimpered.

"Well, I'm sorry I couldn't see you. Anyway, you hit me."

"No, I didn't."

"Catherine, you hit my nose." There was a pause and I felt her breathing ease. "Now let me settle you down again." The panic and confusion receded and I tidied her bed. "Leave your light on," I said as I made to leave but her eyes fixed on me. "Ellen, I thought it was you and it wasn't. I don't know why..."

I let it pass, the middle of the night was no time for discussion. I waited while she settled down and returned to my room.

I was awake early next morning and before getting dressed, I peeked into Catherine's room. In the half-light she was as I'd left her. Relieved, I washed and dressed and went downstairs.

The range, thankfully, was still alight. I poked it and added more coal and put the kettle on to boil. From the pantry I picked out a packet of dried egg. At which point Catherine appeared and sat herself at the table looking a little sheepish.

"How did you sleep?" I asked.

"Not sure," came the mumbled reply.

"But no more nightmares?"

"I can't say." She looked at me. "Tell me, why do you have nightmares? I never used to."

"Nightmares are a sign," I said. "Our medical officer described them as a sign of shell shock. Common in the first war. We were warned about it because it often accompanied combat injury. Often appearing later when soldiers returned home."

"Ellen, one was brought up to bite one's lip. And I was not injured." She was watching me lift the kettle from the range. "Is that for tea? I'm dying for a cup."

"Only milk powder, I'm afraid."

She snorted in disgust. "That is worse than a nightmare."

I set out two mugs on the table and sat opposite. "Catherine, we were lucky. No physical injury but we both went through the London blitz. Each morning we'd shove behind the night, manage some sleep, and be back on duty the next night. Sometimes we'd miss a raid. But every night would become a memory, one after the other, piling up... so on and so on. Memories are pushed away but they don't go away and at some point they burst out. Do you remember anything of your nightmare?"

"I don't know that I want to remember." She vigorously stirred more sugar into her tea. "Really, Ellen, it must have been the same for you. And this tea is awful."

"Yes, Catherine, I know. The tea is awful and so are nightmares and they will get worse unless you deal with them. Like it or not, we have to talk about these things. Drag these bad memories out and deal with them."

We ate our breakfast of scrambled dried egg with rather dry bread and awful tea. Catherine cut two more slices of bread for us, spreading each thinly with margarine. She said, "If we think talking would do good, where should we begin?"

I had already been through this in my own head and in that very instant it was as if my head was refusing. My eyes shut and images were there, grey and still, not moving. It was like staring at a blurry photograph, seeing it magnify, like everything is large and cluttering my brain ... like stretchers cluttering an ambulance ... Catherine's voice was suddenly loud.

"Are you all right?" My head had sunk down and she put a hand to my shoulder.

"Yes, yes, I'm all right. Strange, I haven't had nightmares but..." I rubbed my eyes vigorously. "Sometimes these flashbacks just come."

"You scared me," she said.

"You scared me last night," I replied, trying to make light of it. "Saying I hit you."

"That's it!" she said. "Something did hit me. Yes! There it is. Something falling, a building. I was always afraid of something falling on me and I wouldn't see it..." and she was biting her lip. "But it's there..."

"Just let it happen," I said. "Don't push it away. We can deal with these things together. We can tell each other and that'll help. We won't let it get us down." Suddenly I put my arm around her. "We went into this together and now we're going to make sure we come out together."

The great adventure was how Catherine and I thought of the war in 1940. Two nineteen year olds setting off to do their bit. So naïve – silly one might say – but that was how we were right from childhood. I think the war affected me in a different way to Catherine but I can't put a finger on why.

22. Sergeant Jones calls

I happened to be looking out of the window of the octagon room one day when I saw someone go round the corner of the East Wing. I hurried out of the room and along the corridor and down the back stairs just in time to hear a sharp rap rap at the back door. Opening it, I was surprised to see Sergeant Jones the village policeman, beaming at me.

"Miss Macpherson, I trust I did not frighten you."

"Well, no you did not but..." I opened the door wide. "Do please come in. Was it her Ladyship you came to see?"

"If I may. And your good self, of course, Miss Macpherson. If I may, that is." He removed his cap and tucked it under his arm. He sniffed and his bushy brows and large white moustache twitched in unison. I had known the sergeant of old, a very upright figure who instilled fear into prank-playing local boys and girls. And we hadn't spoken since those times.

"Of course," I said. "Welcome to Maybury, Sergeant. How very good to see you after this long time. But I hope there's nothing wrong."

He drew himself up. "Well now, nothing wrong as I'm aware of, but as you rightly say, it's been awhile" He looked me up and down and did so quite decidedly I thought. "But there's things to talk about," he said. At one time the sergeant would call quite regularly, either to discuss matters with Mr Prior or His Lordship. Guns seemed a regular subject, the sergeant enjoyed the opportunity of a shoot over Maybury Park. He knew the local poachers well.

I conducted him along to the kitchen. "We live in here, I'm afraid. Convenience, you understand."

"But you're secure, I hope." As he spoke his gaze seemed to run before him, missing nothing. "The army left everywhere safe, did they? Not too much damage?"

"Oh yes... well mostly so."

"They were Poles, of course... Good men."

It's how the conversation went, wondering, quizzing almost. I began to explain our circumstances, the front doors not opening, the rain getting in. "But we're all right," I insisted. "Really we are. Please be seated," and I excused myself to find Catherine.

She was in her room. "What on earth can he want?" she said. "Did he say?"

"No, but no doubt we'll find out."

We went down together.

"Lady Catherine, how pleased I am. My, last time, if I may say so, you were... if I may say..." his moustache twitched and he drew himself up to full height as now we were both looked up and down. "Military life seemed to have done you well, if I may say, your Ladyship."

Catherine's smile just spread wider. "A mere daughter of an earl. Is that it, Sergeant?" She did so relish these occasions. "And now lady of Maybury. And you know Miss Macpherson, of course, my very dear companion. And yes, it is army life, it does give one such confidence, does it not?" We all smiled around, shook hands and seated ourselves at the kitchen table.

"How may we help you, Sergeant?"

"A call to see everything is as it should be."

"I hope it is," replied Catherine. "I don't think there's anything amiss. Do you, Ellen?"

"I don't believe so," I said.

The sergeant sat with folded arms, his cap at his elbow on the table. "A few things to discuss. If your Ladyship has a moment. And Miss Macpherson." He half turned to me and the moustache twitched again. "Just something I noticed in the village and thought to m'self, I must drop in to see as everything's right, the pair of them – if you'll forgive the boldness – being in the big house."

"I'll make a pot of tea," I said and got up to put the kettle on.

"It was young John Roberts as made me think," went on the sergeant. "He was driving you, m'Lady and Miss Macpherson into town, I believe. Now I know he's got a driving licence but..." he came to fix on Catherine. "But the car is her Ladyship's and it's tax disc is out of date. Truth be told, it's dated 1939. Now, I'm sure it just a slip because that's the way of things but..."

"Then there's nothing more to be said," interrupted Catherine. "The car must be... how does one go about such things, Sergeant?"

"County offices, if her Ladyship cares to call with the vehicle log book. And Government will be bringing back the driving test, oh yes it will. So to avoid anything of that nature for ladies such as yourselves, may I presume to suggest as you enquire about driving licences at the same time?"

"We have our army licences," I said.

"Forgive me, Miss Macpherson, they'll be permits, not licences. Permits must be exchanged for licences."

Catherine looked at me. "That seems clear enough, doesn't it Ellen?"

"I take it we shouldn't drive the car," I said.

"That would be unwise, Miss." Now he was looking around, eyes latching onto this and that... a spider's web by the wireless set on the mantle piece.

"We have a wireless licence, Sergeant," said Catherine quickly.

"Oh I know, m'Lady. Polly at the post office said as much."

"Good Heavens," said she under breath, "Is there nothing this village doesn't know?"

The sergeant beamed. "I make it my business to make sure all is well in the village. That way no one goes, shall we say, wrong."

Thankfully, at that moment the kettle boiled. I filled the teapot, set out cups and saucers, one or two biscuits on a plate, milk in a jug, and sat down again.

Catherine was watching me in that unwavering way she had. I looked at the sergeant but he studying the tray I had set out. I poured tea.

"Is there anything else, Sergeant?" asked Catherine.

He didn't immediately answer, stirring sugar into his tea. "I was thinking about His Lordship's guns, m'Lady. Now I used to enjoy those times gone by, to carry a gun over Maybury. Me and his keeper got along well, take a brace or two between us. Local poachers knew us well. Got along with His Lordship, oh yes I did." He glanced up from his cup to Catherine. "Her Ladyship never felt inclined?"

She blinked. "Inclined to what, Sergeant?"

"To take a gun to the field, m'Lady."

"Sergeant, I was never considered old enough and my father assumed – probably rightly – I would spoil his dogs."

He nodded as if that was to be expected. "So when the war came and Poles came," he went on, "They and me liked to... as it were, to carry a gun. Like in their country, they liked a spot of sport. Good shots. Between us we did rabbits, pigeons and crows, a bit of game sometimes, not a lot and it occurred to me..." he sniffed

setting the moustache off again, "That if Your Ladyship wished for this to go on as it were and as there being no keeper now and no guns now, well, the birds'll be there and seems a pity to... you know."

Catherine stared at the fellow. "Sergeant, do I gather from all this that you'd like to shoot at Maybury Park? If so, then please do for I'm sure no one else will, only please take care as Ellen and I roam freely."

"Only the top wood, m'Lady. Only the top wood."

"Then that will be all right. Now is there anything else?"

"Catherine," I said gently, "There is something else."

"Oh, really, Ellen, what may that be?"

"Your pistol."

A sudden silence descended. The sergeant, in the process of draining his cup, stopped and put it down.

"Oh yes..." said Catherine. "I do have a gun, don't I. Yes, what should be done about that?"

In a way it was a relief. The pistol had remained in Catherine's dressing table since our return. I'd seen it only briefly that time when she described how it came about and so on. To have it at last dealt with was very much a relief. At least, that was how I saw it at the time.

She laid it on the table before us still wrapped in the silk scarf. The sergeant looked from it to Catherine. For a moment I wondered if it was expected to unwrap itself but, no, she carefully did that. He picked it up, handed it, studied it, sniffed it and said quietly, "Used?"

"Yes," said Catherine.

"In action?"

Catherine thought a moment. "Yes."

He replaced it on the scarf and said quietly, "I have one. First war. I took it from a dead German..." his brow furrowed. "Not easy. No, not easy. But important. You must keep it." He straightened and looked hard at her. "Memories must be kept and kept clear, m'Lady. You're engraved on the barrel, *The Countess Catherine*. This is yours, it's very clear. I will write the permit."

For once without words, Catherine sat down, eyes wide in disbelief but he was shaking his head. "For Her Ladyship's good. And Miss Macpherson here, the two of you in this great house. Always had guns in this house. Carrying on its history and nothing wrong in that. As I said, I have one as is special to me because... You'll know what I mean. I'll do a permit and drop it in. Err... you have ammunition of course?"

Later, Catherine and I had discussion and I set down rules. "Under lock and key, if you please, Catherine. The liquor cabinet from your father's study has a sturdy lock and we can move that into your room."

"With the drinks still in it. Ellen, what a splendid idea."

"But it will be locked!"

"Then we will keep the key to hand."

So be it, I sighed. So be it.

23. Catherine's Medal

A letter from the French Embassy has arrived for Catherine. But she doesn't disclose to me what it says. Of course, I'm curious. Later over tea, I ask her about it. She's quite dismissive, saying it's only about the French general she chauffeured across France after D-Day.

I ask, "Is he all right?"

"Yes, of course," she replies.

And still I learn nothing. It is really very frustrating. When Catherine and I arrived back at Maybury we both exchanged experiences. At the time, of course, these were the glossy versions of what actually took place. In Catherine's case it was all about herself and 'mon Général' driving through liberated France, enjoying the adulation and the swagger. Nightmares revealed a little: of fear and horror and distress that was sealed inside and wouldn't let go. The war was behind and the horror with it. But of course it wasn't. The refusal to admit to dreadful times does not mean that they are gone away. Far from it: witness my own experiences.

When a telegram arrived she glanced at and without a word, passed it to me, and went straight to her room. Even with my limited French I deduced what it was about: an invitation to the Embassy to receive the Croix de Guerre. I went upstairs and gently knocked on her door. She was seated at her dressing table, head in hands.

"Come on," I said, "Tell me."

"I can't do it," she said. "There will be questions I won't be able to answer."

"Why is that?"

"Secrets and..." she buried her head further into her arms.

"Secrets and more secrets? Is that it?"

"I can't speak of some things. You must understand, Ellen."

I stood behind her, placed my hands on her shoulders. Did I understand? No, of course not, that required a very special understanding. My own experiences were not hers. "I will come with you," I said. "We'll do this together."

"No, why should you?"

"Well, I may not know what took place but I do know you. We'll talk more of it later but for now, a simple letter of acceptance to the Embassy is required. Then we carry on what we were doing."

I returned to my work in the octagon room.

Later, I saw Catherine cycling down the drive. I guessed it was to the post box.

I cooked that evening, nothing special but Mrs Roberts' potatoes baked beautifully in the kitchen range and with a little butter...

"Ellen, that was quite delicious."

I smiled. "My mother's teaching."

"I never had that."

"You inherited your mother's beauty, she gave you poise and style. Don't you ever forget that, Catherine Shelham. I saw you post your letter."

"How do you know?"

"I know you."

"You're a witch, Ellen Macpherson."

Regardless of this banter, I was not to be distracted. "So your letter is posted, shall we have a sherry?"

Catherine went to the cupboard where we kept a decanter of some of Maybury's finest. We sat, shoes off with our feet stretched out to the range, and sipped, and slowly the liquor eased tensions and Catherine began.

"Paris was lovely. We were welcomed, adored, such optimism for what one might call an adventure. We dressed for dinner. Best hotels and everyone was glad beyond belief that the Germans were gone. And I didn't know anything – as driver I didn't need to know. I followed. I'm sure you would say I played the part, and I did. Whatever was asked I did – except that that I would not." She paused and looked at me. "The General respected me, he was an honourable man. We left Paris and motored South into Vichy country and it was there he began his investigations."

I listened and said nothing but followed the narrative closely. I wanted to be clear in my head about these things. When Catherine paused to sip her sherry I waited.

"We reached a wood. It was late afternoon, and he asked me to stop the car. He said he wasn't sure where we would be that night but from now on I was to be prepared. That was when he presented me with the pistol. He showed me how to use it. How to aim and fire, how to load, and look after it. He was thorough. I was to sleep with it under my pillow. My God, Ellen... he told me, do not hesitate, use it. Hesitate and you're dead. We practised, we practised all sorts of things. I got used to - well, this was special operations and this was the front line. From then on, each day seemed less certain, more threatening, people more suspicious.

"Then he announced we were to go into Germany. We headed North and caught the American advance through Belgium. The General had intelligence now about Vichy collaborators who had fled into Germany and so we followed. Sometimes too close." She paused, glass at her lips, eyes wide and fixed. "I shot a German. I still don't know how. The General's Sten gun finished it. You know the rest."

She stretched up, straightened herself, as if lifting a great burden.

I said, "Let's sit on your bed," and we did, my arm around her now.

"Ellen, was I ready? For what was to come? That first child we came across? Here was the enemy. No uniform, no shoes, dirty, eyes hollow with hunger, and only a child. It seemed all that was left were children and mothers. Ellen, I had to steel myself, these were the enemy. And I had to ignore because we could do nothing. I wasn't there to do anything but read this, translate that. At the camps I read documents. Lists of names. 'No, not those names,' he demanded. 'They don't mean anything... only these...' I translated words like 'gas' and 'crematoria' and lists and lists of names. Were these good names or... But nothing registered. Until I saw the faces... The faces in that camp and all I did was kill a one German. I still wonder if he was the father of that child."

The distress was real, her whole frame was shaking. And the temptation was there, to stroke it away, talk nonsense, mutter platitudes, but no, this had to be gone through. I held her close. "Go on... tell me," I said as gently as I could. "Tell me all there is to tell."

And so it came about, our visit to the French Embassy. We dressed the same as our last time in London, in her mother's elegant finery. We felt good. The General was there and Catherine whispered in my ear, "He's not who he says he is." She

never spoke of him by name but I put that down to the ways of the Intelligence Service. I addressed him as she did: mon Général. He raised my hand to his lips. I have to say he was a charming man, well suited, and the champagne made conversation easy. The medal with its red and green ribbon rested perfectly on her mother's dress. She had her best smile for everyone, as did I.

24. Catherine Reveals More

We were late returning to Maybury after our visit to the French Embassy, thankfully, Johnny was waiting at the station with the Alvis. Catherine was unusually quiet. I guessed why: the expectations of the day hadn't materialised, no awkward questions but nor were there any answers either. The lateness, however, did not deny a 'night cap'. I think the unlocking of the drinks cabinet may have made up her mind: the drinks cabinet also being the repository for her pistol and the memories that that continued to hold. She poured out sherries and together we sat on her bed.

I remember the room was quite dark with only her bedside light. "Mon Général," she began, raising her glass, "A toast to you and to my medal." We both gratefully sipped for what seemed another little piece of history dropping into place. She continued, "He was a nobleman. I was only a driver but he treated me with absolute respect. You met him today. What do you think?" Before I could answer she went on to tell me about France and, despite the late hour, we sat, sipped sherry, and I listened.

"We arrived by plane, a ferry service run by the military had begun by then. Paris had just been liberated. The car was waiting, a big car, left hand drive but I soon got used to that. He saw to everything..." she lapsed a moment, lip drawn between her teeth. "I wouldn't say I was frightened. Apprehensive, yes; the German's had only been gone a few days, but he was confident. We drove to the hotel in the centre of Paris. Welcomed is hardly the right word but after four years of occupation... well, one can imagine the sheer excitement. He simply said 'be yourself, Countess...' From that moment he addressed me as 'Countess'. I said, 'But I am not a Countess...' 'Oh yes you are!' and he smiled at me in that way he had.

"And so it was: whatever the circumstances that was how he addressed me: Countess. I accepted it. As my senior officer - very senior, indeed - his orders were absolute. At hotel reception, he asked - no, demanded - adjoining rooms. We were shown to the rooms. I had to wait while he checked my room, then his, bathroom, furniture, windows, doors. I was to use his bathroom. He gave me the keys to my room and to the connecting door. 'Lock both doors every night and keep the keys by you.' No, I wouldn't say I was frightened. Nervous, yes. Barely a week before my room had been occupied by... who knows: Gestapo? He was an absolute gentleman. He had my total trust. But I wonder still if I will ever know who he really was."

She paused once more and I topped up our glasses.

"He insisted we dine together. I wore service dress uniform, 'dress' being a debateable description for that of a mere corporal. He said I looked smart - which I did - and... well, he liked the skirt because... I'm sure you know what I mean, Ellen. Nonetheless, he said this is Paris and we would be as Parisians are and 'you are my Countess'. As he said this he stared at me over his glass and his smile came... my God, Ellen, if ever..." I squeezed her hand and the moment passed and she continued. "He said, 'Tomorrow, you and I visit... first, hair stylists, then we will dress you. Oh yes, tomorrow, you will truly be my noble Countess.' He laughed outright now and the other diners looked at us. It all had some sort of meaning, I suppose. But so unreal and when I stopped to think about it, I made myself afraid. Only a week before this place teemed with enemy. Ellen, I will admit to you, I **was**

afraid. I was only to drive his car. I suppose I should have realised. But so many SOE had been here and never heard of again..."

Her face was hidden from me, shadowed from the meagre bedside light. I squeezed her hand again and said, "You obviously did admirably."

"One does one's best. I was only told that that was required. He once said, 'what isn't known cannot be revealed.' I followed orders. I never knew the truth of what we did. I don't think I ever will. As for civilian clothes: I had taken none. I only had my service uniform which I was determined to wear all the time. I thought that perfectly appropriate. because from now on I was never off-duty. So why dress Parisian style? But he insisted. Dress, shoes, gloves, stockings, hat and handbag. Well, at least I was allowed to choose," she tossed her head and I had to smile: the irrepressible 'ladyship' would ever be.

"Looking back I begin to understand more. Those early weeks in Paris were about meeting people. Gathering information. Evenings were less formal, people more relaxed, conversation easier. Wine and cognac - really, Ellen, I made myself be very careful - but he missed nothing. He seemed sometimes to be on a different plane, as if his mind was running on ahead. Once he asked my opinion about someone, a woman who was with us that evening: was she truthful? I said I wasn't sure. 'Then she must be a liar,' he said. I knew nothing of what went on in his head. That evening we returned to the hotel quite late. He took my key and unlocked my door but held it, barring me. He checked the room. Then, for a moment he was close. It was then he asked me - not directly, but would I care to join him for a cognac. I declined. I did not have to consider. I thanked him and declined. And, Ellen, I wasn't afraid then. His hand pressed into the small of my back but as I've said, he was an honourable man. He said goodnight and went into his room. It was then I noticed my uniform laid on the bed. It had been cleaned and pressed, buttons polished, shoes polished, cap badge... Why or who, I do not know and would not ask. Oh, dear Ellen, if ever a man could..." she sank against me. "Sometimes, so near..."

"It's late," I said gently. "Let's go to bed and we'll talk more tomorrow."

Next morning over a late breakfast we decided to go to our secret place by the lake. A decision as much influenced by the early Autumn sun as any desire to pursue the conversion of the previous evening.

"We should have a seat put here," said Catherine, brushing away some leaves before sitting down.

"That would reveal our secret," I replied.

"Then we will do it ourselves. Move one of the benches from the stables, don't you think? We could do it with that handcart we found. Later today?"

She was enthusiastic. Bench seats, though, were not the reason for being here but I would have to choose my moment. I followed her gaze across the water. A little cluster of ducks had appeared and suddenly I was reminded of being in this place in 1940. Then it was a cold day, the Phoney War was on everyone's lips and everyone wondered.

I asked if she remembered that day. "We came here to think what we should do."

"There was frost in the ground," she said. "Yes, of course I remember."

"How did we decide to be ambulance drivers, neither of us could drive?"

"Well, I didn't want to be a nurse and we assumed the fire service was for men."

"Decisions were made for us," I added reflectively.

"One does as circumstances require." She was staring across the lake but the ducks were gone now. "How could we possibly have known how it would end? Yes, decisions were made."

"London Ambulance Service, then me to Italy, you to France... with your General."

She thought a moment or so. "I wish I could have talked to him properly. But he seemed a different person. As if all that we did was of no consequence now and best forgotten."

"But you can't deny the memory."

"Did he?"

"Possibly, I don't know."

"He was very charming," I said regarding her closely. "You described him as honourable but..." she turned to me and her eyes darkened.

"But what?"

"You once said he propositioned you."

"That was a fib."

"Oh..."

"Yes, sorry. The ducks are there again. See."

I let the fib pass. I thought of previous conversations about driving South and the search for enemy collaborators. "You always seemed to get decent places to stay," I said. "I presume he had contacts."

"I never asked how."

"And petrol for the car."

She pursed her lips. "That came from the Americans. He always arranged to rendezvous with them."

The more that was revealed the more I puzzled over it. But this was SOE, one never questioned, and she had just been awarded a gallantry medal by the French Government.

"You know," she went on, "How chaotic things were, one never knew what would happen. One had to be ready to change plans quickly. You know how it was..." her voice drifted, her eyes no longer on the lake and she murmured the words "My God..."

"What is it?" I said.

"Sometimes it's like a fog. Remembering is like peering into a fog and one's trying to untangle. We did this, then that, but how and when isn't clear any more. Some things brighten, one can see them clearly while others ... are horrible, black and... Oh I don't know. Really, Ellen, I do not... but the bright things..." her face was lighting up. "The time when... oh yes..." her fingers stretched out as if at last able to touch and now the story came in a rush.

"We had been in Germany awhile. The surrender was done and finished, and the General received an order to return to Paris. The operation we had been conducting was to be wound up, we were to drive to an airfield in the North where I was to board a plane for England. Was I sorry? I'm not sure. The end was so sudden, I had barely time to pack my kit. The airfield had been a large Luftwaffe base but now taken over by the RAF Transport Command. We were directed to a group of British army officers. I stopped the car a short distance away as our arrival had already caused curiosity. We got out... this woman corporal with SOE badges and a French general conducting their parting for all to see. Imagine the

thoughts going through minds. It was awkward and that made me sad. We had been together almost a year, we had witnessed some frightful things..." She paused to pass a hand over her face. "We had been close because we had to be. There was emotion in that parting and to end so quickly and not show any of it.

"I picked up my kitbag and I didn't look back. Oh, Ellen, how I regret that, not even to turn and wave. I hurried with that heavy kitbag on my shoulder. At least I was dressed properly. Some of those officers were to my mind decidedly scruffy. But I saluted smartly. Some were bothered to return the salute. I was ignored and I stood apart. The day was warming, they undid tunics, took off caps, puffed on cigarettes. I did neither. I was proud to be me. Ellen, you know what I mean, military is about men, isn't it. Women have yet to make a presence. They will, of course, and it will be the better for it.

"The plane arrived, a Wellington, and everyone turned to watch it land and taxi. The crew - only two - got out, one came to supervise us, the other, the pilot lit a cigarette and sauntered round his machine. A sergeant of some years, I suspect, judging by his ribbon bar, greying hair, forage cap wedged in an epaulette. The other member of the crew read out names from a clipboard, and suddenly that nervousness came over me again: was my name there? Yes, it was, Corporal Shelham, right at the end and I breathed with relief. Why was I nervous, I was going home? Last name also meant last to board. I think there were about eighteen or twenty of us. I managed to get my kit bag in - no one helped a lowly corporal, of course, and there was no space. Then a voice bellowed close to me - as if on a parade ground - 'Come on, chaps, bloody war's over, make room for the lady from Special Operations!'"

"That cleared the air. However, there was more curiosity when the loader, while checking that we were all strapped in, said almost offhandedly, 'Oh, no one with a loaded firearm, is there?' Well, that was my cue. 'Yes, I have,' I declared, straightening up. My pistol was in the holster under my arm, American style. I unbuttoned my tunic - I felt all eyes in my direction. I took out the pistol to carry out a proper 'making safe': pistol pointing down: remove magazine, breach open, check it is clear, restore pistol to holster. 'Firearm safe,' I announced, buttoning my tunic, 'Thank you.' Of course I made a show of it. I was the only woman, the only NCO, and the only one who was armed. One felt very proud and I smiled to show it. Someone actually applauded. Yes, that was a good moment, very good."

25. I Walk the Park and Meet Tommy Russell

As I settled into the routine of going through each room and recording its contents, I came to understand more about Maybury. It amazed me how much I did not know. I was born and brought up here, worked here yet how little I knew of it. The many rooms I had never seen. I knew the other servants far better than the house. But this was my home! To be here now is... my feelings are taking over... For Goodness sake, after five years at war, surely I'm not about to cry? I pulled the duster from my belt and rubbed at the nearest piece of furniture to contain myself.

Of course, emotions had overtaken me before. Even as I write, I feel these things still. I cannot help it. But then, with the war just over, I made the effort to be me again. Of course it could never be. Time moves and I had moved with it. No longer the girl-maid crisply dressed who looked up to the big house. Now the house looked to me.

One morning, late summer as I remember, I put on my boots and set off on one of my walks. Not a long one, and at first I was anxious. I didn't tell Catherine my plan but I needed to be alone. Just thinking time, gathering thoughts, that sort of thing. I went out by the French windows of the billiard room and reaching the corner of the house I cast a quick look back into the courtyard and there she was. Bless her, Catherine in her Wellingtons, hosing down the stable yard. She had been weeding but looked up and saw me. She waved but the hose pipe squirmed out of her hand and sprayed her. I smiled and waved back. It wasn't about the yard, of course, this was her way of making another bit of Maybury hers again. I left her swilling her hands under the tap and wiping them down her dungarees.

I walked between lawns gone to weed or rutted by army vehicles. As for the flower beds and shrubberies, once so carefully tended, I simply walked by and would not look. But where the gardens gave way to the park, I could not help pausing to look back. I had to see the house, to make sure... and the relief! Proud still, smiling at me, broken a bit here and there, but proud and now a tear did come. So what? I was proud too!

I continued my walk. The further I went the more overgrown the pathways were and at times I was not sure quite where I was. However, satisfied at having made the effort I eventually came upon a path more familiar that would take me passed the tennis courts and orchard.

The orchard is part of the walled garden built in the second earl's time and is quite old. The wall is now crumbling in places. There are two doorways in opposite walls, the nearest was open and tumbling from its hinges. Neglect was everywhere. At one time all this would have been tended, the trees carefully pruned, grass scythed down.

At that moment I heard a scraping sound. I looked up to see a pair of young legs disappearing over the wall.

"Hey," I called, stepping outside in time to see a boy drop to the floor. He was about to make off with a basket of apples but stumbled and the apples spilled over the ground. "Now you wait there, if you please."

He was about ten, a tousle of hair, braces holding up trousers that were too short. But an honest face, I thought, and that determined me. "Who are you?" I demanded.

He straightened and looked up at me. "Tommy Russell, Miss."

I glanced at the empty basket. "Who sent you."

"No one... well, these were for my mom. But she didn't send me," and he squinted up at me as if willing forgiveness for his mischief.

"So where do you live, Tommy Russell?"

He shrugged, "The village."

"Does that mean you don't want to tell me?"

I didn't press. These were difficult times for many households. "Then pick up the apples and put them back in your basket." I watched him do so, not missing any in the long grass. "Do you know they're cooking apples?"

He looked at them. "No, Miss."

"Did you want eaters?"

He nodded sheepishly.

"Well the eaters are those trees over there. Now why don't you pick some of those to put in your basket as well and on the way home, leave a few by the back door of the big house?"

"Yes, Miss," and he scurried off.

I called after him, "And, Tommy Russell, do not climb on the walls, it is dangerous, do you hear? And nor do I want all the village boys coming here helping themselves. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Miss. And thanks, Miss, I won't tell a soul, promise."

When I got back to the courtyard the hosepipe was neatly looped over the tap but no sign of Catherine. At the back door there were apples, cookers and eaters, lined up like soldiers along the edge of the horse trough.

Meeting young Tommy pleased me. Later, I would meet his father.

26. Thomas Russell Senior

Following my earlier excursion into Maybury woodland I decided to explore more. In times past I rarely went as far as Top Woods as it was a favourite for shooting and generally avoided by servants. Sometimes, however, we would take food and drink to shooting parties when this was arranged with one of the keepers. So I did know about the tracks and paths. But now, how overgrown they were. I pressed on, glad of my army boots, working my way up the steepening valley that carried the stream down passed the house and gardens and on to the lake. At one place, the path steepened, and I paused not sure if this was the right way when I heard the noise.

Heavy thuds then a pause, more thuds and a grunt. I eased forward through the brambles and there was a man, stripped to the waist wielding an axe. For a moment I wondered what to do. Not that I was scared or anything like that, but coming upon this was a bit of a shock. The man turned to wipe his brow and saw me. He propped himself on the long handle of the axe and looked at me through narrowed eyes.

I pushed forward aware of him watching me now as I untangled bramble from my dungarees. Thankfully, I was dressed for work. Gathering my breath I said, "May I ask who you are and what you're doing?"

He remained as he was, leaning on the axe. "Russell's the name and I'm repairing the bridge."

"Bridge? What bridge?"

"Over the stream further up."

"Who asked you to do so?"

"Who am I talking to?" I wouldn't say his response was surly, just expectant of an answer.

"I'm Ellen Macpherson," I said.

"From the house?"

"That's right and..."

"But you don't own here now."

"No but we have returned to live here and that makes us responsible." He continued to eye me and so I did likewise, moving closer to see him better. "Please show me what you're doing."

"Come this way and mind your footing."

I remembered the bridge. It carried one of the woodland tracks across the stream.

"See the state of it," he said. "Unsafe."

"But it's not used now."

"I use it."

I stared at him, skin darkened by the sun, a strong fellow. "Why?" I asked.

"I walk this way."

"But this is private..."

"I walk here."

"Yes but..."

"This National Trust has it now. Put there by the Government for the nation. Isn't that how it is? So I can walk here. You can walk here." He fixed on me again. "So I'm mending the bridge because it's unsafe for you, me or anyone else."

"Who pays you?"

"No one." With that he clambered down the bank to grab hold of one of the upright timbers. "See it's rotten. So I replace with new green oak. Put in the way it grows will be good for another fifty years. This side then the other side, walkway needs work and the rails. Get it done while the weather holds."

"I take it you know about bridges."

"Carpenter and joiner. And if you're wondering, I was in the army, Royal Engineers, discharged on medical grounds after Dunkirk." He pulled himself back up the bank and came to stand before me, hands on hips. "You and the lady at the house were in the army, is that right?"

I nodded, "Yes, that's right."

"Then you'll know about army life. Amazing how many don't despite there being a war. And you know my son."

"Tommy! Yes, of course. Do you know what he did..."

"Pinched some of your apples."

"No, Mr Russell, he collected apples for his mother and some for me."

Surprised, his face began to soften. "He's a good lad. But if I thought he'd been pinching he'd have felt the weight of my hand."

"Well, that won't be necessary, I can assure you. I am pleased to have met your son. I told him he could come and collect fruit for his mother as long as he doesn't encourage the other boys." Suddenly, I took a liking to this man, this father who had a family, someone of the war who would have experienced as I had. "Do you do carpentry around the village? There may be other work..."

"No. Not because I don't want it but somethings... well, aren't possible. Enough said, I need to get on." He heaved up his axe. "Thank you for your kindness to him and his mother. Mind your footing - even in your army boots!" He grinned at me and returned to his work.

27. We Make Jam and Have a Disagreement

When sorting through the larder I came upon some sugar that had been left by the Poles. At first I thought it should be thrown away as goodness knows how long it had been there. But as it was in a large and sturdy bag and sewn with stout string... well, what was there to lose? It seemed perfectly good despite being a solid lump. Sugar at the time was rationed and, as I broke off a piece and tasted it, I thought what a worthy find!

I wouldn't tell Catherine. Not until I was sure about it. She would only fret if it was thought unsafe. And it was solid. But a bag of sugar so large - it must have weighed several pounds - and idling in our pantry troubled me, got under my skin, upset my natural inclination to thrift. But how to deal with it? Break little pieces off to stir into ones tea? I imagined Catherine wrinkling her nose and saying, "Where did you say you found this? Oh, really, Ellen, whatever next."

But I was set thinking. And jam came to mind. I would go to the orchard, and straightaway pulled on my boots, grabbed a basket from the scullery, and set off. I thought of young Tommy Russell collecting apples for his mother. On arriving at the orchard I wondered if Tommy had been again. The door creaked on its rusty hinges but let me in. There were apples still. I picked one, rubbed it on my pinafore, and took a bite. I couldn't leave them. So I filled the basket. Further in I found an old plum tree and, although getting late in the season, it was a-buzz with wasps and still so laden that the branches had bent right over. The ground was littered with fallen fruit. Pulling off my headscarf and tying the corners to make a bag, I gingerly set about picking up all I could reach. I soon filled the scarf by which time the wasps were getting very angry so I left them to it. What a haul!

I chuckled to myself. I would teach Catherine to make jam!

"Hello," I called as I went through to the kitchen. No answer, so I emptied the plums into the sink, ran cold water over, and hunted round for a jam kettle.

"Hello, are you there?" I called along the corridor.

A moment or so later I heard Catherine coming down the stairs. "Did I hear you call?"

"Yes. I thought we would make jam."

She came into the kitchen and stared at the plums floating in the water.

"The fruit will only go to waste," I said.

"Ellen, of course. How does one make jam?"

I wiped my hands on a cloth. "I'll show you."

"You mean to do it now?"

I had to smile. "Well, the fruit is already over-ripe and it won't keep and it will make a welcome change from eating dry bread and margarine on cold winter days." I picked a plum out of the water. "Try one."

The idea was well intended. But the kitchen and Catherine, well-meaning as she was, did not quite fit like hand in glove. I asked her to begin by washing the fruit.

"Should I use soap?"

"No, only water."

"Where shall I put them?"

"On the drainer."

I went to the pantry for the bag of sugar.

The jam kettle was large and heavy. I remember jam-making required two kitchen maids to lift the kettle on and off the range. We stoked the fire and poked it into life.

"You weigh the fruit," I said, "Scales over there." I had to whack the sugar with a heavy ladle to break it up. We heaved the full kettle onto the range and soon the plums were cooking down nicely. Catherine stirred.

"Be careful not to splash yourself," I said, "It will stick to your skin and burn. As the stones come to the surface spoon them off and put them here." I placed a dish on the side.

I went off the find suitable jars. They were where I expected, in a cupboard not touched since the before the war. These I washed and stacked in the side oven to heat up.

I watched awhile as she chased stones around the bubbling mass. Another stone went onto the dish. She asked, "What happens if one is left behind?"

"I'll put it on your plate at teatime and say 'one for the cook'."

"Ellen, really."

We tested for set, enjoyed a taste on a teaspoon and filled ten jars. A very worthwhile job! There was even sugar left over. I was very pleased.

Sitting down afterwards by the idling fire, I couldn't take my eyes of the line of jars with their little cotton hats.

"Ellen, you haven't stopped staring at them for a moment and I do wonder why."

"Satisfaction," I said. "Not wasting fruit."

She was staring at them herself now. "Yes, I'm sure it is very satisfying. You know, I haven't been to the orchard since we came back. Remember when we were little, how Josh the old gardener would pick two apples and polish them on his apron before presenting them to us. Are there apples now?"

"Oh yes, I collected some today. Oh, did I tell you that last week I found this boy in the orchard helping himself?"

She looked at me in surprise. "No, you didn't. A boy from the village? Who?"

"Young Tommy Russell. He was collecting apples for his mother and I asked him to collect some for me..."

"Ellen, was he was stealing?"

"Well hardly, the fruit would have gone to waste."

"That is not the point."

"Oh, come on, Catherine, he was doing no harm."

"He was stealing. You should have stopped him."

I felt myself bridle. "Can't we be more magnanimous. These aren't easy times what with all this rationing."

"Times may have changed but Maybury is still Maybury and still private property."

At that moment, I hadn't an answer. Her response caught me off-guard and I let it pass. And there was still Thomas Russell senior and his clandestine work in Top Wood, to be explained.

28. Disagreement Resolved

As it happened, I had no need to tell Catherine about Thomas Russell for next day was Sunday and as we came out of church we were confronted by Sergeant Jones. I say confronted, the sergeant clearly had something to impart, asking us if we 'would be minded to pause for a moment'.

"I happened to be in Top Wood yesterday," he said, his moustache quivering. "I was thinking to myself, a bird or two would not go amiss, so took the gun and the dog. I came across Thomas Russell. Said he was repairing the bridge over the stream and when I asked on what authority he said that you and he had spoken about it earlier, Miss Macpherson," and he looked directly at me.

"Yes, that's right," I replied. "He was well into the task and so I left him to it. I'm sorry, Catherine, it completely slipped my mind to tell you, so much happening yesterday."

But the sergeant wasn't done. "I think you should know that Thomas Russell was discharged from the army."

"Yes, it was on medical grounds."

"The point is, Miss Macpherson, Thomas Russell was court martialled for striking an officer."

Catherine interrupted, "What has happened? Ellen, Sergeant, can you explain what this is about?"

"There seems to be some confusion," I said.

"Not as regards me, if I may say so," said the Sergeant.

"Thank you, Sergeant, excuse us a moment if you will," I said and ushered Catherine out of earshot. "I found Thomas Russell repairing the bridge. He'd almost finished it. I forgot to tell you. Completely forgot."

But Catherine was indignant. "You came upon this person on Maybury land?"

"Yes, he was repairing the bridge. He's the father of Tommy Russell who..."

"And you didn't stop him?"

"He was halfway through the job."

"The father of the boy who stole apples?"

"Well, hardly..."

"Ellen, I'm disappointed in you."

"I said I'm sorry..."

"Very disappointed. Her voice was rising. "This is trespass, Ellen, and you let it happen."

I continued as calmly as I could, "Catherine, I don't think you understand."

"Oh really!" Her eyes went quite wide. "I think it is you who does not understand."

I snapped at her, "Hear me out, if you please."

It was distressing. She was upset. I was upset. So sudden, and more shock than anger. I reached for her arm, she tried to pull away but I was firm. "Catherine, we'll go into the churchyard where it's quiet and talk this through."

That is what we did. One has to accept that in such circumstances there will be moments when upbringing, family, lineage, will out. Catherine couldn't help it, it was in her blood. We found a quiet spot to sit. Her eyes were bright and determined. Mine were too. Nevertheless, it was not long before our arms were hooked together and we were as we always were as through it all, I felt a smile push forth.

"Ellen, you are smiling."

"Yes, we were spatting like children."

"I fail to see the humour."

"We're in different times, Catherine. We say we're back home but it isn't the same. How can it be?"

We sighed a collective sigh and I set about explaining as best I could. Nevertheless, tensions drifted away but I can't remember much of it because it doesn't matter now. This huge and ancient property had taken over our lives and in ways we struggled to understand. I found myself staring at Catherine's profile." She said, "You're looking at me in that way again."

"I hadn't realised."

"Of course you had."

"I see your grandmamma."

Her eyes dropped. "Dear Granny," she said softly. "I feel her. As if she's inside my head, talking to me. My God, I do miss her good sense."

"But it's for us now."

"To continue with her vision."

This sounds so glib... almost embarrassing, one might say. It is how we were, two young women - mere girls! - surrounded by a man's world. That is how we were thought of: as girls. Our owner, the National Trust, considered us all right to be 'just around', keeping the old place warm, make it feel lived in. Until someone - probably a man - comes along.

Forgive me, I am a wretched soul with my memories at times.

Nevertheless, it was how it was. Lady Eleanor's presence seemed with us all the time. She provided the means and that was it. Her legacy to Catherine was for Maybury. And so she was - still is - everywhere, willing us, urging us, frightening us and, we hope, smiling down on us. Yes, the likeness was there and I would smile and Catherine would always ask why.

And so as always, differences were resolved.

On our way home we were both deep in thought. The house loomed as we reached the end of the drive. It seemed it had been there for ever, that there had been no war, and it would be that way for ever more. Suddenly Catherine tugged my arm. "I have an idea. Now, Ellen, do not be disapproving but..." she turned to face me, plonking her gloved hands firmly on my shoulders. "We have to move forward. Hush now, and let me explain. We must involve more people. We cannot do this by ourselves. We have George and a gardener now, and the Roberts at the farm - though I do feel Mrs Roberts is inclined to be forward. However, this is a start."

By now Catherine was in full sail. "This house was once home to so many people," she went on. "Good people who lived under its shelter and benevolence. Family and servants - not to forget those Polish airmen. Shelter and sanctuary, Ellen. Now please don't argue but ... we must have people back again, don't you think? I propose we invite the village to help at Maybury!"

29. Thomas Russell Invites Questions

A day or so later I was returning from town on the bus and happened upon Thomas Russell. "I didn't recognise you," he said, "without your trousers and army boots."

"Mr Russell, I'll thank you to mind your own business."

"No offence meant. Are we walking in the same direction?"

"It does seem so."

"If you don't mind being seen with me."

"Why should I?"

He shrugged. "Some do."

"Well I do not."

"I'm sorry if I embarrassed you," he said.

"Trousers and army boots?"

He stopped and turned to me, his face hard. "I'm sorry I said that. But my wife once dressed like you. She always dressed well, looked good and like you could carry it off. But she sold her nice clothes to make ends meet. There, now I've told you."

What could I say? We were nearing the church when he suddenly asked, "Do people want to know what you did in the war?" It was as if the question was tossed into the road in front of me.

"They do but... Well, it isn't easy, is it. Why do you ask?"

"Because you were in it. You understand."

"Do I? Is it so simple? One can't always find words."

"Words." He scoffed. "What's it to do with anyone else? The nerve of people. There he is! That man Jones." He lurched against me and from the corner of my eye I saw the sergeant crossing the road. "Let me at him!"

"No!" I snapped, grabbing his arm.

"You know what he did?" he fumed. "He let out I was court martialled, for God's sake!"

"Steady now," I said as calmly as I could. "Just settle down."

Thankfully, he did so and then as if nothing was amiss, said quietly in my ear, "My God you're a cool one. You've been here before, haven't you?"

"If you mean I stopped men in a bad state rushing blindly into a worse state, then yes."

He nodded and steadied himself against the wall. "But Jones wouldn't listen. I told him I was discharged on medical grounds but no... he had to tell everyone I was locked up. I was in a recovery unit, I'll have him know! Why do people only remember the lie?" His shoulders sagged and he twisted away. "What has it to do with anyone, anyway? So I'd punched an officer. Our unit - what remained of it - was retreating under fire with casualties. Men with guts out, limbs gone, heads blown off. Good God, it was awful, absolutely bloody awful and we were led by a fool."

"Why are you telling me all this?" I asked.

"As I said, you understand. You've been there. The rest don't know anything. Did you know I did work at the big house when it was a hospital? No, of course you didn't. I repaired the boiler there. It was the Winter of '42 '43 and I heard they were in trouble. The snow was bad then. I got to know the adjutant. Went on from there, carpentry, plumbing, odd jobs. Whatever they couldn't do, I did. I got on well

with the adjutant. It was that winter that did the front doors. The step lifted and pushed the doorframe out of true. Didn't bother them. They always used the French windows in the billiard room because there were no steps. But I knew. Oh yes, I know what it is with the doors." With that he straightened and his grin came and I was seeing him in Top Wood stripped to the waist, leaning on his axe, and hearing the same confident elucidation. "So I worked at the big house, and for the army. Can you believe it? Worked for the army after they'd chucked me out. And I'm looking to work there again and you once said to me about other work. You remember?"

"Yes, but this isn't the time..." I stopped on noticing someone draw near. I turned to see a young woman, pleasant face and demeanour. "Excuse me, Miss," said the woman, "But I'm Mrs Russell."

On hearing his wife, he relaxed. "Sorry, I mouthed off," he said and fiddled in a pocket to take out a packet of cigarettes. "I don't mean it." A match flashed, a coil of smoke wreathed his face.

His wife said, "Please excuse him, Miss. Thomas sometimes gets..."

"Angie, shut up."

"No, Thomas."

"I was telling her, that's all," he insisted.

"Thomas!"

"Angie, for God's sake..."

I raised my voice. "Please, both of you... I think I get the gist. But this isn't the time or place to talk about it. Far better for Mr Russell to call at the house sometime."

I left it at that.

Catherine was in the courtyard when I got back. "Ellen, where have you been? It's almost lunchtime." I began to explain when I noticed Sergeant Jones.

"Did I hear mention of Thomas Russell?"

"Yes, you did Sergeant," I replied. "I met him and his wife in the village. He tells me he did work here during the war."

"So he may have," said the sergeant.

"It is why the sergeant is here," said Catherine.

"Which raises that question again, if I may say so." The sergeant stroked his moustache.

I looked at Catherine, she at me. "It seems that Thomas Russell has a criminal record," she said.

The sergeant came down the steps. "When I challenged the fellow about trespass on Maybury land he implied that Miss Macpherson had indicated that that was all right. But as I say, he is a criminal."

Catherine spoke up. "Sergeant Jones, you have been at pains to tell me about Mr Russell. Miss Macpherson and I will discuss how we should proceed, so thank you for your attention."

The policeman placed his cap firmly on his head. "Your Ladyship must realise I have her interests and those of her household and this great house, at heart. I speak as I find." With that he bade us good day.

I was very cross. "Household, indeed. What a cheek!"

"Goodness knows..." breathed Catherine closing the door, "where one goes from here."

We had lunch, cold ham, courtesy of Mrs Roberts, and boiled potatoes and it set me thinking: what might Mrs Russell be serving her family that lunchtime.

"Catherine, I want you to meet Thomas Russell. He may be blunt but I feel he would be useful." I went on to recount my earlier conversation with him and did not mince my words. "The man has a dark streak. I think Sergeant Jones was out of order calling him a criminal. He survived Dunkirk and he holds a lot of that inside him. His wife does her best to understand. I feel for her, poor woman."

"My dear Ellen, the man should not have passed comment on your dress like that. Quite rude. Then to unburden himself. Well, really..."

"I'm afraid the war left a huge chip on his shoulder."

Later, we were sitting in Catherine's room watching the sunset.

"Ellen," she began reflectively, "We must be grateful for our good fortune. We are here, we have returned. Maybury is all around us. We are very, very fortunate," and she sighed heavily.

"It seems you feel the weight of it," I said.

"Yes, so many didn't make it. But we did..." she picked up her newspaper. "You know so much happened when one was doing one's bit..." she thumbed through the pages. "Yes, here it is: it's about the Welfare State. You have heard of it, of course."

I smiled, "Oh yes. We had newspapers from home when we were in Italy."

"Mmm, I'm afraid I have catching up to do. But it does seem the government will govern more of our lives. Health and education, that sort of thing, better old age pension - not that that will affect us quite yet. However, these are serious matters that change how we live. We now have a Labour Government..." her voice drifted away while her face remained hidden by the newspaper.

I sensed that there was more to come.

"Ellen, you did vote, didn't you?" The question took me by surprise.

"Yes, of course. You did as well."

"Well actually... no, I didn't."

"Really, Catherine, we went to vote together."

"But I didn't vote. I could not make up my mind."

"Why on Earth not? Why didn't you say? Really, Catherine, we discussed beforehand how important it was: the first time that we're old enough to vote and you didn't bother. Well really, I am surprised at you. It was very important, for Goodness sake!"

"Please don't shout at me, Ellen."

I managed to hold onto my slipping patience. "Tell me why?" I said.

She thought a moment. "I don't know. One doesn't find these things easy. One is comfortable, then not."

"You mean it's family."

"Yes."

I'm afraid that old chestnut, class difference, lingered still. Maybury was forward thinking before the war. Far ahead of other landed families and their mansions. My mother made clear that she and Mr Prior, the agent, expected servants as well as family to cast their votes on election days. Of course, Catherine and I could not do so because we were not of age. Now, the war had brought huge changes and these, I'm afraid, were yet to be understood.

The newspaper shook suddenly. "Ellen, are you still there?"

"Yes, of course I am. I was thinking."

"Tell me what about."

I could have expounded too. Instead, I simply said, "I was watching the last of the sun and thinking, yes, we are fortunate to be here in this great house. Empty but for you and me and a whole lot of memories. We are privileged to live here. We are fortunate. Many aren't."

"Mr Russell for example?"

"And Mrs Russell and little Tommy. I live here and I have nice clothes while she sold hers to feed her family."

"So how does Maybury square with that?"

"Not the way Sergeant Jones put it. He didn't have the answer."

"Do you?"

I thought awhile. "No but Maybury must have answers somewhere."

Silence settled over us as the sky shed the last of the day. Privileged, yes. So many fine houses had gone, estates built on. "We must find a new purpose," I said. "I think we are ready for it. The village must be involved."

"And a certain person in particular?"

"Mr Russell is not a criminal."

"Oh really, Ellen, I can't wait to meet this man." I caught the glint in her eye around the newspaper as she said, "If I'm not mistaken I think you are a mite smitten."

I sent the paper flying out of her hands.

30. Thomas Russell and the Front Doors

I was in my octagon office one Saturday in September when I heard a loud motorcycle sweep up to the house. I looked out to see Thomas Russell with young Tommy in the sidecar. The father swung off the machine, pulled off goggles and gauntlets, set his cap the right way round, and ran up the portico steps to stare at the doors. I would have hurried downstairs to meet him but I heard Catherine's voice.

"Mr Russell, how good of you to call. And this must be young Tommy? Well now..."

So, instead, I listened from my open window.

Catherine and I had discussed the front doors at length and we had come to the same conclusion that they needed to be put right. The means, though, we had not agreed upon. This is not to say we disagreed, just that we could not decide.

I heard the doors being shaken.

"They're solid enough," I heard Mr Russell loudly exclaim. "They've been like it awhile." Now there were thumps and bangs. "Have they ever opened?" I detected a touch of sarcasm.

"Mr Russell, in our time one did not use other entrances."

He grinned and walked over to the sidecar where young Tommy was now standing on the seat. The father folded arms and stared up at the doors, the son did likewise.

"I'm afraid they were always difficult," said Catherine. "Sometimes it took two men to open them. One wondered if someday they might come off the hinges."

"No chance of that. Good solid workmanship. Seen some years but built to last."

"So, Mr Russell, what would you recommend?"

"First, if you don't mind, can Tommy see about some apples?"

The boy got out of the sidecar with the same large basket I'd seen before. This was my prompt to go down and meet him.

He was waiting for me at the back door. "Tommy, I don't know how many apples there are. It's getting late in the season but do go and look. Bring me some as well." The boy set off and I thought to see how Catherine was getting on. However, I resisted as to do so might be appear intrusion. Much better for her to work this out for herself, no doubt apply her army skills just as I had done. So I sat down in the kitchen to wait. It wasn't long before Tommy returned.

"Are these all right, Miss?" He put the heavy basket down on the table and took out an apple to show me. "Somethings been at them. But I found the best."

"Birds or wasps," I said. "They won't keep, I'm afraid. Will your mother be able to use them soon?"

"Oh yes, my Mon's a good cook. I've got some for you." He sorted through the basket, made a selection, then suddenly announced, "I'd like to work in the garden. It's nice here, the trees and all that. Do you think I could?"

I was rather taken aback. "Well, possibly... But you must ask your father first, and if he agrees..."

"Oh Dad will."

"You must ask him..."

"Would you?"

"Would I what?"

"Ask my Dad if I can work here." He looked at me with wide bright eyes, "Please Miss, he'd listen to you."

"Tommy, I think we've done enough for today. Thank you for bringing me the apples, take the rest for your mother." He set off to join his father.

I was dying to know how Catherine was getting on but resisted the temptation. Hearing them in the courtyard I realised they were coming to view the situation from inside. I kept out of the way as they passed the kitchen then quietly made my way up the back stairs. I would be able to hear everything from the landing above the Grand Stairs thanks to the infamous echo.

"Well, Mr Russell?" Catherine's voice rang out.

He replied, "Nothing wrong with the doors as I can see." The latch was rattled. "But there's something under that step."

"What might that be?" asked Catherine.

"Well now if I could answer that without m' tool bag I'd be a rich man."

"Would that be an invitation to discuss cost, Mr Russell?"

He rattled the heavy door handle, pulled and pushed, and so loudly I missed his reply. Catherine's too. I lost the thread until he burst out, "Look, I can't talk money. I need the work."

His voice still echoed. I went to the balustrade, they were staring at each other, Catherine with mouth half open. He repeated, "I need the work. I'll start on Monday, eight o'clock sharp. I will do the job."

That was how it was. I judged that was the moment and went down to join them. Not how I intended. No grand entry as so many had been on that Grand Maybury staircase but that was how it was. I received only cursory acknowledgement before he turned on his heel and disappeared down the back corridor and a minute later came the roar of his motorcycle down the drive.

Catherine was still talking about Thomas Russell at teatime. "Really, Ellen, I understand why you were upset by him."

"I wasn't upset."

"He made you angry," she insisted.

"You don't have to like a person to understand them."

"But, Ellen, he is **so** forceful."

I smiled. "I'm sure you managed perfectly."

She huffed.

There was little to be gained by further discussion. That evening we had a bottle of Maybury claret and listened to the last night of the Proms on the wireless. We were both carried away by the experience of hearing Beethoven as it happened, the response of an enraptured audience. It was like being there. The joy of it! and we were in tears.

"Do you remember going the Albert Hall?" said Catherine dabbing her eyes as the last of the applause died away.

"1941, wasn't it?" I said. "I'd never been to a concert before."

"My God... it seems an age ago now."

"Just before we enlisted."

"Recruited," she corrected.

"Five years and everything changed. Thomas Russell was in prison."

"He's got to you, hasn't he."

"It's about justice, Catherine."

Sitting there at the kitchen table watching the last of the fire dying down in the range, we chinked glasses.

Sunday, and neither of us wanted to go to church. The thought of meeting Sergeant Jones and being asked about Thomas Russell made us both shake heads. Though we had still not decided how to deal with the man.

Despite not going to church, Sunday was not a work day. Inevitably, we went to our special place under the old oak by the lake. A last minute brainwave was to take the remainder of the bottle of wine. "It will help with a plan," I said.

"The man is too familiar," said Catherine. "I do not like that."

"I think we can put up with it," I said.

"That is not the point."

"The point is: can he do what we want?"

We sipped the last of our wine. I looked up at the sky. "Is it going to rain?"

"I don't think rain would put him off."

"Catherine, I don't think anything would put off Thomas Russell."

Monday came and we made a special effort to be ready. We were determined not to be caught in the middle of breakfast or the clearing up afterwards. The motor cycle roar came at eight and we both went to meet him. Already, he was head down in the sidecar among a jangling of tools.

"I wonder where he will begin," said Catherine quietly.

"We must be patient," I replied.

A moment later he emerged. "Good morning to you both," he said. "I'll let you know when there's something to see," and he stood there until we went.

"Such an infuriating fellow," said Catherine.

"A bruised individual," I replied. "But I think we're helping."

"I hope you're right."

We went back to our work; Catherine to the Estate Office, me to my office. By now I made the Earl's old sanctum in the octagon room my own. I looked out over the estate as if it really were mine. I did so often. I think I was becoming quite possessive. We both were.

I opened my window to listen to the activity below. I was going through a bundle of old bills Catherine had found in the Estate Office, many with my mother's initials as Housekeeper. Various items from bed linen to crockery and I had become quite engrossed when a loud klaxon horn sounded outside. I opened the window wide to see Mr Russell vigorously pumping the device. "It's done!" he shouted.

Catherine had heard too, she came out of her room and we both hurried down to find him standing arms folded in front of wide open front doors. "There you are," he expounded. "But as to the culprit..."

31. A Mystery

Thomas Russell was standing in the open doorway. He had wedged a small piece of wood under the top step to lift it slightly.

"There's something funny going on," he said. "I need a witness."

Catherine stared at him. "Whatever do you mean?"

"The step's been disturbed. Put back on sand. The sand's shifted and I can see something sparkly. Might be gold." He grinned at us. "Might be a sovereign. So I need a witness."

"Then, Mr Russell, we had better see."

"Could be nothing. A sovereign or a farthing. Who knows, might have been a witch here."

"This is Maybury."

"Not unknown in these parts, witches and such like."

"Shall we see?" I interrupted.

He took a metal bar and prised the step higher, inched the wooden wedge further to hold it, managed to get a grip with both hands and heaved. We moved closer but he leaned over the spot and blocked our view. "Well, I've seen some things," he said, sweeping away more sand to get hold of whatever-it-was and take it out. I thought I saw a gold chain and what appeared to be feathers... "Good God..." he leaned back suddenly.

We tried to get closer but Catherine recoiled, pushing herself away. "No! I don't want that near me." She got to her feet, brushed her hands vigorously down her dungarees. "Why would anyone do this? Placing a horrible thing like that under a step. Is it a joke of some sort? Mr Russell, leave everything as it is. We must decide what to do."

"But I can't leave the step like this."

"You can do that later. We have a mystery and a horrible one. We must think what to do. Please leave everything as it is."

"What about the doors. You can't close the doors."

Exasperated now, Catherine restrained herself, saying simply: "We will take tea," and headed for the kitchen.

But I held back and when they'd gone I stooped to see the object more closely. Even now the memory of it makes me shake a little. It was a miniature portrait in an oval gold frame of a young woman that had been broken in two but what had been done to it turned my stomach: it was tied to the carcass of a headless bird, black feathers pushed out as if through the broken face. Having been under that step - having stepped over it countless times - was so shocking for I was seeing Catherine's face. Of course it was not her, I presumed a forebear, but an uncanny likeness, and to see her disfigured like that was truly horrible. I am not inclined to the supernatural but I have to say, that thing, under the entrance to the house where we had all lived, did smack of witchcraft.

I went through to the kitchen to find Mr Russell at the table, large hands curled around one of our best China cups. "She's gone to telephone," he said. "Bloomin' odd business, though. I never thought when I said about a witch. Upset her, hasn't it." He glanced up at the clock. "My dinner'll be ready so I'd better be off. Shall I come back afterwards?"

"Yes, of course, and thank you," I replied.

"Thank me when the job's done." He pulled out his cap, wedged it in place and left.

I sat down and waited for Catherine. On her return she seemed more composed.

"Did you know the telephone works?" she said. "The operator answered. I spoke to the museum and the editor of the Mercury. A reporter will be here this afternoon with a photographer and a man from the museum as well. That's good, don't you think?"

I couldn't help wondering how the local paper could possibly help. However, seeing my look of surprise, she added, "No doubt the village will learn soon enough from Mr Russell so I think it better to have an official version." When I told her that he had gone for his dinner, she rolled her eyes. "Really, Ellen, what on earth made the man mention a witch? As if he knew!"

"I'm sure he didn't," I said. "Mere coincidence."

"Nothing mere about it. Very real, seems to me."

The reporter's car pulled up at the front doors as Thomas Russell's motorcycle swept into the drive. It all came together very well. The reporter interviewed Catherine. A group photograph was taken in the doorway.

While the rest talked, the man from the museum studied the scene. I asked him what he thought.

"It's a puzzle," he replied. "I've come across coins set under walls and in doorways but never this. Charms to bring good luck but never one like this..." he shook his head and his voice dropped. "You know there was a report about something that once happened here. Fifty years ago, maybe more, but it caught the attention of the newspapers. The story goes that a servant girl was dismissed because her mistress found she was into bad things, you know... sort of improper things. I expect you've heard it."

I had no idea what he was talking about.

"Spells, magic," he went on. "The girl went missing. Rumour had it she died mysteriously."

"Oh, really..." I said still hiding ignorance.

"Landed families were always tight lipped."

"You think that under the step was something to do with it?"

"Can't rule it out."

I learned no more for Catherine announced they must get a move on if this was to make the evening edition.

"Mr Russell, you can finish the job." She took my arm and led me aside. "As for that object. I told the museum to keep it." She paused in thought for a moment, her eyes blinking uneasily. "Really, the nonsense people talk: magic, if you please."

"It was a shock," I said. "Seeing that little portrait..."

"Disfigured, you mean. As if it was me but it wasn't. Thankfully, a long time ago. Anyway, one has to get used to these things. But enough of all that, Ellen Macpherson, to matters more important: what would you say to our employing the man to do other work?" My surprise obviously showed. "Oh really, Ellen, I know you found him impulsive at times but he's a dependable chap, isn't he?"

"You sound as if you've already made up your mind."

"How did you guess?"

"I know you."

"Really..."

"Well, have you?"

"Yes."

"Then why do you ask?"

She gave a tiny snort. "He will be here tomorrow to tidy up and that set me thinking. You seem unsure. Why?"

"Because a short while ago you were very upset."

"One has to put such matters aside."

"Yes, of course," I replied. "And, yes, I approve." I was only too relieved the morning's unpleasantries were behind.

The doors working (although we were forbidden to walk on the step until morning) we brought out chairs from the hall. Catherine said we should have a drink to celebrate and went off to the cellar. "I found this," she said on her return and showed me a dusty bottle with faded label. "But I'm not sure what it is."

"I thought a daughter of an earl knew these things."

"Well, this one doesn't."

The cork was very tight. I held the bottle while she twisted the corkscrew. "In Italy," I said, "We once came across a squad of Poles who didn't bother with the cork, they simply knocked the neck off with a rock."

But at last the cork came out. We sat in state facing down the drive, and that was how we celebrated

"Catherine, isn't this inclined to the vulgar? You know, in full view of the estate."

"We'll see anyone in time to hide the bottle."

"And the empty glasses?"

"Maybury crystal is not vulgar."

"We managed to avoid vulgarity in the army," I said.

"We were good girls, Ellen, you and I. Just as we are now." She lifted her glass to the light. "This is quite nice, don't you think? Let us toast ourselves over Maybury's mended threshold and be thankful that, despite wars and curses, we have our health and wellbeing."

And nor for a moment did it cross my mind that what we did would once have been unthinkable. A maid with her mistress, feet up, glasses in hand, sharing a bottle on the portico of one of England's grand houses. No, we were not vulgar, just young women emerging into a new age.

32. Surprises Abound

To my knowledge the Mercury evening paper was never read at Maybury. I think His Lordship refused to have it but I don't know why. I had to cycle into the village to get a copy to read all about our mystery. At the newsagent there was already considerable interest. I suppose this should have alerted me to what was to happen over the next few days.

Catherine and I spread the paper on the kitchen table and read it together. To say we were surprised is to put it mildly.

"Did you know about a maid who went missing?" I asked.

"No of course not," Catherine replied.

"But it says here that you did."

"Yes, I know."

"But no one at Maybury in my time – or your time – ever mentioned such a story. So why does it state here that you knew?"

"Because, dear Ellen, they all knew! The reporter had looked up an old copy of the Mercury and the museum knew all about it. This scandalous affair that had taken place in my great-grandfather's time, so scandalous it was still being talked about."

"But we didn't know," I insisted.

"No, but how could I remain so ridiculously ignorant in front of all those men? Quite unreasonable it seems to me. Remember we were only children then. Nothing awkward or disagreeable was ever spoken of in the presence of children." She was quite aggrieved.

I re-read the article. "So how was that thing under the step part of it? Was the maid into magic? Did she put a curse on someone and was then never seen again? Is that the whole of it?"

"How can anyone know?"

I did not press the issue. Catherine was, as I've said before, sensitive to matters concerning her family and being last of the line she felt responsibility regarding the Shelham name.

More surprises emerged. First, I was accosted by Mrs Roberts who was delivering produce from the farm. So great was her eagerness to engage me that she jumped down from the trap and startled the pony.

"Miss Macpherson, may I speak a moment..." breathlessly, she gripped poor Rob's halter to steady him. "Of course you've seen the evening paper. Well, I thought to myself, here's something to tell them up at the house. But first... here are your eggs." A covered bowl was thrust into my hands. "My grandfather said the tale was passed down but it was not like it said in the paper. Story goes the old earl wanted... you know..." she tapped the side of her nose and winked at me. "Well, there was this lady guest at the house who he took a fancy to. He called on this village woman to... you know, do something to help. I'm sure you know what I mean. Well, the village knew well enough, didn't they."

A few days later two letters arrived by first post. I took them into breakfast. One was from my mother the other was for Catherine. I heard her footsteps along the corridor. We exchanged good mornings and she sat at the table. I passed her letter to her.

"It's from the county historian," she said opening out a type-written page. "He has read the newspaper article and is prompted to write. Would her ladyship feel disposed to meet him? Really, Ellen, what is one disposed to say? Oh just pop over whenever you feel like it. One can't say, no even though the matter has become quite tiresome." She sighed and put the letter down. "I hope your correspondence is more worthy than mine."

"I think yours is worthy," I said. "We've uncovered a mystery and presumably he may be able to shed light on it."

"Presumably, nothing! We didn't have a mystery before. What has changed? A revolting object manifests itself and everyone jumps to conclusions. And you haven't told me about your letter."

"Personal," I said.

"I'm sorry for prying."

I grinned at her. "It's from my mother. She would like to spend Christmas with us."

"Oh joy! Why do you get a nice letter while I have to suffer witchery and bloody nonsense."

"Aren't you in a misery mood! And moderate your language if you please."

"Yes, sorry, I'm being silly. Of course your mother should come. I like her. I have always liked her. She will raise our spirits."

I didn't say that my mother had also read the newspaper article and it reminded her of stories that were still being whispered around the house when she was housekeeper. Nor did I say that my mother would quite likely take charge as if she were still Housekeeper at Maybury.

The historian was duly invited. We had by then tidied the reception room off the Hall and made it reasonably comfortable. Being able to welcome visitors at our front door really brought Maybury to life again! I even polished the letter box and doorbell. We set out tea and biscuits with best Maybury china to add that little extra to the occasion. Catherine asked if she looked all right. We both dressed for the day but I wouldn't stay to meet the man. I thought it better if Catherine did this by herself. Instead, I went into town for some shopping.

As the bus wound its way through the countryside I was thinking: should I have stayed? Since our return we had done everything together. But this business with the step had made Catherine aware of family in a way I hadn't seen before. And it was personal. On arrival at the bus station I noticed a man waiting. A well-dressed individual with briefcase. Country folk never carried briefcases. I guessed this was him.

I checked the time by town clock and decided when I should return. I was determined not to arrive back too early and nor too late for she would be eager to tell me everything. Although I had our ration books shopping would be more spontaneous than planned. In the square was one of those old fashioned coffee shops and the scent of roasting coffee drew me to the open door. This, I knew, would be an indulgence. I ordered eight ounces of freshly ground and while it was weighed and packed, I steered myself to a table for a small Arabic, black and sweet. I was reminded of Rome and the chaos of liberation and I sat awhile as memories flickered passed me.

But soon I was out again and on to Timothy Whites for soap but they didn't have Pears and so I went to Boots. They were out of scented soap entirely and that meant Wright's coal-tar again.

A visit to the bank to cash a cheque after which I walked down by the river. It was so calming there, just a moorhen or two. I came upon a couple of lads with a small yacht. I thought of Tommy Russell... and, yes, his father too, soon to be employed at Maybury. I wondered now about Catherine and her guest and checked my watch. I walked further, crossed the river at the weir and returned to the high street. Street names were being put back. I spoke to one of the workmen. I think he was quite surprised at being spoken to by a well-dressed young woman. Six years ago such would have been unheard of. I smiled in agreement when he said how well 'we did for Hitler.'

Now it was time to go back. I was walking up the long drive to the house and I met the man returning. He raised his hat as we passed. Now I was thoroughly curious to hear what had taken place.

"Oh, Ellen, I'm so pleased to see you. Have you had lunch? No? Nor have I and I'm famished. Let's go into the kitchen and I'll tell you everything. Oh, my goodness, what a morning..."

We sat at the table, served ourselves with tea, cold meat and bread.

"First, he produced this," she said placing a letter on the table.

I instantly recognised the fine writing paper and delicate hand. "Lady Eleanor... and it's addressed to my mother when she was Housekeeper here."

"And it explains the mystery," added Catherine.

I read it through. "So it was my mother who dismissed the maid."

"For meddling in the black art." Catherine was grinning broadly. "Dear granny, as far as she was concerned it was more important to preserve the family name and here she is thanking your mother for her timely action."

"Stifling servant talk," I said.

"But that wasn't why he was here." Catherine took the letter from me and folded it away. "The newspaper article only served to remind him of what he called the Maybury papers. Well, you can imagine: I hadn't a clue what it was about. But it had nothing to do with the step. It seems there was a huge pile of documents, ledgers, goodness knows what else, was delivered to county offices in 1940. Ledgers and documents going right back to the first Earl's time - one actually bore the seal of George the First, can you imagine! He says it fills a whole room."

"But I thought everything went to the National Trust," I said.

"They hadn't the means to store it but didn't want it anyway. Ellen, don't look at me like that. I was baffled too." She took a deep breath. "He just wanted to say that county would happily keep it but as it amounted to the whole Shelham history - confidential and much of it very personal - only the family could give permission for it to be seen. And as I am the last of the line I'm the only person entitled to see it, or to give anyone else permission to see it." She was rather breathless by now and I was beginning to understand why. "Can you imagine, Ellen, the responsibility? He also thinks it wise for me to declare that am holder of the title to forestall anyone else making such a claim and..."

I interrupted. "Half a mo, I'm not sure I follow any of this."

She paused, gazing ahead, elbows on the table. "I don't think I do either. I think it refers to the family title. I didn't question any of this because... well, you know why."

"Because of appearing ignorant," I said.

She didn't answer. I asked what else was discussed at which she clicked her tongue in annoyance. "Oh, yes. I was told there were rent books for the cottages and the last entries were dated 1939. It seems rent hasn't been collected for the past six years. He asked if I'd like to have them. I said no thank you. Really, Ellen, this was too much. I am not a rent collector. The National Trust own everything and if they can't be bothered to collect rent then one cannot be bothered either. As far as I'm concerned these are good village people and they can continue living in their cottages rent free. Why are you looking at me like that?"

I said, "Don't the Russells occupy one of the cottages? You know, the terrace by the church?"

"To be frank, Ellen, I don't know one row of cottages from another."

"I'm sure Mr Russell would know his rent situation," I said.

"Does he? Does he live rent free? What of our situation in this great house?" She spread her arms in exasperation. "You know, I had just been posted to SOE when a young officer happened to address me as Kate. He had found out who I was, I don't know how, but because he was an officer he thought to be familiar. I told him I was Corporal Shelham and that was how one should address me. Yes, I know, Ellen, I could have been on a fizzer but for once my family rank and title subordinated army rank. Now I'm told the whole family history awaits my attention and I haven't a clue where to begin."

33. First Remembrance

Remembrance Sunday arrived. Catherine and I were well prepared. We each wore blazer and beret with our badges of service – and medals, of course – skirts and polished shoes for the parade. Importantly, we did not look alike. We arrived at the village green in time to see everyone else arrive. And everyone seemed not quite sure as to how the day was to proceed. There was some chattering and enquiring, exchange of greetings, some asking after so-and-so and so-and-so, and wondering about who was there and who was not.

Catherine said, "I don't recognise people. Are they different? Has the war done that?"

One could not help wondering how many were no longer there. I said, "Some may have moved on. Like we have."

"We came back."

"Not the same, though."

"The house is still here."

"But it's the people."

It was disconcerting to observe, the village unchanged, the church, the clock telling the same time. But it was not the same. People gathered and people were quiet. The scout troop collected. The Boys Brigade were forming up with their band, instruments shining in the November sun. Cadets appeared in full uniform, bulled boots and Blanco webbing. Catherine was quietly watching. "Men and women," she said. "Tell me, Ellen, what did women get out of the war?"

"Independence," I replied.

"And responsibility."

"And we enjoy both."

"And we're whole." She nodded toward a wheelchair with a young man in RAF uniform. He had only one leg and the uniform trousers were folded accordingly. The wheelchair was pushed by a woman of similar age.

At that point the **parade / commanding** officer called everyone to order and invited us all to form up into ranks.

We were to march around the village and return to the green. The band struck up a pleasant tune and we set off. We quickly fell into step, veterans and younger ones, we all made the effort. If memories flashed and tears sprang we pushed them back as we pushed back our shoulders and swung our arms for this was about Remembering.

The church was full and quiet. Flags propped around the chancel, tassels drooped onto cold stone floor and no one whispered a word. We sang the hymns and uttered the prayers, heard the readings and tried to be comfortable in unforgiving pews as the sermon began.

The Reverend Watkinson gave a good sermon. The first after the war and he caught the mood: move forward but remember. I think we were uplifted, satisfied. We made our way out and we could speak again, and he was there to thank us at the door. We shook hands and thanked him, and moved on.

Some crossed the green to enter The Vine or the New Inn. Unaccompanied women did not usually enter public houses – an oddity unchanged by the war, it seemed – and so we went home. But we were not inclined to jollify after taking

part in remembering. In fact we walked in silence, not even to speak to each other until we were comfortably passed the Maybury gates and onto the drive.

"A good sermon," I said reflectively.

"Mothers holding the family together."

"Did we ever think of that?"

"Ellen, we are not mothers."

I slipped my arm through Catherine's and now we walked in silence, only the clink of medals reminding us to remember.

34. An Unwelcome Visitor

We walked home in silence after the Remembrance Parade. Memories mellow with time but are always there. There will always be the everlasting question: why are we the ones to return and remember? That was our first Remembrance.

Our silence persisted right through Maybury gates. Our shoes on the gravel concealed the chink of our medals and I was glad of that. Medals remind. But soon I would put them away until next year and the next... and so on.

We were pulled out of our melancholy at seeing a small red sports car parked right in front of the entrance. The hood was folded down but there was no one about. I was sure I'd seen the car around the village, it had a small flag on the bonnet. Catherine poked it with a gloved finger. "The Shelham family arms..." A small leather case was strapped on the back bearing the initials E. S.

She said, "Let's go round to the courtyard."

We were about to let ourselves in when a man's strident voice called out. "Good afternoon, dear ladies, I do hope I'm not intruding." He was smartly dressed in suit, overcoat, a snappy trilby that he touched lightly as he approached. One might say a respectable individual but for the Adolph Hitler moustache to which I took instant dislike. Thankfully, we held our own in caps and blazers, medals, badges, and shoes you could see your face in.

"The name is Edward..."

"But you're trespassing," interrupted Catherine.

"Not intentionally," he replied with widening smile.

"What are doing here?"

He didn't answer and his eyes flicked over us. "Am I speaking to Lady Shelham? Catherine Shelham?"

"Yes," said Catherine.

"How pleased I am to meet you." He put out his hand. Catherine guardedly accepted the gesture. "Edward Sheelham," he announced. "The Honourable Edward Sheel-ham," emphasising a drawn-out e and distinct aitch. "The northern branch of the family prefers the more elegant pronunciation."

"Should we go in?" I said. "It's getting rather cold."

"You're quite right, Ellen," said Catherine. "Let's go inside."

Welcoming a visitor at the rear of the house is always an awkward business yet he seemed not to notice. I led the way through the kitchen.

"I'm on my way to London," he said breezily. "Thought I'd call and introduce m'self. I have news that I'm sure will be of interest to Catherine."

When we reached the Hall he gave a little gasp "Oh my, oh yes, quite beautiful, the staircase, the carvings," he said, staring up. "I do so remember the light in here." In the reception room I switched on the electric fire and invited him to sit. He swept off the overcoat, folded it beside him on the settee and placed his hat on top. Catherine sat in the armchair opposite. I sat next to her. He was grinning all the time, eyes constantly wandering. I could feel tension coming about. Catherine was not impressed.

"You're wondering why I'm here," he said, taking a silver cigarette case from his pocket, opening it and offering it to us.

"Thank you but we do not smoke," said Catherine, and seeing him take a cigarette for himself, added, "And we thank others not to smoke. Yes, we would be grateful to hear your business."

He folded his arms across his chest. "I'm your cousin, Catherine. A distant one but cousin nonetheless. You see, I knew your father. We met before the war. The Earl and I were in Munich together." He suddenly leaned forward and his voice dropped. "Catherine, we have certain serious matters to discuss. Can we do so in private?"

"Mr Shelham, I know nothing about you or for that matter, any other branch of the family and one may speak freely here in the presence of my close friend and companion. Tell us, where are you from?"

"My family home is in Northumberland," he replied.

Catherine face stiffened. "I do not know of any connection with that part of the country."

"Scotland?" he prompted. "Your grandmother's estates?"

"That is not Northumberland."

"Of course not." He leaned forward more so, for a moment I thought he was going to take Catherine's hand. I'm glad he did not try to do so.

"I came to one of your birthdays," he said with an excited little laugh. "You were just a small girl but such a pretty child. Yes, I liked you. Your father was here. Such a kind man. I was just starting out in life – the diplomatic corps, as it came about. He was so helpful to me."

"Mr Shelham..."

"Edward, please."

"When where you in Munich?"

"Oh, the big Nazi parade in 1937."

"With my father?"

"That is correct. The British Government sent a delegation of which I was a member... a junior member but significant, don't yer know!" and he laughed again.

"Surely you mean Nuremberg."

"Oh well, one or the other," he replied offhandedly.

"And I'm sure you haven't travelled all this way to talk about my birthday and a visit to Germany. So far we have heard nothing of consequence. Will you please explain yourself?"

He cast a snobby glance at me. "I wonder would you be so good: I'd like to speak with Her Ladyship alone?"

I didn't move and Catherine ignored the request. She said, "You have arrived here uninvited on Remembrance Sunday. Today is a special day for us. We demand to know why."

He began to fidget. "It concerns the Earl your father. He was part of the mission to follow events in Germany. But he was also suspected of being an agent for the..." his words were dashed aside by Catherine's outburst, "Oh this is ridiculous! In 1937 my father was dead. I don't believe a word you say. You are an imposter. You are trespassing and if you don't leave this house immediately I will shoot you. Ellen, please show this person out." With that she swept out of the room.

He was completely unabashed. I thought, what a damn cheek! I stood and waited by the door while he put on coat and hat... and that for me, determined it: no gentleman would don a hat indoors.

"I've never been spoken to like that," he said. "Threatening me like that. Not what I'm used to at all."

I didn't bother to reply. I unbolted the front doors and waved him out. I have to say I was apprehensive, not of him – I could easily have boxed his ears. No, it was Catherine. I had never seen her so angry.

The fellow cranked the car into life, tossed the handle into the footwell and got in after it. And then it came... and, I have to say, I jumped. The shot sent up the crows from the trees. I don't know where the bullet went but the car lurched forward, mounted the lawn, skidded around, finally righting itself on the drive to roar off in a cloud of smoke.

I ran upstairs to be met by Catherine on the landing, cradling the pistol like a child in the cruck of her arm.

"Is that loaded?" I demanded.

"Not now. Why do you ask?"

"You scared the life..."

"I'm sorry. One was very annoyed that's all."

"Don't ever do that again. Do you hear?"

Later, we were in the octagon room and Catherine was showing me how she fired from the open window. "I aimed at the old oak on the other side of the drive. He didn't see me."

I let it be: Catherine was neither stupid nor reckless. But the point of it was: we were two women alone in a mansion. Who was he? A conman? Criminal? Here, on our Remembrance Sunday, we invited him into our house and we didn't know a thing about him. How disgraceful! Did the man have no shame? Of course he did not and I felt that shiver down my spine again.

Catherine was still staring from the window. "You can see everything from up here. Right through the gates as far as the village and beyond. I've never given that much thought before. One doesn't, you know. Living all our lives here makes us part of the place. We take it for granted then along comes someone who..." her shoulders sagged. "Oh, Ellen, I've just done something I never ever expected to do again."

"But you didn't fire at him."

She turned to me. "No, but why today?"

We both fell silent. The darkening November afternoon was quietly slipping away.

"I wonder," she said, "He can't of known about my father and any connection with Germany, can he?"

"Catherine, does it matter now?"

"I suppose not."

"I think it more important who prowls around Maybury without our knowing."

"Oh, really, Ellen, are you trying to scare me?"

Next morning I cycled into the village and you can imagine my surprise at seeing the red sports car parked outside the police station. Of course I had to stop. Sergeant Jones saw me and came out.

"I know this car," I said. "We came across it at the house yesterday."

The sergeant stiffened. "Is that so?"

"The driver was a slick-tongued sort, claiming all manner of connections with the family."

"Well, the car was stolen. So since you're here, Miss Macpherson, it'd be useful if I could ask a question or two. If you've a minute, that is."

At his desk, Sergeant Jones took his time. His scratchy pen got on my nerves and I was pleased when he put it down. "A good parade yesterday," he said, looking up. "Everyone did their bit. A special day, Miss Macpherson, everyone proud and serious, and thankful. Just as it should be. But this rogue showing up like that wasn't right. Not on Remembrance. I'd have felt his collar just for that."

"Do you know who he might have been?" I asked.

"No, but the car's from up north. The owner was tricked into handing over the keys. It was found run out of petrol by Farmer Roberts and he towed it here with his tractor. No sign of the thief, though." The sergeant scanned down his notes. "You say he was scared off by Her Ladyship's pistol. Did she threaten him?"

"She fired it."

His fingers moved to twirl his moustache. "Did she now."

"Yes. Only to scare him. She fired from the upstairs window into the trees opposite. You may as well know it all, Sergeant."

"Well, Her Ladyship is permitted to discharge her pistol on her property. She's licenced to do so. Nothing more to be said."

"I would be glad if nothing was said in the village."

"Lips are sealed, Miss Macpherson, lips are sealed."

35. Worrying Twists

My mother's request to spend Christmas with us was a salutary reminder of impending Winter. For me Maybury had so many beautiful memories of Christmases but the next one could not possibly be like any of those. Our three souls – assuming my mother did join us – could very easily be lost in a cold house. Which set my mind wondering: was there enough coal for the fires? Did the chimneys need sweeping? The nights were drawing in: had we sufficient lightbulbs? As for the expectations of my mother, the kitchen required some attention: a pipe was leaking under the sink and sometimes we heard electricity crackling in the kitchen light. I decided to call on Thomas Russell.

I thought I knew where he lived. I paused at the terrace of cottages as Catherine's words came to me: 'I don't know anything about the cottages'. I thought, nor do I. But hadn't I been here before? Hadn't I met Mrs Russell that day her husband got very angry at seeing Sergeant Jones? I opened the gate I thought was theirs' and knocked on the door. A male voice I didn't recognise came from within, demanding, "Come round the back." I did as requested to be greeted by a girl of about twelve.

"Is Mr Russell in? Could I speak to him please?"

Before the girl could answer the same voice called out, "Who is it?"

"Lady from the big house, Grandad."

I glimpsed a man behind her pulling up his braces before ducking out of sight. A smell of stale cider drifted out to me. I waited. The girl was still holding the door. "What is your name," I asked.

"Lizzie, Miss."

A thought came to me. "Is Tommy Russell your brother?"

"He's my cousin."

"But you live in the same house?"

Her gaze flickered away. "Some of the time."

I didn't enquire further as the grandfather called to the girl to open up the front room. I would rather not have entered but it would have been discourteous not to. Front rooms are kept for visitors. Fortunately, the cider smell had not penetrated here. There was a dining table and chairs, tablecloth with a glass vase, polished tile fireplace, neat net curtains. I remaining standing and when eventually my host appeared, he stared at me, I suspect he was annoyed or disappointed that I wasn't 'her Ladyship'. He waved Lizzie away.

"I came to see Mr Russell," I said. "Mr Russell the builder."

"He's out at work," came the reply accompanied by a rattle of false teeth. "What is it yer want?"

"Would you ask him to call at the house sometime..."

"About what?"

"Some work we require."

"What sort of work?"

"I will explain when he calls."

As Lizzie showed me out, I asked, "Is Mr Russell the builder your uncle?" She replied he was. "Do you go to school in the village?" She gave a slight nod. "And you like school?" To that there was no reply. I thanked her and left. I walked passed the school, the children were in the playground.

This all set me thinking on the way back about how vague we were regarding the Maybury estate. Tenants who didn't pay rent, grandfather Russell and the niece Lizzie who waited on him and wasn't at school. I couldn't get the girl out of my mind. I thought her pleasant and intelligent. I wondered what else lingered behind the net curtains and the stink of cider?

I was still deep in thought when I turned through the Maybury gates and caught sight of Catherine just ahead. I hailed her and ran to join her.

"You'll never guess," I began, "I met another Thomas Russell this morning. This time the grandfather. But an odd sort of household." Catherine's pace didn't slacken and I had to hurry to keep up. "You know how you come upon things you never expect. Well, there was old Mr Russell and his granddaughter. He's a drinker and the girl waits on him. I don't think she attends school very often. She shouldn't be there. It's a bad state of affairs."

Catherine stopped abruptly. "Ellen, what is the world coming to? What have I found out today about Maybury? A bad state of affairs. I've seen documents, letters I never knew existed. My father and..." she let out a long sigh. "Ellen, there's a room full of my family history. Some of it quite shocking. Frightening, even. My father and his lady-friends, lavishing money on visitors one would not wish to meet. Let us get home. I need to talk and clear my head."

Catherine had been to the county records office again to see more of the Shelham family history and was finding more of the unexpected. We sat at the kitchen table and she took out her notebook.

"I made a note of some of the letters I came across." She licked her finger to flick over the pages. "We were only children. Haven't we said before, adults never talk in the presence of children? Listen to this from my grandmother 'I am not happy about Catherine remaining at Maybury. I'm arranging for her to go to school in Switzerland.' Ellen, I was sent away to protect me. Can you believe that? Maybury was my home. What is a home supposed to be? A safe place for children. So secure nothing could ever happen. Then we have the vile business with our front door step, and there was the another letter from grandmama to your mother about dismissing the maid. Then another one, this time to Mr Prior informing him to expediate school fees in Swiss francs. Letter after letter. One referring to my father's gambling debts. Oh, yes..." she flicked through more pages. "There was even mention of that woman – yes, the one you and I already know of that he kept in London. Really, Ellen, this is all so shocking. My grandmama had me sent away to protect me, for God's sake! Can you believe it? In Maybury. We were children and knew nothing." The teacup was shaking in her hand.

Hearing all this pour out was upsetting; we both lived under the same roof, that we came from opposite station made no difference. Catherine took a deep breath, "Then I came across a letter still in its envelope, as if it was supposed to be hidden away. I unfolded it to see blazoned across the top: the German embassy in London, complete with eagle and swastika and dated 1936, stating that the Ambassador was pleased to receive his Lordship's invitation to visit Maybury."

It was as if we were fixed there staring at ourselves. What had we been through in the last five years? Catherine's face was stone. "I can forgive everything of him but not connections with the enemy." Her voice fell to a whisper. "It is as well he's dead."

36. Disaster!

Early December, and Christmas was well into our thoughts. My mother had been invited and she had accepted by return of post. By now we had organised our meals: I cooked on even dates and Catherine the odd dates. This worked well: dinner – or as Catherine insisted: luncheon – included dessert while breakfast and suppertime were simpler. I hoped my mother would be impressed.

However, even that routine was becoming a bore. I make no excuses: domestic work was never for us. I well remember the day when kitchen matters really did come to a head. It was evening, and Catherine was doing supper. I was coming downstairs when I heard the clang of saucepans and her scream of frustration. "I can stand this no longer. My hands are chapped, and the soup I had great hopes for, is still cold. Ellen, are you listening? Did you know the Belling isn't working?"

I arrived at the open kitchen door. "Have you switched on the light?"

"Oh don't be ridiculous! Of course I've switched on the light."

Our first Winter, cold nights and short days, but we had acquired a little God-send in the form of a Belling cooker. This was a left-over from the Polish presence and occupied the end of the kitchen table and so much more convenient than shovelling buckets of coal onto the huge kitchen range. The Belling connected to the electric light. Yes, I hear your gasp of astonishment but that was how it was as even mansions had to make do. The Maybury kitchen had two electric lights so with one light bulb removed, the Belling would be plugged in. All was well until that day when I wiggled the wire and there was this flash and a crash and everything went dark. Except for a small glow in the ceiling where the light once hung, a glow that got bigger and quickly flickered into flame.

I grabbed the washing bowl from the sink and flung the contents at the ceiling but to little effect. Catherine shot outside to return with a stirrup pump and bucket. We could barely see but we knew what to do. Of course we knew what to do... we were girls of the Blitz, weren't we! Soon water was everywhere but the fire was out.

"The lights are fused."

"Where's the fuse board?"

"Is that it next to the bell board?"

"In the corridor?"

"Get a chair."

"Get a torch."

"Hold it still!"

"Watch that lever... the red one!"

A loud clunk and I breathed again.

Catherine got another chair and together we poked into the cobweb of wires that when working, brought light to Maybury. From then it was a matter of pulling out each lump of white porcelain until we came across the one with burn marks and swap it with another.

We were pretty pleased with ourselves. There was a mess, but the hole in the ceiling where the light once hung was inspected, damaged wiring revealed and folded safely aside.

"Who's going to switch on?"

"I think it should be you."

"No, I'll look up at the hole while you do it."

Clunk, and we had light again.

Supper was a meagre affair but a bottle of whisky eased our minds as we sat to mull over what had been a jolly close shave.

"We must employ a kitchen maid," said Catherine.

"No maids," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"No maids," I repeated. "I was the last maid at Maybury. The war's over, the world's a different place. There will be no more maids."

"Oh this is ridiculous!"

"No it isn't. We employ... well, a person to... to sort of look after things in the kitchen."

"A maid."

I'm afraid my socialist determination foundered on a name. Now we'd call it a job description but in 1945 that notion had yet to come about. We were sitting in the kitchen, feet propped near the dying embers of the range. Catherine chuckled into her glass. "No maids, no ladies, almost no mansion."

Next morning I visited Thomas Russell to request he appraise the kitchen situation. He looked up at the ceiling and shook his head which I have to say, annoyed me. "Mr Russell, we saved this great house from burning down."

"I'll grant you that. Most would have just run out the door." He went to get tools from the sidecar and we left him to it.

"We need to talk, you and I," said Catherine. "I insist, I am tired of domestic work."

Of course, it was not unexpected. The truth was we both felt the same. The kitchen had become a place of discord. Even my upbringing did not include the kitchen and our army service had definitely elevated us higher. But we'd managed. Now, though, change was inevitable. Catherine, after some thought, said, "I will seek advice."

Mr Russell came to find me upstairs in my octagon office. "The job's done," he announced. "Ceiling's patched, light put back and..." he wagged a finger at me, "I've wired you an electric point for that cooker so no more plugging into the lights."

"I'll thank you not to point your finger at me, Mr Russell."

He grinned. "Blame the Poles. They plugged into the light and when the fuse kept blowing they put in a bigger one. Only a matter of time before the wiring gave up and – spitzzz. But take m'hat off to you and herself because most wouldn't have had a clue."

37. Christmas 1945 – my mother arrives

Everything was ready for my mother's arrival. I chose the room next to mine for her so she could use our bathroom. Catherine and I were quite casual about our use of the bathroom, the doors from our rooms were never locked, we simply banged or called out before barging in. Now, though, we had to be mindful of our visitor.

I cleaned everywhere. I was scared to death lest something be amiss. It was then that Catherine mentioned that she had arranged a domestic help. To be frank, I was too occupied to pay much attention but it seems it was done with Mrs Roberts' help for it was the eldest daughter who was engaged. I could have been piqued: it was never discussed and I have to say the suddenness caused me some disquiet: I thought the girl a chip off the old Roberts' block but Catherine said simply, "Like the rest of the family: willing, reliable, and gets on with it." But as I say, I was otherwise occupied.

I decided to collect my mother from the station in the Alvis. As the car was rarely used, petrol being on coupons, I gave it a look over the day before and was surprised to see it had been polished, the maroon paint really shone. The garage once housed all the Maybury cars and the keys were always kept in the small office there. Everywhere seemed in good order and I never gave it another thought.

Next day, in my new trouser suit and coat, hat and gloves, I was determined to make a good impression. I set off across the courtyard to the garage only to find the doors already open and the Alvis gone. At that moment Catherine called from the kitchen door, "The lady's car awaits at the front."

I retraced my steps. "I was driving myself..."

Catherine leaned against the door and those eyelashes fluttered. "What can one say: ones very own chauffeur for the day."

I hurried through the house to find young John Roberts, chauffeur's cap at a jaunty angle, holding the car door open.

"John, what is this? How do you know I'm going into town?"

"Mom said as you were, and I should drive you because it's Mrs Macpherson you're to collect." There was even a folded rug on the seat by me.

"Yes, but... Oh it doesn't matter!" I got into the car. As we set off down the drive I saw his grin in the mirror and said, "I can drive, you know. I've driven all sorts: ambulances, jeeps, lorries. Everything."

"Yes, Miss, but this is the Alvis," and the grin grew wider.

The train was late of course. My mother emerged from a bustling throng of travellers, puffing with exertion and dragging a large case and bulging bag. I hailed a porter who took charge while we gave each other the sort of reserved embrace one did in those days at railway stations. "I hardly recognised you," she said, standing back. "Trousers now, is it? Well, they flatter you, no doubt of that." She wore a regular navy mac and hat that despite the large hatpin, couldn't quite contain the bun of grey hair.

John showed us into the car and I offered the rug for her knees but she declined.

"Why are we in one of the Earl's cars?" she asked.

"Because the Earl isn't here now." I saw her frown. "Mother, it is how I described in my letters: times have changed and so has Maybury. Catherine and I run the estate now." That prompted the inevitable discussion: about ourselves,

how we were managing, the running of the house. Before we had even arrived at Maybury gates she had managed to ask with a wry sort of smile: "Dare I ask if there's a young man?"

"Oh for goodness sake, Mother..." I cast a hurried glance at John in the mirror but he was busy negotiating a pothole in the drive. I said, "Everything is all right, really it is. Oh one thing... don't be surprised when Catherine announces she prefers to be addressed as Catherine – no m'lady or ladyship and whatever you do, don't curtsy."

John carried the luggage upstairs and we followed. "These are our rooms," I said. "Mine is here next to yours, Catherine's along the corridor and..."

"But these were guest rooms," my mother interrupted. The late king slept here." She looked about her. "Oh how things are changed."

However, she seemed pleased enough, touching the neatly folded towels and noting the full coal scuttle. "Come here," she said, "I haven't given my daughter a proper hug and kiss."

"Even though there's no boyfriend?"

She pulled me to her. "I was joking."

Catherine had put a tray of tea and biscuits on the kitchen table when I got downstairs. We waited for my mother to join us. A light knock came on the door and Catherine jumped to her feet. "Mrs Macpherson, how wonderful to see you again! How was your journey? Has Ellen seen to everything? Now, please, do tell us how you are." I had to smile. For once, my mother was overwhelmed. But that's Catherine.

Later, I took my mother on a tour of the house. I was not at all certain how this might go, the house being so different now. We walked through to the Hall and stood in silence at the Grand Staircase. She gazed about. I wondered: was that decree about no noise in the Hall still present in her mind? She placed a hand on the bannister, rubbed a finger over the scuffs there. I said, "We're slowly getting things back as they were."

"To think," she said, "The only time servants were allowed on this stair was when it was polished."

"Yes," I replied, "I remember being one. Let's go up and I'll show you my office."

She followed slowly, looking around, taking everything in. At the octogen room I waited for her. Her eyes went wide. "His Lordship's study..."

I shrugged. "Not now. When we arrived there was a bunk and an army desk in here, and piles of military junk, including a dartboard."

"Now nothing," she said.

"Well, not quite," I replied.

"And you call it your office."

"Catherine uses her room."

"So you have His Lordship's private study. Why not her Ladyship?"

"Mother, it's how we decided."

She crossed to window and looked out. "Is this how things are now?"

"Maybury is our home. We make the best of it."

She turned to me. "How do you manage?"

"Well, we get along..."

"No, dear, that's not what I mean."

"But I explained in my letters." Her face stiffened and it was as if I was a child again, awaiting certain admonishment. "I know what you mean," I said. "You see me dressed like this, living here – able to invite you here for Christmas, and you wonder. But it's the legacy that makes it possible."

"I'm sorry," she said quickly, "I'm prying and that's wrong of me."

"You're thinking that living on Catherine's legacy must mean..."

"Ellen, I should not have asked."

"We don't share anything else. We're not like that. We don't share anything else but money..." a sudden fit of coughing caught me and she put a hand on my arm. We sat together on the window seat. "And a bathroom and kitchen," I continued. "And the rest of this great house. But we don't share anything else. Oh no. We're close... we've always been close but not like that. I need my space and she needs hers. I was forever putting her bed back together when I was her maid. Not now. Not anymore."

"Oh you silly girl!" she said. "It's nothing to do with how you are with Catherine. I've known you two for long enough. You're a grown woman now and so is she. Now come here." That was the moment, I suppose, all tension gave way and I burst into tears. She pressed my face to her shoulder. "Why are you crying?" she said. "I'm proud of you. All you've come through and done. Good looking girl like you, why are you crying? Of course I'm proud of you. This isn't about how you live."

I felt her relax and looked up. "What then?"

"Well, you must realise the position you're in."

"What position is that?"

She sighed. "I know, I have only just arrived and having words isn't a very good start but please hear me out and then we can relax and enjoy our Christmas together."

"It's not the way you think it is."

"Ellen, please," she retorted. "None of that is my concern and I will hear no more of it. Now listen, if you will. When Maybury closed it was like the end of the world. Nothing had ever happened like that before. Our whole world was in this house. Family and servants. But in that lies the difference. We are not family. They are not us. When they're gone there is nothing. Do you understand?" Once again I felt the gentle motherliness of her, the teasing fingers in my hair. "Oh my darling," she murmured. "When the people are gone the house is nothing. It's how it is. When I saw Mr Prior lock the doors and drive away, I knew that was the end. No more wages, no longer my little room with my bed, no meals. Nothing. We all walked away with whatever we could carry. Yes, Lady Eleanor gave us gifts – and special they were too: memories of our lives here – but nothing of consequence. It is like that for you." There in the comforting circle of her arms, it was as if years hadn't happened and I was a child again – cradled, caressed, cosseted, corrected. "You are not family," she went on. "The divide will always be there. It can never be crossed. You were born on one side, Catherine on the other. What she provides is hers to give. If she is not here there is nothing."

"But the legacy is for us..."

"No. It is for Maybury and Catherine is the means. She is family. I know because I am on the other side too. We must all know our place. Now, I've said what I want and I'm going to unpack." I mumbled an offer to help but she smiled and said, "No, darling, best I do it myself."

I found Catherine in the kitchen and she noticed my state. "What is it?" she asked. "Is anything wrong?"

I shrugged, a desire to be out in the fresh air came over me. Without a word, I went straight to the door. She called after me, "It's beginning to snow. Ellen, for goodness sake put on a coat." But just then I was in no mood for anything. I walked, got cold, and hid behind the stables. Of course when I went back she wanted to know what it was about.

"I had words with my mother," I said.

"Oh dear. Dare I ask why?"

"I mistakenly assumed something. I assumed she was asking about us. You know..."

"No, I don't."

"How we are here. You and me. I jumped down her throat because I assumed she thought we lived together."

"Well, don't we?"

"Not like man and woman."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Catherine, did anyone ever make a pass at you in the army?"

"Yes of course but..."

"Was it a woman?"

Her eyes went wide. "Ellen!"

I took a deep breath. "We both had to put up with drunken men and roaming hands. That was army life. But I had a demob medical and it was carried out by an ATS major. I thought, so what: a few questions about where I'd served, injuries, infections, and so on. But she wanted to know more, much more: where I was going. When I said I'd be returning home, she asked, 'Oh, where is that?' 'Maybury,' I said. 'Alone?' 'No, I'll be with my friend, my companion I grew up with.' Her face changed. I still see her glaring at me, narrowed eyes running over me. 'Then I won't ask you,' she said. 'Put on your clothes, you can go.' It sank in when the orderly said, 'That one's looking for a lover to take to bed and she fancied you.' I was told demob medicals are only done if there are wounds or infection on your record. By then I had neither so it seems this officer was simply... well, you can imagine my embarrassment. It was like a punch in the face. Did you ever have a medical like that?"

Catherine turned away. "Really, Ellen..."

"That's right, we don't talk about those sort of things, do we? And I jumped at my poor mother because I thought she was asking about how you and I live here. Does it matter? You know and I know how we are together." I was staring at her back, she was facing the still cluttered sink. "Yes, we'd better do the washing up," I said. "If Mother comes in she'll think we're not managing."

"You are upset, aren't you," said Catherine, running the tap.

"Yes. One misunderstanding after another. An officer acting completely out of order. I was furious. The insinuation... oh God, yes, I can say now how I've longed for five whole years to be back here with you. And yes, for us to have hugs again and, yes, be naked together over our bath, and laugh and make fun of our nonsense and silliness. But never that other,"

"No, never that other," she replied softly. "We were together from the very beginning. For me that's perfectly normal. Surely it is for you. Tell, me, do you still have my letters?"

"Of course."

"I have yours too," she said. "We hardly ever mentioned Maybury, though."

"How could we? I would write letters for lads on stretchers. Didn't matter who or what uniform they wore, for me it was writing someone else's longings, not mine."

"You should have punched that officer."

"And risk court martial just before demob?"

"Better than her bed, don't you think?" That was showing-off, of course. Her cheeks were beginning to colour. I rarely saw Catherine blush and now I couldn't stop myself. "Oh yes," I said. "And fond of you as I am, I could never share a room with you and certainly not a bed. You're far too wriggly and untidy..." I grinned and ducked, just managing to dodge the swinging sodden dishcloth.

38. New Revelations

My mother confronted me in the kitchen corridor, red-faced. "I cannot believe it," she began. "Mrs Roberts has this minute waltzed into the kitchen with a loud 'good morning', plonked the laundry basket and groceries on the table, and helped herself to money from the tin on the mantelpiece."

"Yes," I replied, "It's an arrangement we have."

"Is it, indeed. Well, I was about to start the mince pies and then, would you believe, her daughter appears, taking off her coat and rolling up her sleeves."

"That's Bunty, the kitchen help. She'll be preparing lunch."

My mother pulled the door to behind her and dropped her voice. "Does everyone do this? Just appear and do whatever they want, take whatever they please?"

It was one of the many such arrangements my mother found confusing that first post-war Christmas at Maybury. Yet for all that, Catherine and I were determined to have a real traditional Christmas, the sort that Maybury would expect. So important, we thought, so very important, despite all the difficulties, shortages and so on. And then, as if to be part of that Christmas, the local choir invited itself to sing carols on Christmas Eve and for which they would expect a warm fire, the mince pies Mom was preparing, and sherry.

"Oh, Mom..." I said seeing her draw herself up.

"But of course," she went on. "I must remember that I'm a guest here now."

I dodged the matter by suggesting we go outside to collect firewood and fill the coal scuttles.

Sun caught our faces as we stepped into the courtyard but frost still lurked in the shadows. I picked up my pair of old mittens in the woodstore. Next the axe. Mom looked horrified. "You're not using that, are you?"

I grinned and stood a sturdy oak log on the floor and set another smaller one on that. "Stand back," I said, rubbing my hands together before gripped the axe and raising it. The log parted easily, as did the next and the next, soon we had a good enough pile. "Warm work for a cold day," I said returning the axe to its place and picking up the shovel. "Coal now..."

I half expected to be reminded that this was not woman's work. Maybe my know-it-all grin forestalled any such the remark. I did not expect what came next. "We had German prisoners doing this sort of thing," said Mom. "There was camp nearby. They came into town to do different jobs. We didn't have anything to do with them, though. After all, they were the enemy."

That made me think. I'd come across this before: folk who referred to POWs as 'the enemy' were those who had spent the war at home. The ones who'd served rarely did. For Catherine and me the enemy ceased to exist the minute the war was over.

I suggested that Mom may like to see more of the house. "Some of the rooms remained locked the whole time. We found furniture under dust sheets, pictures and ornaments tucked away out of sight."

"Yes," she replied, "A lot was done by me and Sykes, the last of the footmen. The army was already arriving and we had to hurry."

"Well, I wonder if you'll remember this," I said, unlocking another door.

"Oh, bless my soul... His Lordship's desk."

I opened the desk to reveal the writing paper and His Lordship's fountain pen. "We also found letters. Intimate letters. Did you know His Lordship had an affair? Catherine has taken the letters. She said she'd burn them but I don't think she has."

"Ellen, this is not how we should be talking." I looked at her in surprise. "No, dear, some things are not for us to know."

"But we do know," I said.

"Yes," she replied, "And you'll say that is how it is now, and no doubt it is and that I'll get used to it. But you must realise all of this was my way of life."

"The Maybury life," I said. "Of course I realise. It was once mine too and now mine again but different. Nothing can ever be the same." I squeezed her hand. "Come let me show you something less upsetting."

I took her to what Catherine and I now call the 'wardrobe' room, where all the countess's clothes had been put. "We help ourselves," I said. "Not everything. Some of these are just too luxurious. I wouldn't feel right in a mink coat."

My mother ran her hand between the hangers. "Her Ladyship knew how to dress. Oh my, she did. And Lady Catherine is the same size. But how do you manage?" She lifted a dress out and held it against me. "Mmm... yes." She nodded approvingly. "But you were so much alike from children."

"And there's enough to choose from," I said. "We're both very grateful."

Mom continued her inspection. "Oh, yes, I remember the mink, how it shone, it was so pale. My oh my... and more: blouses, evening wear, silks, chiffon. And she left it all here because she was in such a hurry to go. His Lordship laid to rest, what money there was she stuffed into her case. Walked out and her only daughter not yet of age. But we mustn't speak ill of them, no that won't do." Nonetheless, it seemed this was a trigger. "The war was upon us," she went on, "Many gone to join up. In the end only a few of us were left: me, Mr Prior, a couple of maids and one elderly footman. Such ruin, and how sad to see. But there it is and I've said enough."

So typical. Nothing must mar the name: the all-providing family. I gazed at clothes I was once in awe of, now there to be picked over, chosen, discarded. "But there is more," I said. "Catherine has been going through documents at County Hall. So much she never knew. Letters, and so on. Some from Lady Eleanor to you."

"Well, no doubt there are. But I say to you, my girl: mind what you know and mind what you speak of. Tongues wag too easily."

39. A Visit to Church - More Revelations

Mom wanted to visit the church and asked me to go with her. Christmas was now getting close and I would rather have declined but there was something in her voice. "There're things I want you to know," she said. "You're of age now and I think it's time." I was tempted to ask: why the church? Nonetheless, we donned hats, scarves, coats, gloves and boots because there'd been snow overnight.

I wondered, were there to be more revelations? A daughter didn't question because it was how we were brought up but I was curious and a touch uneasy. Little was said all the way through the village. Mom led the way up to the lychgate and into the graveyard, right to the far end and the low wall that bounded the churchyard with snow-covered fields beyond, and there she stopped, a mite breathless.

"I want you to look for a stone," she said. "Not a large one, not fancy." She kicked snow from the long grass. I did likewise. "It's somewhere here," she said. "Oh this is so overgrown. It is too bad."

But together we managed to clear a space and I still had no idea what it was about until I saw the name, "Paul Macpherson, aged 8." Mom took a step back and brushed her hand across her face. "Your brother," she said.

Speechless, I stared at her filling eyes. I stared at the stone, leaning awkwardly. Seeing this, and my dear Mom so emotional, all I could do was put my arm around her. "Yes, that's right," she said. "Your brother. He died before you were born. Just before you were born. So sad, so very, very sad. How everything changed."

A sharp flurry of snow whipped across our faces. At last I found my voice. "Let's go inside," and I steered her towards the church.

Mom held back. "No, we can't..."

"We'll be all right," I said. "Come on." We reached the porch and I nudged open the door. Our sudden noise in that great space bounced back and Mom tugged at my arm. "We mustn't talk in church. It's not right."

"Mom, what isn't right?"

"It's the Lord's house."

"But there's nothing bad we're going to say, is there?"

"Of course not."

"Then I'm sure He won't mind."

We sat in the nearest pew under dim light of stained glass. "We're all right, Mom," I said, "We won't make a noise."

"I'm sorry to upset you like this," she said.

I couldn't immediately reply. Did I need to know about a long-dead brother? And for what reason? My fingers stroked hers in soft leather gloves. Her face was lined with concern.

"Do you forgive me," she asked.

"What is there to forgive?"

"For not telling you before." Her eyes suddenly filled. "It was why your father left me."

I could not help but wonder now. What had any of this to do with me? A father I never knew and now a brother I never knew. I said as gently as I could, "Mom, why are you telling me these things? I mean... I'm sorry for you but..." I faltered as the image of a small boy in my mother's arms suddenly struck me.

"It's your family," she said. "I have to tell you about your family. Don't you want to know?"

"Mom, you're my family. You're the whole of my family. I don't have any other."

"You would not be here if it wasn't for your father."

"I know that."

"But you're coming sent him away. He grieved for his son and you were a girl. You meant nothing to him..." and her voice faded to nothing.

I suppose, having no father put me in similar position to Catherine because her father ignored her. Despite the difference in our station, that's how we came to be close. Had the brother I never knew, lived, I would have had a father as well. But what's to be gained by going over what might have been?

"It must be very difficult for you," she said, "Trying to understand all this. I'm so sorry."

"Mother, why are you sorry? All this is past. The war finished it. The war was a bad time but I'm not sorry for what it did for me. I came back and Catherine came back and we're better people for it. We have Maybury and we can invite you to spend Christmas with us. No, those six years shut the past away and I don't have to worry about it."

With arms around each other we were close and that was good. To feel her closeness, just as I had only days before when she had reproached me over a silly misunderstanding and I'd burst into tears. No tears now. I felt strong for her. "You're my Mom," I said softly. "Your my family," and I gently kissed her cheek.

The church clock chimed the hour. "We should go," I said. "It will be getting dark soon."

Outside, Mom went once more to where Paul rested. I waited for her, the snow was falling steadily. "I'm sorry I can't feel anything," I said when she returned. "But I'll look after the grave."

She slipped her arm through mine. "Thank you, dear. I know you will." And now it seemed a weight was lifted from her. "Let's go back along the path to the house," she said, walking ahead until she came to a small iron gate overgrown with ivy and bramble. She shook the gate but it was stuck fast. "Oh dear, I used to love this path. On Sunday mornings we would walk to church listening to the bells getting louder and louder until we stepped through this gate and they'd be deafening. Then we'd form a line just here and wait for the family to arrive in the cars and follow on into church. But now everything is changed. Such a shame."

Was it a shame that felt nothing for a small body in cold earth over there? We paused that dark December day but only for as long the wind would allow.

At the lychgate and I was about to lift the latch when it suddenly swung open.

"Mr Watkinson," I said, stepping back.

He glanced quickly at Mom.

"My mother," I said. "Mother, this is the Reverend Watkinson."

He swept off his hat and pressed it to his chest. "Here for Christmas, I presume?" he said jauntily.

"My mother was housekeeper at Maybury for many years," I said.

"Of course," he replied. "I'm sure you will be welcome, Mrs Macpherson. A steadying influence over these young ladies. I hope to welcome you at our services..." his gaze settled on me. "Oh yes, I do hope so." With that he replaced the hat and hurried off toward the church.

Mom stared after him. "Well I never," she said. "Is your vicar always like that?"

"Yes, quite often."

"The way he looked at you, you might have had an angel sitting on your shoulder."

"Oh really, Mother..."

"You can't fool me, my girl. And such a nice looking man."

"He hopes to save me."

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"Mother, the snow's coming on. We should get back." That and the fading light demanded we concentrate on our way rather than talking. We arrived at Maybury to be greeted by a concerned Catherine. "Mrs Macpherson, let me take your coat. My, what weather for you to be out in." She turned a couple of kitchen chairs to face the range and prodded the fire into life.

"I think I'll go upstairs and get under my eiderdown," said my mother.

"Mom, are you all right?" I asked.

"Yes thank you, dear, but I'll be more comfortable there."

I sat down and pulled off my boots to stretch my feet to the fire. Catherine filled the kettle and put it on the range. "I wondered about you," she said. "Both of you out in this. Where've you been?"

"The church," I replied.

"Church! Whatever for?"

"Mom wanted to show me something. She wanted to show me my brother's grave."

Catherine stared at me. "I didn't know..."

"Nor did I. He died before I was born."

"Oh, Ellen, I'm so sorry."

"Yes, it's sad."

"How did he... you know...?"

"I don't know anything except his name and that he was eight and he died just before I was born and that was why my father left. And now I feel exhausted. Has that kettle boiled?"

She spooned tea into the pot. "Why don't you take a tray to Mom's room and sit with her?"

Mom seemed comfortable; she had a good fire going and was resting on her bed with the eiderdown up to her chest. I put the tray on the table.

"Please tell me about Paul," I said.

"Of course, dear. Cuddle up close," and she lifted the eiderdown for me.

Later, I told Catherine everything. "And I knew nothing," I said. "I didn't know I had a brother and I thought my father died at sea. It seems my arrival meant nothing to him so he walked out. He was in the Navy in the First War and Mom assumes he went back to sea. But she doesn't know. No address. Poor Mom kept it all to herself and now, what's to be done? Nothing. Can you imagine that? You know, I never shed tears the whole time I was in the army. Now, with my Mom, they just come and I can't help it. Why? It must be because the war's left something inside me. Did you ever cry when you were in the army?"

Catherine shrugged. "Well, one wouldn't, of course. The army was a man's world."

40. Christmas and on into New Year

We think everything is ready. Yesterday, Christmas Eve, a rooster, dressed and ready for the oven was delivered by Mrs Roberts and Mom made mince pies.

I checked the boiler, we didn't want the drawing room we had adopted as our sitting room to suddenly go cold. Mr Russell had left instructions about how to maintain the boiler and I followed these assiduously.

Mom announced she would cook dinner for Christmas Day: Catherine and I did not disagree.

"What shall we wear," said Catherine. "A hint of humour? What do you say?"

Once more we raided the countess's wardrobe. Catherine found a clown suit, spotty trousers and blouse with bows. I chose a party dress adding a huge fur wrap as I was determined to keep warm.

It was how our first Christmas after our return to Maybury happened.

Our Christmas Dinner was excellent. Then we heard the King's address. That, for some reason left us feeling downcast although Mom remained quite perky, cheeks rosy, as she topped up her glass from the bottle of port. She went on to relate how the bottle would pass around the table. "His Lordship always chose the port with the butler and Christmas was always special," she said.

Catherine kicked off her shoes and tucked her legs underneath her. "That would be my grandfather," she murmured, "My father was never at Maybury for Christmas." That remark sort of stifled the conversation.

Mom was not to be put off. "Well, where was everyone last Christmas?" she asked brightly. "Come on, Ellen, where were you? Everyone knows where they were at Christmas, don't they?"

"I was in Italy," I said.

Mom looked at Catherine but received no response. I sensed disappointment, "Sorry, Mom, but it's how it was. Remembering isn't easy."

Suddenly Catherine swung herself off the sofa to find her shoes. "Please excuse me but there's a letter one must write."

"Oh dear," said Mom as the door closed, "Have I upset her? Something I've said?"

"I'm sure you haven't," I replied.

"I'd do anything but upset Lady Catherine, you know that."

"Mom, sometimes memories play tricks. Like a cloud that gets in the way. There'd be glimpses, you'd remember good things, silly things, people laughing, joking. But try to put it all together... well, that's not always easy."

"But surely we all remember Christmases."

I've no doubt my mother would remember them all. Or say she would, convincing herself.

"The thing is," I said, "We all remember differently. There's a lot not talked of."

Mom looked at me doubtfully. "Well some folk are very full about what they did. I know you've told me a little. Has Catherine said very much?"

Questions like this were inevitable and the more one tried to evade them the more they came. "Why don't you ask her?" I said.

"I can't do that. That would be rude."

"She's told me a little," I said. "Mostly in nightly ramblings, dreams, sometimes nightmares. We're used to it. We leave our bathroom doors open so we can listen

out for each other. I do know that Catherine, because she knew French and German, had a London posting to a section that helped our people in France. After D-Day she was driver and translator for a French general and they travelled through France and into Germany. She can still wake at night and pour something out. So, yes, I have learned a little. How once they found themselves behind enemy lines and surprised some German soldiers. She shot the first, the general the rest. I think that memory haunts. Sorry, Mom, it's how it is, things don't come easily. It's the same for both of us. Catherine still has the pistol she used."

But just then another sort of niggle came into my mind. "Shan't be long," I said and I too, left the room.

The way Catherine spoke about a letter she must write set a bell ringing in my head. I won't say I hurried up the stairs and along the corridor to our rooms, but I suppose I did. I knew immediately for her door was ajar and couldn't mistake cigarette smoke. I knocked and went in. She was seated at her desk, wrapped in an army greatcoat, smoke curling from a cigarette. She didn't speak but carried on writing.

I sat in the fireside chair. The fire had mostly gone out and it was cold. I wasn't sure what to do: ask about the letter or the cigarette? I waited a minute or two and got up to leave. Without so much as a glance, she said, "I'm poor company and it's Christmas."

"What happened? Was it something said?"

She paused, pen in hand. "I'm writing to the solicitor. I want to make a will. You are to be the only beneficiary. Don't worry, I'm not about to die or anything like that but six months ago I hadn't two pennies to rub together. Now, God knows how much there is but it is not going to a distant cousin one's never heard of. Oh damn..." ash from the cigarette fell onto the letter blotting the ink. She letter and cigarette into the hearth.

"You're upset," I said.

"Yes, I was looking forward to our first Christmas."

"Memories get in the way, don't they. We're back at home but..."

"Ellen, I am determined to write this letter and your mother is by herself."

I took the hint. On returning to the drawing room, Mom asked if everything was all right. "Catherine went for a smoke," I said.

"I thought she didn't smoke."

I shrugged. "I thought so too."

I emptied what was left in the coal scuttle onto the fire and sat down. "We had a little pact about smoking," I said. "At the beginning we both agreed not to take up the habit and we'd sign our letters with something like 'still no smoke' or a crossed-out smoke doodle. Only a game because we could never say what we really wanted in letters during the war. We both played it but I know Catherine fibbed. I know because more than once I smelled smoke on her letters." At which point Catherine entered the room.

"Yes, I'm sorry," she said. "It won't happen again," and she threw an unfinished packet of Gold Flake into the fire."

Mom got up. "I'm going to make a pot of tea. Ellen, pull the sofa closer to the fire and make room for Catherine."

When she returned we all sat in a line, Mom in the middle, sipping our tea and saying little. I looked at Catherine's clown costume peeping from under the

greatcoat and my girly-party dress that kept riding above my knees. I could have laughed. The intention that morning straight after church, for a simple Christmas of dressing up and frivolity had jaded. But Mom sensed the situation as a mother would. "Now look here, daughter. Yes, you as well, Catherine..."

"Can I call you mother?" said Catherine suddenly.

Mom glared at her. "Well, I don't know..." then caught Catherine's grin. "Oh very well, it's not how it should be but..." she looked at Her Ladyship and had to smile. "No, it's not how it should be but I suppose can I look upon you as I do my own. And, the pair of you, I won't have misery on Christmas Day. Whatever it is, be done with it. There's only us here, so let's be over it and done with bad thoughts. All right? Now, we sit close together and we think of good things and nice things because that is what Christmas is."

Boxing day was a surprise with bright Wintery sunshine. Catherine and I walked to the village to post her letter to the solicitor. I suggested we go up to the church. At the lychgate Catherine paused. "Is this to show me where Paul lies?"

"No, not really. But if you'd like to..." and so I led the way to the far side to the small leaning stone. Catherine brushed the snow from it and we paused there awhile. But it was the scene across the fields that took our attention, we clambered over the low wall and there was Maybury, golden in the afternoon light, standing firm and proud. Catherine said, "I'm determined about making a will, Ellen. It's for Maybury, of course. I'm sure you know what I mean."

She was standing, hands to her eyes studying the scene. "You should have brought your camera," she said. "The house looks so beautiful."

We hadn't made much of Christmas presents, there was so much else to think about. And Catherine hadn't been herself, then talk of a will, letter to the solicitor, had been dispiriting. But Mom gave me the camera that belonged to my father. Catherine examined it and said did we know there was a film still in it. Well, Mom didn't know and so Catherine suggested we take our photographs. "With the house behind us. A record of our first Christmas." I felt slightly uncomfortable, holding something that the father I never knew, once held. However, Catherine had no such misgivings. "We used cameras like this in the war. The film must be jolly old but come on..." and so we all trooped outside to have our photograph taken.

So that is what we did on Boxing Day.

Today we saw my mom off at the station. I hope she enjoyed Christmas with us. Yet I think she was relieved in a way to be done with two young women with their army ways, boots and trousers, lipstick, hang-ups, and growing long hair. It was bright Winter's day, Catherine drove the Alvis and ran out of petrol. This could have been so ignominious had it happened on Christmas Day on the way to church in our finery. Well, it did not. I noticed the petrol gauge and warned her, but Catherine being Catherine... Hey ho, we got home and only had to push the car across the courtyard and into the garage. Not easy because of the snow. Catherine slipped over, I laughed to which she made a ripe riposte best forgotten. We managed, dusted ourselves down, and it was then that she announced, "We can't go on like this. Look at it," she said, "Maybury, golden in the Winter sun. So firm and proud. But it can't go on like this. Two women in a this great house waiting for the next thing to stop working, freeze up or fall down. Maybury needs people, Ellen. Good heavens, we both know how it used to be, full and thriving with people."

And the National Trust is either unwilling or unable to do anything about it. We need people, Ellen. So we're going to shake things up, you and I. I am determined about making a will with you as sole beneficiary. I know the solicitor will object. He will find difficulties because that is what solicitors. Grandmama had a trust set up to look after her estate and to provide for me. But I'm sure dear granny wished that you be included as well. Why else were we allowed to grow up together. Your mother, bless her heart, believes it and so do we. Let us await the reply."

41. Snow

One morning I awoke to see snow. I parted the curtains and rubbed frost from the pane. It seemed the whole world was white. From horizon to horizon, over the Park and far beyond and I could not help but stare and marvel. The tiny fields, so still, tracery of trees as if drawn by a pen and I marvelled at it. Why, I can't say for the reality of course was sheer cold. I pulled on my dressing gown, turned up the collar, wriggled my feet as deep as they'd go into my slippers.

The postman had been. His bicycle had left its trail through the snow. A letter delivered? More than one? Had he delivered here all through the war? The mail must get through... must get through. Letters to, and letters from, men soon to return to stations and squadrons.

I sat on my bed and thought of all those precious letters. How I longed to receive letters from my mother, from Catherine. Flimsy army letter paper covered from top to bottom and side to side, everywhere written upon, not an inch left. Of nothing. Small talk. Little things, tiny scraps of nothing yet so precious. Nothing wasted, not one word wasted.

The bedroom was cold. The fire grate was cold because nothing was wasted. Coal was not for heating bedrooms, coal was for the kitchen. What nonsense to waste coal! Nothing wasted because everything was precious.

42. We Will Pay

I heard the fire engine's bell. The sound carried on the fresh Spring air. This was my usual Monday shopping in the village and I hurried the cycle out of the stable, dropped my handbag into the basket, and launched down the drive.

As I rounded the corner into High Street I was confronted by the raised hand of Sergeant Jones. "Sorry, Miss, road's closed."

Asked why he braced his policeman frame. "Been an explosion, I'm afraid. Can't let you through."

I thanked him and turned back. But curious now, I took the alley that wound its way up to come out opposite the church at the far end of High Street. There, I smelt smoke and quickly crossed over into the churchyard and, propping the cycle at the lychgate, hurried through to where I could see down into the back gardens of the cottages. There were firemen and hoses but, thankfully, it all seemed to be over, the smoke was no more than a wisp drifting from the back door of one of the cottages... except there was no back door. That was lying on the cabbage patch. And the kitchen window was gone. Suddenly, tiles came down off the roof with crash. Someone shouted, "Stand clear!" A figure ran across the garden. It was Thomas Russell. I called over the fence to him.

"Gas blast," he said coming over. "They're still damping down." A fireman came out with charred chair, another followed with a broom sweeping out water. "The old man's fault. He was in there."

I then realised that this was his father's cottage. "Is he all right?"

"Scorched and frit near to death. But no worse. They took him to the doctor's." He leaned wearily against the fence. "Know what he was up to? Built a liquor still in the cellar, that's what. Tapped into the gas with a hose, thought no one'd know, boiling up the stuff when the hose came off, then bang. Look at the place. What a mess!" The poor man's hands were shaking. "Nearly did for the whole row, dammed old fool and his drink. Could have killed himself. And who's going to pay to put it right, that's what I want to know?"

Without a second thought I said, "We will pay." But by now people were turning up to stare, he glared at them and, ignoring the firemen's warnings, went back into the cottage.

Cycling home, it caught up with me: blown out doors and windows, the stink of someone's home burning. I had to stop to collect myself. And by now I was worried to death that I'd gone too far by offering to pay for repairs. Goodness knows what Catherine was going to say.

As it happened, she thought a moment and said simply, "Well, could have been worse. We both know that, don't we?"

43. The Solicitor Calls

Spring was beginning to declare itself. The birds were telling everyone and the primroses along the woodland pathways positively grinned at me. And we still awaited a reply to Catherine's letter to the solicitor. When it eventually arrived, Mr Phipps was full of apologies for the belatedness but he had been very busy sorting out the affairs of the estate and could he possibly visit Maybury to see our circumstances and meet us in person?

We wondered how to go about receiving him. Should we appear as well-to-do ladies as we had when we met him in London or work-a-day girls in overalls and headscarves? So much depended on impression.

Catherine said, "Are we collecting him in the Alvis?"

"Does it have enough petrol?" I asked.

"Oh really, Ellen..."

To cut a long story short, we had another letter telling us that he would arrive on Wednesday by car.

We asked Bunty, our kitchen assistant (I still refused to call her a maid) to prepare a cold lunch and to leave it for us to serve ourselves as we had no idea when he would arrive. We wore our Winter best just in case.

We waited and waited. Two o'clock came and went. Little was said, we just huffed at each other, refusing to be agitated but of course we were. We expected to hear a car and both jumped to our feet on hearing the loud clanging of the doorbell.

The front doors are heavy, they don't open quickly and we both tugged at them but on looking out we saw no one. A car was there, a Bentley, large and smooth and black. I went out onto the portico steps but no sign until he stepped into view.

"Miss Macpherson, how nice to see you. I was admiring the house. Quite magnificent."

A tall and genial fellow in dark suit that was a little crumpled, no hat but shock of hair with hints of grey. One who served in the RAF as I remember. Catherine joined me.

"And Lady Shelham too..." oh yes, he was very genial.

"Mr Phipps, welcome to Maybury," she said.

"I do apologise for not arriving earlier but I wanted to see the village."

"Of course, of course..."

"A very pretty village," he went on, "I imagine little has changed over the years. I'm sure it will remain a most valuable asset."

"Do come in, Mr Phipps," I said directing him into the hall.

We followed him, Catherine mouthing something to me that I didn't catch. We crossed the hall where he paused to look about, to glance up the stairs to the large dome of stained glass, and said as if in total awe, "Splendid. Such accomplishment, such an asset."

"We're hoping to return the paintings to their places soon," said Catherine. "And much of the furniture is still put away. But we do what we're able."

"No matter. If I may say, you have done much to enliven an empty house with your presence, and one no doubt, that was heavily used by the military. But I'm sure the chaps who were nursed here would be grateful. Now it is for you to make yourselves comfortable. Shall we sit here?" He indicated the table and set his case on it. "Yes, an empty house but you make it a delightful one."

With that I asked if I should do lunch.

"That would be most welcome," he replied.

"Yes, Ellen, of course..." answered Catherine gathering herself after such admirations. "But we must hurry as I'm sure Mr Phipps has much to tell us and will be anxious to be on his way so let me help you."

"Oh, there is no hurry," he said. "I'm staying at the Blue Boar tonight."

But Catherine followed me, right on my heels to the kitchen. She pulled the kitchen door shut behind us. "Well, what on earth did you make of all that about the house?"

"I'm sure he was only being courteous."

"And that nonsense about the village?"

"Catherine, we have to hurry. Please go and join our guest."

"Well, don't be long."

"I'll be as quick as I can."

"Please make sure that you do."

I propelled her out of the kitchen with a sharp slap to the backside.

When I rejoined them they were sitting facing each other across the table. Catherine tapped the chair next to her, Mr Phipps waited for me to sit, and began.

"Firstly, Lady Shelham, your request to draw up a Will. I fully agree and my staff are already dealing."

"Oh..." said Catherine. "I thought there might be difficulty."

"Not at all. A Will is essential for every person of property. And this brings me to the substance of our meeting. I have a letter here, I'm sure you will recognise your grandmother's hand. It is from Lady Eleanor to my father who was then managing her affairs. Now, much as I admired my father he was of the old-school: he preferred to deal with men of property. In his own words, those of the fair sex were ill-equipped for such matters. However, for your grandmother he was full of praise. Note the letter date, this was Spring 1942, Lady Eleanor was in declining health, the war was at its height and you were on active service but she was determined to see the transfer of Maybury Park to The National Trust with due regard for yourselves."

He paused for a minute while Catherine read the letter. "You will also notice mention of Miss Macpherson: that you both must be permitted to live at Maybury Park for as long as you choose, and that the word 'both' is underlined. I'm sure that will be a relief to you. But we need not be concerned with that today."

He took up another document. "Let me summarise your grandmother's Will, Lady Shelham. She decreed that on your 25st birthday, soon to be upon us, 20th May, the whole of her estate will pass to you. All assets and property, including those in the City of Westminster, her estates in the North and those in Scotland. Everything passes to you. As I'm sure you are aware, there is considerable wealth involved. But, I wonder, have you considered what this entitlement will actually mean?" He sat back, looking hard at Catherine.

"How can one know?" she replied. "Where does one begin? I presume I can't sell any of it."

"You most certainly can sell it. Not that I would advise doing so."

"But surely much would depend upon the trustees."

"Lady Shelham, the trustees will cease to exist on your birthday. As does my authority to act on their behalf."

I saw her visibly pale yet her composure held. She said, "Then, Mr Phipps, there are decisions to be made. What do you suggest?"

He drew in a deep breath. "Would Her Ladyship consider engaging my firm to act on her behalf?"

"Yes."

"Would she also consider that a request be made to existing members of the trustee assemblage to act as her agents to those properties they currently deal with?"

"Yes."

He made some notes in his daybook before announcing, "Then I think this a good juncture to take lunch!"

I jumped to my feet thankful for the release to the kitchen. I returned with a laden trolley to serve slices of cold meat with salad and buttered bread while Mr Phipps kindly drew the cork from a bottle. He raised his glass for a toast. "Maybury Park," he said, "And not forgetting Maybury. And, if I may say so, a most pleasant wine, Lady Shelham."

"Thank you, Mr Phipps. But tell me, why did you say Maybury Park and Maybury?"

"Ah yes, you are wondering... as did I until it became clear from my search of the records. I note in your correspondence that you use both Maybury and Maybury Park and do so, if I may say, indiscriminately. My searches made clear the distinction: Maybury refers to the village whereas Maybury Park is the house and estate."

"Oh..." said Catherine. "I'm sorry but I don't understand the significance."

He shrugged. "It became significant because Lady Eleanor looked upon her Maybury estate as one, that is, Park and village. However, the minutes of that final meeting in 1942 state that The National Trust did not want the village. The village, therefore, was left behind." He placed his knife and fork neatly on his plate, wiped his mouth, and sat back. "The village has been awaiting your return, Lady Shelham. On your birthday that delightful demesne of Maybury falls into your tenure."

Silence once more fell across the table.

The afternoon was taken up showing Mr Phipps around the house, then out in the Bentley to drive through the village. We stopped at the church. "My what a view!" he exclaimed. "And all within the holding of Her Ladyship!" He was quite animated, which in retrospect was understandable: the fellow had been successful in taking on the affairs of a very wealthy woman.

That evening, while in my bath, the bathroom door flew open and Catherine strode in, clutching a handful of papers. "Ellen, I find that one must collect rent."

The day had been long and arduous and by now I was in no mood to go back over any of it and could only think to say, "Oh dear."

She stood at the open door wearing the same old army greatcoat she'd worn most of Winter. "Is that all you have to say?"

I felt a draught across my wet shoulders. "Catherine, you're letting the cold in. And why are you wearing that awful coat?"

"Because of the cold. You said it yourself."

"Why not your nice Japanese dressing gown?"

"You said it smelt of mothballs."

"Oh for goodness sake..." I sank down in the suds.

She pushed the door to and sat opposite, the greatcoat clutched even tighter because she was ready for the bath and had nothing on underneath. "All this doesn't help," she said. "No not at all. I'm informed here that the rent must be collected from each house on a regular basis according to statute and an entry must be made

into the rent book of each house. Ellen, I will have to go round with the rent collector's satchel. There, what do you make of that?"

"Rubbish," I replied sinking lower.

"What do you mean: rubbish? Really, Ellen, I have to say..."

"Catherine, you employ someone. We employ a rent collector."

"Good Heavens, another person on the Maybury estate. We have two gardeners – one part time but a gardener none the less; a kitchen assistant we're not allowed to call a maid; a maintenance man who keeps the roof over our heads, and now someone to collect rent."

"And he'll be paid out of what he collects."

"Ellen, the village hasn't paid rent since war broke out."

"Then they've got off pretty lightly, haven't they? "

She came to lean her arms on the edge of the bath and said softly, "Doesn't all this conflict with your socialist beliefs? And when are you going to be done with this bath?"

"Not long, " I replied and sank still lower into the suds.

44. Lizzie

We were used to the postman showing up at breakfast time but that morning it was a noisy motorcycle. Catherine got up to look out of the kitchen window. "Oh, it's Mr Russell. We're not expecting him, are we?"

I went to unbolt the back door but before I could get it open I heard his agitated voice, "I need your help." I invited him in but he just stood there. "I don't know how to say any of this."

"Mr Russell, whatever is it?"

"It's my daughter, Lizzie. You've met her, haven't you?" He snatched the cap from his head to crush it in his huge hands. "Sorry to be a bother but you people are all I can turn to. It's my father, he's been... God help me, how to say this about my own father?"

Catherine joined me. We both stared blankly at the man.

"He's been touching her," he blurted out. "I have to get her out of the house. His mind's gone. I need her out of his way. My God, I do. Can you help me? There's nowhere she can go. I mean, can she come here? Will you take her in? There's nowhere else I can go."

One can imagine, we were dumbstruck. Eventually, we managed to persuade the man to come inside and sit down. I put a cup of tea before him and at last he calmed.

"M'dad's mind's gone. Been coming awhile. The drink's what done it. He was making spirit. Damned stuff he made! Turned his mind." He crushed the cap more as if clawing for support. "My own father getting is granddaughter to ... to ... Oh my God!" He slumped down on the table, knocking the cup from the saucer spilling the tea although he seemed not to notice. I grabbed a tea towel as Catherine tried to pacify him. "Mr Russell, steady now. What is this about your daughter?"

"It was my wife told me. She said the girl's frightened because of what he did and what he asked her to do. I said I didn't believe her. I didn't believe my own wife, Lord bless her. But she made me listen and I didn't want to. How right is that? My little girl and her own granddad telling her to do things that ain't right."

"What sort of things?" For a moment Catherine's question simply hung in the air.

"What sort of things," repeated the man. "How much has to be said? He came to her in her bath... Yes, her bath, I tell you, by the fire and... and... showed himself. Or would have done but for Angie catching him." His voice rose higher. "How much do I have to say about my own father? I need my daughter out of it, I tell you. I need your help?"

At last the sense of this dawned as I remembered meeting Mr Russell senior and his granddaughter and the house reeking of liquor. "But why us?" I said. "I mean, are there no relatives?"

"Yes, an aunt, Dad's sister but when I asked she said, 'The girl's lying. My brother would never do anything of the sort and never speak such dirty talk in this house again' and slammed the door. And before you ask, the village is poisoned as well. They say, nothing ever happens like that here. So I come begging."

I looked at Catherine, she at me. "I think we've heard enough," she said. "For all it's bizarre to say the least of it. Let us get this straight, Mr Russell, how long might this go on for?"

The man shrugged. "Until he's out of the house. Don't know. Can't say. Days, a week, fortnight maybe."

"What of her schooling?"

"She's fourteen and done with school."

"Why doesn't she continue?"

He rolled his eyes. "She has to earn her keep now."

"If she comes here, Mr Russell, it will be to work and study. Please understand that."

A look of utter relief seemed to flow over his face quickly followed by that shrewd Thomas Russell expression I'd come to know. He said as calmly as you like, "I'm sure you'll teach her. She's a bright girl. Knows her arithmetic and reading and writing. Quick learner. She'll work well."

"What has her mother to say about all this?" I asked.

He hesitated. "Angie's not her mother. Don't get me wrong, my wife treats her like her own but she's not." At that he rose to his feet. "Now I've said enough. It's for you to decide."

Catherine smacked the table. "Mr Russell, we will meet the girl before any decision is made. When shall that be?"

"Tonight. I'll bring her when she's had her tea."

You can imagine what went through our heads that day. All sorts of questions and very few answers. After all, who were we to understand any of this? But the fact was, it seemed Lizzie would arrive and how could we turn her away?

"Army training," said Catherine. "Think on one's feet. We've done it before, you and I."

I said, "Are you sure?"

"Of course. Why shouldn't I be?" She turned to put her coat on. "I will cycle down to the farm to see Mrs Roberts to arrange extra provisions. What will you do?"

"Prepare the room next to mine, the one my mother used over Christmas." I had already decided I wanted Lizzie nearby as the thought of a her wandering the corridors of Maybury in the middle of the night searching for a bathroom was not to be contemplated.

The room needed little doing to it, a dust round, shaking out the bedside mat, bedlinen and a towel. It didn't take long. Then I set off to meet Catherine. I went as far as the gate where the park gave way to the farm and fields, and sat down on the rock that marked the boundary. I hadn't to wait long before I caught sight of her. I got up and opened the gate.

"Hello," she said, "Why are you here?"

"I came to meet you. How was Mrs Roberts?"

She wheeled the bicycle through and we set off together. "You may well ask," she said. "I think that woman knows about the Russell household. Nothing was said, of course, and I was not about to enlighten her but I do have that feeling."

"Village whispers," I said.

"Ellen, this is beginning to worry me. I'm not sure we should be involved. Don't you feel the same?"

We had reached the bend in the drive where the path to the lake branched off. I said, "Come on, let's go to our special place in the Dingle. We need to sit and think."

We pushed through long grass and overhang of branches to find the great oak and the seat we'd dragged there last summer, and sat down. I noticed the swans, two of them in the reeds. I wondered if they would nest this year but Catherine was

not interested in swans. "Seriously, Ellen, how can we possibly be involved? What do we know about such things? Less than a year ago we were full of excitement and expectation, the war was over, we came through five years of not knowing if we would ever see each other and Maybury again, but we returned. We were the only ones, all that was left of the big Maybury family. We have one calamity after another but we managed. We still manage. That is until our solicitor calls and, suddenly, everything is turned upside down. I find myself owning property that I never knew of with tenants and rents to be collected, and before one can draw breath, we're asked – demanded, seems to me – to take on this girl Lizzie because of something so dreadful no one will talk about it. It's too much, Ellen. It really is too much." She was staring out over the lake but seeing nothing, hands pressed to her knees. "This place was our secret, Ellen. Our special place by the lake that we never told anyone about. Here was where we could just be ourselves away from the house and all its show and seriousness. But now the world is changed. What has the war done to us? Done to everyone? How much are we changed? I don't know, Ellen. The house is here. Maybury is here but what of us? We're the only ones now. We went away as children and came back adults and now we have to deal with this."

I placed my hand over hers. "Oh dear, you've got yourself into a state, haven't you?"

"Ellen, I don't like secrecy. Secrets get out and who knows where that may lead."

"Well, I don't think you need worry about Lizzie. I've met her and she seems a sensible girl."

"But what do we understand of this?"

"Oh come on, Catherine, I think we understand enough. We had unwelcome encounters while serving, didn't we?"

"Except this girl is a minor."

"And her family's dealing with it."

"And we provide succour. She's still a child, Ellen, and we will be responsible."

In the end we made our way back to the house little the wiser. At least we'd got some of it off our chests.

Lizzie arrived as expected, toward dark. Catherine went to the kitchen window the moment the motorcycle came round the corner into the courtyard. Mr Russell pushed his goggles up onto his cap but he did not dismount. Instead he waited, arms folded while his daughter stepped out, patted windblown hair back into place and smoothed creases from her dress.

I opened the door to welcome them but her father waved the girl forward, saying, "Go on then, and remember what I said: listen to what you're told and mind your manners. Then, over the noise of the revving motorcycle, a mere nod, and before either of us could reply he'd roared away leaving the girl clutching a bundle wrapped in a blanket. We knew Thomas Russell was inclined to be impetuous yet this was an abrupt start to Lizzie's time with us.

We welcomed her in, closed the door, and I caught her bright and open smile – only briefly but that, I think, said she was relieved to be with us. I do hope so.

Maybury must have appeared very strange and forbidding but I tried to explain as simply as possible. Nevertheless, I don't think she was hearing much of it as we made our way up the back-stairs and along the corridor. She was still clutching the bundle as I showed her the room. I suggested she put it down. She looked around wondering where: the counterpane on the single bed, chest of drawers, dressing

table, wardrobe, bedside table, rug on the floor. I said, "Pop it down on the bed. Do you want me to help you unpack?" It was secured by a cord and when she undid the knot it fell open to reveal a neatly folded jumper, slippers, a sliver of soap wrapped in a flannel, a towel, socks, nightie and underwear, hairbrush and toothbrush.

She turned to me and asked nervously, "Miss, what will I be doing here?"

"I can't say. But don't worry I'm sure we'll work it out together."

She looked down at her little pile of possessions. A flush of emotion came over me as I was reminded of my own leaving home. "You'll be all right," I said. "We all get along very well in this house. Now, let me show you where everything is. The bathroom is through this door... and through my room to the next... Come along, I'll show you. We don't lock doors, so you just come and go as you please. No one will mind." Was it the space? Everywhere big and heavy, dark panelling, high ceilings, ornate plasterwork, decorated tiles and porcelain, carved and polished wood with strange handles that did odd things but the girl just stood open-mouthed. "It's all right, Lizzie, there's only the three of us. Lady Catherine's room is through the next door. She does tend to rush in and out but you mustn't worry about that."

Back in Lizzie's room I noticed a book among her clothes on the bed. "Little Women. You like reading?"

"Oh yes," she replied suddenly animated. "I go with Angie to the library. I've nearly finished that one." Her smile came and I was seeing that bright face again. "I used to read to my nan."

"Your nan lived with you?"

"No, next door with grandad. But she died. Nan made my dress." She smoothed the flower-pattern down her front. "She made it big enough for me to grow into," and now she was laughing and with that all remaining shyness went. Once more I felt that pang as I was seeing myself at that age for just then it seemed not so long ago. I said, "Why don't I leave you to sort yourself out and we'll see you downstairs in the kitchen. Do you like cocoa?"

Catherine had a three cups and saucers on the table and a saucepan bubbling on the Belling. "Well, what do you make of her?" she asked, pouring out the cocoa.

I sat down. "I think her father was right: I'm sure she'll learn quickly and be very useful. But much depends on how long she stays. How much are we going to pay her?"

Catherine's eyes went wide. "Pay her? What on earth do you mean? She's here for her protection. As far as I can see, that's it."

"But if she works..."

"Will she? How can one be so sure?"

"Her father says she will and we must pay her."

"Oh really, Ellen, this is ridiculous. What can a fourteen-year-old do..."

"It is not ridiculous. I will find her work."

"I cannot agree..."

"I will pay her."

With that there came a light knock on the kitchen door and Lizzie came in. It was as if nothing was amiss, as if there was never argument. Catherine swept her with the most gracious smile, invited her to sit, and poured cocoa. "Well, Lizzie, how is your room? Is everything all right? And tell me, is Lizzie short for Elizabeth?"

Yes, I'm sure it must be, and I'm sure you prefer Elizabeth. May I call you Elizabeth?"

Lizzie looked from Catherine to me and of course, Catherine seeing us both stumped for words, fluttered her eyelashes and beamed the more. "I think names are very important," she said. "I will not have my name corrupted. Ellen has a very respectable name that will not corrupt but you and I, Elizabeth, must make sure we are addressed properly. Now in this house we use Christian names so we are Lady Catherine and Miss Ellen. However, outside and in the presence of others one will always observe etiquette so I will be Lady Shelham and Miss Ellen will be Miss Macpherson. I think that explains everything, doesn't it, Ellen?"

Later, when Lizzie had retired to bed, Catherine said quietly, "I think I like the girl. Yes, I think she may do well with us. But she should finish her education. It will be a shame if she does not so I will see her father about that. The college in town teaches book keeping and secretarial work, that sort of thing. We will see, Ellen. Oh yes, we will see."

45. Catherine Visits the Parish Office

Catherine's investigation into the family archives had wavered. She said that Winter was to blame but I think it had more to do with the fear of turning up something disagreeable. One can understand why: the discovery that the late earl, her father, had dubious connections with Germany before the war was troubling. But a letter from the solicitor advising her of her duties as landlord to much of the village prodded her into action if somewhat reluctantly. When I repeated my suggestion that someone be employed to collect rents, her reply was not as expected.

"Yes, of course," she said as if nothing to the contrary had ever been mentioned.

"So you agree?"

"Yes, but have you seen the rent ledger? It dates from the last century and is huge."

"Surely some of the properties have been sold off."

"Not many, I'm afraid. Of those remaining, occupiers must be called on and rent books squared."

"But you don't have to do it."

"Ellen, that is not the point. As landlord one has a duty to meet all these people."

"We'll do it together."

"That is not the point..."

"Of course it is."

Irritated, she clicked her tongue. "Now I think you're being ridiculous..." but seeing my grin she put her tongue out at me.

Of course it was quite right that she meet her tenants.

It was the morning after Lizzie's arrival that Catherine chose to go into the village "It will be better if I'm out of your way," she said. "I'm sure you will have something in mind for the girl. I hope to meet the parish clerk." She carefully adjusted her hat in front of the mirror. "Is that all right do you think?"

"Yes, but you've a tiny dab of lipstick on your..."

"Oh dear, can you..."

"Then please keep still."

The parish office was in a gaunt old house which before the war was the Men's Institute. During the war the building was used as the village food store in the event of invasion. In those days because the telephone was still a rarity, communicating with people required the posting of a letter or note delivered by hand. I noticed that Catherine put a notebook and pen into her shoulder bag. A few minutes later the Alvis hummed gently down the drive.

I knew that she was not comfortable about this landlord business. Her reluctance to discuss didn't help. So I left her to it. But, of course, I was anxious to know.

She parked outside the parish office. The door had an old-fashioned bell-pull and not being sure if it worked, she jotted a quick note addressed to the parish clerk, signed and folded it, and dropped it through the letter box. She had hardly reached the pavement when she heard a confident male voice call after her. "Lady Shelham. Lady Shelham, I do apologise, the bell sometimes fails to ring." She

turned to see a well-dressed individual coming towards her. "Hugh Stevens, clerk to the council." He extended a warm firm hand to take hers. "I am very pleased to meet you, Lady Shelham. I take it your enquiry is about the proposed cricket ground. I have a letter from the council already drafted." He stood to one side inviting her into the office.

That March day the parish office was barely warmed by the one-bar electric fire. Catherine kept her coat and gloves on and Mr Stevens moved the fire closer.

Catherine read the letter. "I don't know anything about a cricket ground but if the land in question is that space right at the heart of the village then I think it a splendid idea. I will write a reply this instant at the bottom of your letter." She took out her pen from the shoulder bag. "There it's done, Mr Stevens, why waste time when all are in agreement?" She handed him the letter and returned her pen the shoulder-bag.

Mr Stevens seemed rather taken aback. "Forgive me, Lady Shelham, the council was unsure who to approach, the ownership being unclear..."

"I own it, Mr Stevens, as it seems I own the whole village which is the subject of my visit today. You see, I must meet the tenants I am responsible to but I'm not sure who they are or where they live. I was hoping that you and the council might help."

"In what way, may I ask?"

"Could a meeting be arranged, do you think? Could an invitation be sent to all those in my properties so that one might meet them? To visit every house and cottage while commendable, would take an age. What do you think, Mr Stevens?"

"Well, I'm sure a meeting could be arranged."

"Good," said Catherine rising to her feet. "Now I am going to walk through the village to discover something of my property, put names to numbers as it were. Thank you for seeing me, Mr Stevens, it has been most helpful."

"Lady Shelham, would you be put out if I asked to accompany you? I have only recently arrived here and there is so much I don't know about the village. If I may, that is."

She smiled. "Of course, Mr Stevens."

He put on coat and hat and they set off together. What they saw seemed to make sense to him. He said, "Some of these properties are in need of work. See that roof, the guttering, windows and doors in need of paint. But others are looked after," and he nodded thoughtfully.

Catherine though was more confused. "I wonder, how much is for them to do."

"It is for the landlord to maintain his property."

For Catherine, the word 'his' elicited a stiffening of the shoulders. "Mr Stevens, may I ask your profession?"

"Surveyor. The war took me all over the country." His voice dropped, "War Department you understand, deferred service."

"Of course, I do understand."

"And yourself, Lady Shelham?"

"I served from the outbreak. Intelligence."

"Yes, of course."

"Then it was all over and I returned to Maybury. And there's the oddity, my home is owned by the National Trust but I own the village."

They walked further along High Street and the row of cottages that went right up to the churchyard. "I believe all these are in my charge, Mr Stevens. My, how many more are there?" As she spoke an elderly woman came out of one of the

cottages with a bucket of ash that she began to spread over the little garden. Seeing Catherine she put the bucket down.

"Good morning," said Catherine. The woman nodded self-consciously. "May I ask, is this your home?"

At that a man came out. "Aye it is," he said, standing arms folded.

"I'm the new landlord. Catherine Shelham. I'm most pleased to meet you."

"Aye."

"I'm just meeting people. You know, who's who, and who lives where."

The man turned to his wife. "Ask her when we're getting our bathroom." With that he went inside and closed the door. The woman came down the path to the gate, shaking her head. "Don't take no notice," she said. "He's just had his nap. So you're the new lady up at the big house." Her eyes narrowed into a smile. "Seen you about on your bicycle, oh yes I have. Times change, don't they."

Catherine tactfully ignored the remark. "Tell me," she said. "What is this about your bathroom?"

"Well, we ain't got one, have we."

"Oh, is that so..."

"Aye it is so. They got one next door."

"This side?"

"No, th' other."

"And who lives there?"

"No one."

"Oh."

"Been empty years."

"Really..."

"Yes. Son got killed in the war and they just upped and left. My husband says we should move in but I says t'ain't right to just move in, not like that. Sad to see, though. Just look at the garden."

"Of course..."

"Can't do that, just walk in."

"Is there a key, do you think?"

The woman shook her head. "Lord knows where they went. But they got a bathroom."

"Well thank you," said Catherine. "One of the things to be looked into. Bathrooms, of course. I'm very pleased to have met you."

Out of deference, Hugh Stevens had moved a few steps away. Catherine went to join him. "Did you hear that?" she asked.

"Only a little."

"They have no bathroom."

"A number don't."

She looked around. "How do you know?"

"Some of the cottages have an extension at the back."

"I never realised. Good heavens, it never occurred to me. You know, in Germany I came across villages that were better off."

I was getting ready to go out when I heard Catherine return, the familiar click of heels along the corridor. She swept passed my room and straight into hers. I waited for her to emerge, which she did via the bathroom.

"Would you believe," she said, "Many of the cottages don't have bathrooms. I met the new parish clerk – new to the village but most helpful. A surveyor by

profession. We walked along High Street. I stopped at a cottage and the person there told me in no uncertain terms that they had no bathroom. Ellen, I hadn't the courage to ask how they coped.

"They put a tin bath in front of the fire. Remember, Thomas Russell telling us about..."

"Yes, yes, of course I remember but... oh dear: I even forgot to ask the lady's name. I have to say, I so taken aback, Ellen, I really was." At last she paused to look at me, my coat and gloves. "Oh, are you going out?"

"Yes, into town on the bus. The bank and a few things."

A wry grin came. "Should I check your lipstick?," she said. "Are your stockings straight?"

"Oh come on, Catherine. So you learnt something about the village that surprised you..."

"One should know these things and I did not. I was embarrassed in front of a man."

"I'm sure he understood."

"How are you sure?"

"Oh for Goodness sake, Catherine! Now, is there anything you want from town?"

"One of those nice merengues from the teashop by the bank."

"Bad for your teeth,"

"Then cash a cheque for me, please." At last the grin widened and she reached up to tidy my collar but I stopped her. "Catherine, will you please listen, this is important. Lizzie is in the library. I left her with pencil and exercise book to begin the cataloguing. I told her to start at the lower shelves and the more popular titles. It's in quite a state so I don't know what she'll make of it but can you look in on her?"

"What about lunch? Or should I say dinner?"

"Yes, you're late. We've had ours. Yours is keeping warm. See you later and don't forget Lizzie."

When I got back Catherine was oddly excited. "Ellen, can you believe it: that girl was playing the piano. You know the old one in the small dining room used as a billet by the Poles. Not just playing but reading music. I heard this sound in the corridor – oh my she can play. I crept in and listened. Until she saw me and quickly closed the lid. I said don't stop but the poor girl was struck with guilt. She said it was the headmistress who taught her. Did you know she was musical?"

"No, I did not and I was hoping..."

"Well, she can play the piano. She had found some music and was actually playing it. Would you believe it, Ellen, the girl is very musical. She has talent. We must encourage her, don't you think?"

"Catherine, she is here to work and learn, not play the piano."

"Well, she's started the list you asked for." Catherine handed me the exercise book. "She's a neat writer, don't you think?"

"Yes, I can see she's very neat and maybe she is very musical but that isn't why she's here. I gave her a job to do..."

"Ellen, you're being unkind."

"No, I'm not. You doubted we'd get any work out of her."

"I didn't."

"Yes, you did. You said we'd be lucky if she did any work at all."

"Oh, this is ridiculous."

"Catherine, we have an obligation to her father and he expects her to work and we must see to it that she is properly instructed... and don't flutter your eyelashes at me just because you know I'm right."

"I didn't."

"Yes, you did..."

46. Catherine Arranges Lizzie's Education and I Meet Hugh Stevens

Whilst Lizzie's first week with us revealed an unexpected talent for music, setting her to work in the library where there was a piano was courting distraction. The task I would set for the day would be to list all the books on a particular shelf, authors, dates of publication, and a few words of description. And she was quite capable – she was a very bright girl; so much so that she might bury herself in one particular volume for the whole day or be so disinterested that she'd take to the piano. It might have been all rather exasperating but she was smart enough to know what was best for her and eventually knuckled down.

However, it was another incident that reminded us of the realities of life for ordinary folk. Breakfast time one morning Catherine and I were waiting for Lizzie in the kitchen and we were discussing her education when suddenly she burst in from the courtyard, carrying a bundle of damp linen.

"Ah, Lizzie," I said. "Come along, sit down... What is that you have?"

Her answer was almost a whisper. "My washing, Miss, but I can't find the washing line."

"Oh, Lizzie... we don't use one. I'm so sorry, didn't I say we have a laundry collection? And now it seems you've done it yourself. But I'm sure there was a line behind the stables when the army was here. Let's go and look."

And that is what we did. I found the line prop and let her peg out her few small things and see that all was blowing nicely – another reminder of inequality: villagers without bathrooms but plenty of pride, washing done in the backyard and everything pegged out properly on the line.

We all three sat down for our breakfast, napkins on laps, plate and cutlery, eggs in china eggcups, scent of fresh coffee. How privileged we were, Catherine and I, in this mansion.

Afterwards, Catherine took me aside. "I want to take Elizabeth to the college this morning to explore what may be available for the girl."

As soon as Catherine and Lizzie were gone I set to work on the rose beds in the front gardens. I had been itching to get on with this for a week or so, eager to take advantage of the first signs of Spring. I was no gardener, but those beds were so overgrown and I was quite determined to make an impression. I soon had the barrow full of weed and I was puffing with exertion and satisfied. I had just pulled off my headscarf and shaken out my hair when I heard a car coming up the drive. It came to a halt near the portico steps. I walked over as the driver's door opened to be greeted by a tall well-dressed – and I have to say –good looking man.

"Good morning," he said, "I was hoping to see Lady Shelham."

"I'm afraid she's not here. I'm Ellen Macpherson. Can I help?"

"Hugh Stevens..." he reached inside the car to take out a large envelope. "I'm sorry to just turn up like this."

"That's all right, Mr Stevens. Lady Shelham told me about meeting you. Would that be for her ladyship?" I indicated the package he was holding. "Shall I take it for her?"

"It requires explanation, I'm afraid."

"Well, as I'm about to make myself coffee, would you like to join me?"

"That is most kind of you."

"We have to go round to the courtyard, I'm afraid." I pushed my scarf into a pocket and took up the barrow, and we set off. "We come and go by the back door, not as the family once did but that's how things are now." I parked the barrow and pushed open the back door. "Please come in." I kicked off my boots and washed my hands. "We live in the kitchen, being by ourselves it is so much more convenient. Do sit down." But he was looking about him. I think the fellow was rather bemused by the kitchen space, range that once provided for everyone in that inclusive Maybury family, huge kitchen table but only two chairs.

"Just you and her ladyship," he said. "In this great house."

I thought the comment inclined to the presumptive and ignored it to concentrate on the percolator. I said, "Catherine tells me you're a surveyor."

"War department," he replied. "Travelled all over the country. I understand that you and her Ladyship served for the duration."

"Yes, we did" I replied sitting down facing him. "We joined London ambulance in 1940, stayed with that for a year and signed on, me for the Medical Corp while Catherine..." but he was not listening. He had intense blue eyes and I found myself caught by their flickering across my face. "I think her Ladyship was very pleased to meet the parish clerk," I said.

He suddenly looked down. "The war was not easy," he said. "Living day to day not daring to think about how it might end. Then it's all over and everyone's celebrating and the unthinkable happens. My wife was killed by an unexploded bomb that had gone undetected. She'd worked through it all in London. We planned to move out and... now there was nothing." He looked up, forcing an apologetic smile. "Forgive me," he said. "Sorry to unburden myself like that but..." He drew in a deep breath. "But it so happened that reading the paper one morning I came across an advert for clerk to the council of an unheard of village called Maybury and that is how I came to be here."

"I'm very, very sorry to hear of your loss, Mr Stevens."

"It's over, Miss Macpherson. Let us look forward not back."

The percolator finished at last and I poured out coffee. "I'm sure the village welcomed you."

"Do you not find it much changed since your return?" he asked, placing two lumps of sugar in his coffee.

"Of course I do, like everyone else."

"But you seem comfortable here."

"We make the best of things, Mr Stevens."

"And you manage the property as well." I didn't reply. "I see I'm taking your time, Miss Macpherson."

"I'm sure we'll meet again," I said.

"Thank you for the coffee." He drained his cup and got up.

"I will show you out from the front doors," I said. "As it once would have been but..." and I smiled a touch impishly. "There's no maid to hand you hat and gloves, I'm afraid, because those times have gone, Mr Stevens."

I conducted him through the house to the Hall and there he paused. "What a magnificent space, the staircase and that wonderful light." He was gripping the banister and staring up all around. "That ceiling plasterwork and glazing. Oh yes... quite magnificent. May I ask – and please I do not mean to pry but does the National Trust maintain the building? I ask because so many owners of fine properties are now experiencing difficulties." But I didn't have to answer because

he bounded up the stairs having noticed the family portraits that Catherine had put out around the landing ready to restore to their original positions. "Oh my..." he exclaimed and then on leaning closer to one of them: "Would this be Lady Shelham?"

"Catherine's mother. The countess."

"My, such a beautiful woman. And if I may say, so like her daughter." He returned down the stairs. "You know, when I first arrived in Maybury I would sometimes see a lady cycling through the village. However, it was at church one Sunday that I realised there was not one cyclist but two for both of you were seated in the family pew and each – if I may say – quite as charming as this portrait."

"We share a bicycle," I replied, half smiling,

"And you dress alike."

I didn't say that sometimes we shared clothes.

His blue eyes came to fix on me again. "Tell me, are you related?"

"No, we simply grew up here."

He nodded. "I do apologise, Miss Macpherson. I hope I have not transgressed or broken a moral code. But despite a determination never to look back I do sometimes find myself reminded that beauty does still exist."

"Mr Stevens, I am very sorry to hear of your loss."

"Please call me Hugh."

As I opened the front door for him I caught sight of the Alvis sweeping through the gates and into the drive. I waved and Catherine, on seeing Mr Stevens, brought the car to a halt at the steps. I collected Lizzie from the car, and did so thankfully as I was finding Mr Stevens' inquisitorial manner a touch tiresome.

Lizzie and I made our way to the library and she could barely wait to tell me about her college experience.

"Before we went into the college Lady Catherine told me to make sure I sat up straight and not to mumble or fidget. Then she said, 'and remember that while here, I am Lady Shelham, not Lady Catherine or her Ladyship.' Then this man came out and shook our hands. He was Mr Lines, the principal – they don't have a headmaster. And when we went into his office Lady Catherine said who I was and why we were here. He was very nice. He asked me some questions and then Lady Catherine said, 'Now Elizabeth, I'm leaving you with Mr Lines. I will wait outside for you.' She thanked Mr Lines very much and on her way out, she winked at me. Yes, she did! You know the way she gives you a big wink sometimes. You know, when she's pleased over something. Oh that did make me feel better. So I answered all the questions. Then he gave me some arithmetic to do and then he gave me another piece of paper with lines and asked me to write about how I got there. So I began with Lady Catherine's car and walking to the college, right up to when we met him. Then he told me to write down what I wanted to do when I was grown up and I so I wrote down how much I wanted to work at Maybury," and with that her smile came, full and bright. "I think I did all right, Miss, don't you?"

"I'm sure you did, Lizzie."

"Then Lady Catherine took me to ever-such-a-posh restaurant where everything was written in French. But she explained what it meant. She's ever so clever, isn't she?"

I said, "Just think, when you've been to college you'll be like that."

"Ooh, I don't know..." and her smile swept around such was her excitement. "I do like it here with you and..." the smile slipped.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I like it here but... well, I miss Angie and Tommy and my dad."

"Of course you do. This is why you must return home soon."

"I have to grow up more, don't I."

"We all have to do that, Lizzie."

She looked right at me. "You're clever as well, Miss. You're like Lady Catherine. I suppose being in the war must have done that."

The sudden perceptiveness touched me.

That afternoon, with Lizzie continuing her labours in the library, I was at last able to hear Catherine's account of her earlier meeting with Mr Stevens.

"He produced this map. Of course one knows about tithes but I'd never seem a tithe map, of Maybury or anywhere else. It was 17th century with all the various tenancies set out. An ancestor of mine was recorded as Lord of the Manor but the name didn't ring a bell. Mr Stevens thinks that I must have inherited the title. Not that I want it. Titles don't seem in vogue now. Quite enough to have to deal with all this rent and property business." We were seated as usual at the kitchen table and she paused thoughtfully.

"Do you have the map," I asked.

"No, it's parish property."

"But the parish is your property."

"I would not pursue the point, Ellen. In fact that man worries me, rather. Truth is he seems very keen to work with us. He implied he could assist with collection of rent." My eyes went wide. "Oh, yes, he did. He stated that rents are traditionally collected four times a year on the Quarter Days but these could be varied if required – but only by his Lordship. But he did agree that my meeting with my tenants was good idea and which he offered to organise."

"Will you accept his offer?"

"Hmm... I need to find out more about him, don't you think?"

After supper that evening, Lizzie remained excited about the day, until Catherine, now weary of the girl's chatter, said, "Elizabeth, it's time for your bed. Goodnight and God bless, and don't forget your prayers."

After Lizzie had gone I said, "Do you still say your prayers?"

"Of course. Do you?"

"When I was your maid, and Lady Eleanor was here, she would always remind me to remind you to say your prayers."

She nodded thoughtfully. "Does anyone remind Elizabeth at her home?"

"I'm sure her stepmother would."

"Lucky girl. My mother had no interest in me but, thankfully, I had a wonderful grandmama who together with my wonderful maid, saw to all my spiritual needs. And that brings me to Elizabeth once more: it is time she went home. She is greatly improved, don't you think? Her manners and application are good and she is acquiring the grace and gentility one would expect of her should she come to work here. I do hope you agree. And before you argue with me again, I do not mean to imply subservience. Why are you smiling?"

I simply couldn't help smiling. Dear Catherine who sometimes could not help being her ladyship-self.

47. Our Birthday 1946

Lizzie has gone home. I must say it was with some relief, having a girl with such unexpected talents under our roof was at times disconcerting. However, we were satisfied we had done our best in some small way to prepare her for the world ahead.

Now we looked forward to our birthday. We had planned a day at the seaside but the visit of Mr Phipps the solicitor and his announcement that Catherine would, on that day, inherit Maybury village and all within it – houses, cottages, businesses and people – scuppered the whole idea.

"Of course it brings responsibility," said Catherine at breakfast, eyeing a blob of butter on her knife and carefully removing it with her finger. "One cannot simply ignore," she continued before licking her finger clean and fluttering her eyelashes. "Really one cannot."

1946 was the first time we had been together for our birthday since the war. As children, mealtime behaviour was strict. However, birthday breakfasts were more relaxed with exchange of presents. We had a little ritual: my mother would have my present sent to Catherine as she would be upstairs in the nursery, and Catherine's would be brought down for me. She was looking at me curiously now and rather nervously, as I placed in front of her a folded piece of paper. "What is this?" she asked.

"Your present."

"Oh... I wasn't sure. Oh I'm so glad. Let me see..." She unfolded the paper and sat back with a bump, and for once, was speechless. I waited while she studied it. "It's us isn't it," she said at last. "In our special place, and we're paddling and..." her voice slipped away as her gaze flickered over me. "You never let me see your drawings, did you? You always said they weren't good enough. Always hid them away when I tried to look. But this is..." she faltered again, blinking quickly. "Oh, Ellen, this is so beautiful. We're both there, just like we used to be. And you're giving it to me. I'm so pleased. Thank you!"

I nodded. "I only looked out my drawing book last night and... well. I just wondered."

"But you're so good! And I never, ever thought."

"You don't mind?"

"What? Mind what? That we not wearing anything? Heavens, no! It's how we were in summertime. Oh my Goodness it is. And I never, ever knew... you with your pencil..." she laughed suddenly, "And these lovely little touches of coloured crayon. You are so clever! You kept this secret all this time. But so pleased. Really I am!" and she jumped up to lean over the table and plant a kiss on my forehead. Then, just as suddenly she sat down, rummaged about to produce, of all things, a bicycle lamp. "I thought about it ages ago, would you believe, and so different to your present but I do hope you like it." The lamp stared at me from the table. "Oh it's not just the lamp," she said, "The rest is outside," she nodded toward the window.

Now it was for me to jump. "I can't believe it..." I ran out of the kitchen and into the courtyard. "A bicycle! A bright red one with basket on the handlebars. Oh my!"

"You'll have to adjust the saddle," she called from the kitchen window.

"I need a spanner."

"In the saddle bag."

"Oh my... I love it. Oh my, I do."

That was how we celebrated our birthday. We wore summer frocks and cycled on our birthday! Laughing and giggling like children, down the drive and through the gates, turning – not left to the village but the other way, along the road by the estate wall, passed the entrance to home farm and on. We turned into Stubbins Lane, which was uphill and a good pull. The last bit was too much, we wobbled, giggled more, and got off to walk the rest.

"Oh but I love my bike!" I declared breathlessly.

"Bicycle, if you don't mind," replied Catherine. "Ladies cycle. Men and boys have bikes." She propped hers against a hedge, swept her frock under her and flopped down in a grassy gateway, pulling out a length of grass to put between her teeth. "What a lovely view," she said. "Right over the house, you can make out the roof and chimneys, and over to the distant hills, and there..." she twisted round, "Is the church and... Is that the golf course? I didn't think it was so large. We'll go that way, shall we?"

"I can see the town," I said looking the other way. "I think we should go there."

"No, we'll carry on along Stubbins Lane and onto the common."

"Why?"

She jabbed her elbow into my ribs. I grinned and said, "Remember we used to sit back to back when we disagreed?"

"In our special place? Of course I do."

"Are we in disagreement now?"

"Mmmm... maybe, maybe not."

We sat there, the sun warm on our shoulders and thought how lucky we were to be here on our first birthday after the war and then we did as Catherine suggested.

"Oh, Ellen, do please indulge me," she said. "It's because I'm so curious. The lane follows the parish boundary but... well, one's curious, that's all."

I had to smile. "Is this all about being the new Lord of the Manor?"

"Really, Ellen, you do make things up." She jumped to her feet, mounted her bicycle and was off.

I let her lead. Catherine could never conceal that deeply bred sense of where she came from that made her the way she was. Not from her father, not from her mother, much further and deeper than that. I followed because I knew.

We came to where a track led onto the common and where, again, discussion followed as to which way. "We could continue along the lane and the parish boundary," I said.

"Or the common." Catherine seemed fixed on this.

I was dubious. "Can we cycle along the track?"

"We can always dismount."

Once again I followed. The common seemed to go on forever, rough and rambling, now only one or two graziers use it, a few sheep and cattle, and rabbits, of course. Once there were warrens and a warrener, but now the common was mostly under gorse with stands of birch growing bigger. I knew it better than Catherine – it was not where children of landed families would go. I noted that a lot of trees had been cleared, probably as part of the war effort. We came to a dip where there was once a quarry, another track winding down and at the bottom was a rifle range, the butts still with sandbags in place.

"Home guard, I suppose," I said.

"Now rigged up with corrugated sheets," said Catherine, "And used as animal shelters. The local farmer's taken it over. And over here..." she laid down her cycle and picked her way passed thickets of bramble. "Old buildings. Someone's been taking them down and piling up the bricks. But of course, bricks are in demand now. Look, these have been cleaned and stacked and..." she pointed at the ground. "Vehicle tracks. Ellen, someone's carting the bricks away."

I leaned on my handlebars. "Why are you so interested?"

"I don't know..." She looked about. "What was the quarry for?"

I shrugged. "A left-over from the first war?"

"And the last war used it for target practise." She returned to pick up her bicycle and we made our way up and out of there to continue our ride.

Now it was easy going, mostly flat, a few ruts that we managed to avoid, some swerves around gorse, and we never saw the group of men until one of them whistled at us.

"Cheek..." I thought busily minding where I was going and didn't stop.

Then came a shout. "Oi!"

We had arrived at an area cleared of gorse and levelled out and the track we had been riding had a flag on a pole right in the middle. "What's all this?" I said braking sharply. The flag was red, about eye height, and fluttering gently.

There came another shout, "Stop where you are!" There followed a sharp crack and something zipped across in front of us. A group of four men, golfers, judging by their plus-fours and colourful shirts and rolled up sleeves, were some yards away. There they stood, staring at us, hands on hips. "Stop there, d'yer hear, or it'll be a golf ball in the head!" One of them placed a ball on the ground and took a swipe but missed and the ball dropped into the gorse. A round of swearing followed.

Catherine, head high and gripping the handlebars, said, quietly. "Ellen, one does not respond. One carries on. Do not even look."

I smiled in total agreement. So we ignored them, neither hurried nor lingered, simply walked our bicycles passed that fluttering flag and onto the other side, then to mount and set off once more. We raced now, laughing and thoroughly enjoying the wind in our hair until, eventually, we reached the road and a cottage there. A man had to quickly step out of our way.

"I do beg your pardon," I said gathering breath.

Catherine quickly joined me. "Yes, of course..."

The man stared at us in total amusement. "Well I seen most things but never young ladies coming down here like that. Could a' broke your necks. Took a fright, did yer? Golfers frightened yer?"

That word brought us up with a jerk.

"No, they did not frighten us," said Catherine. "We ignored them."

"Wish I could," replied the man, his voice rising. "They taking over the common. Shutting us commoners off. Chasing our sheep. Stopping folk doin' their lawful business as we been doing hundreds of years. Close to taking a shotgun to 'em, that I am."

Despite that tiny hiccup the promise of a lovely birthday did, after all, come about. We sat in the sunshine sipping barley water the man's wife had served. Yes, we had a lovely birthday. And we decided that sometime soon we would call on the golf club...

48. Catherine Meets Her Tenants

Catherine wrote to Mr Phipps the solicitor to ask if he could please find out anything about this parish clerk who seems so keen to be part of Maybury. We were surprised to receive a reply by return. Catherine read it out. "It seems Hugh Stevens is known and respected in his field. He worked right through the war and lived in London with his wife when not on war business but has recently moved away."

"Is that all?" I asked.

"Did you expect more?"

"Mention of a wife deceased?"

Catherine shook her head. "No. Ellen, I'm still not sure about the man. And as regards meeting my tenants, I'm beginning to wish I had never thought of it."

However, there was nothing to be achieved by dithering. Rumours were rumbling around the village, I suspect the post office had noticed letters with certain postmarks but one couldn't be sure. The sooner Catherine met her tenants and put minds at rest the better. "Mr Stevens wants to call on me again," she said, "He's coming this afternoon. You're not going out, are you?"

I was certainly not going out. I even opened the front door for him. I arranged the small drawing room and lit a fire to brighten it up. But I'm afraid there was disagreement. Catherine insisted that rents were not priority. "There are cottages with leaking roofs and no bathrooms. How can one speak of rents?" "Most easily," retorted Mr Stevens.

Nonetheless, a date and venue for the meeting was decided upon: Saturday next at 7pm in the village hall and refreshments will be provided to ensure that as many as possible attend and posters will be put out.

So the big day arrived. Mr Stevens had arranged for help with preparing the hall and setting out chairs, the WI would do tea and sandwiches, and there was to be more help to clear up afterwards. He had detailed everything on paper. I was impressed.

The moment the doors opened the hall quickly filled and just as quickly the sandwiches disappeared. Policeman Jones was there, I said hello to Mr and Mrs Russell, the vicar tossed a lofty smile at me, and many, many others of the parish, young and old. It was very, very gratifying.

At the front a table was set for Catherine and Mr Stevens. I know she was nervous. Who wouldn't be in the circumstances? I sat in the front row directly facing them. Catherine wore a bright floral skirt, silk blouse and tailored jacket – fabulously fitting, it really set off her figure! – and gloves because there was still a seasonal coolness, the little red hat I liked and of course, shoes with a heel. Catherine could carry it off; she had such style! As for me, not wishing to compete, I favoured trousers though I did choose a bright red scarf to complement her dress, but no hat or heels.

Mr Stevens started the proceedings. Catherine stood up, scanned the gathering and flashed that smile, and now there was no nervousness. Her voice was clear as clear, "Welcome everyone. I am so glad to meet you all..." Of course I knew more or less what she was going to say, and if she didn't show nerves, I could hardly keep my hands still. "I'm sure you will want to know about rents," she went on. "Well, all I'm going to say about that is whatever you last paid in March 1940, that's

what you'll be paying this year, but not until September. Now as regards the state of your homes..." and now I could breath again for this was her own very pet idea, and then at last, she sat down.

"Now I'm sure some of you will have questions," announced Mr Stevens.

Lots of questions, so many that both of them were quickly inundated.

When will we get our bathroom?

How much will I have to pay?

We can't afford much

There's only the missis and me

We're a family of five

... and on and on. Eventually, as things steadied some order came about. Then there was a different voice, loud and strident and slurred, "I got a question. By God I have." I looked round to see a man in army trousers, braces over a vest, brandishing a bottle as he lurched towards the front. Mr Stevens got to his feet as the man bumped into the table. "Steady now. Hold there, please."

"Don't you tell me what to do. I got a question for her," and he leaned across to Catherine. "Yes, you, gentrified lady in yer pretty clothes, tellin' everybody what's going to be done. Tellin' me what yer going to do. Now I'm tellin' you. My mother..." but he lost his balance and almost tipped the table. Someone in the hall laughed while another voice called from the back, "Give it to 'er, Jack, go on, give it to 'er, Jack."

"Jack Ford, step back," sounded the stentorian voice of Sergeant Jones as he pushed to the front. "And your brothers. Get away, the lot of you!" A moment's calm came before the second voice called out again, "Give it to 'er, Jack. Go on give it to 'er. Pull 'er drawers down, Jack!" more laughter and a scuffle broke out with shouting and some swearing.

Jack Ford twisted round, "Leave 'im alone. Get yer hands of my brother," he tried to pull away but the sergeant had him securely by the arm.

Catherine got to her feet. "One moment, Sergeant. Mr Ford, Mr Ford, listen if you will. Is your mother here?" The sergeant swung the miscreant to face the table. "Ford, d'yer hear, her Ladyship's addressing you."

"Bloody ladyshit!"

"That's it! Out with him."

With the help of Mr Stevens and one or two others Ford was frogmarched to the back of the hall.

"His brothers as well," called the sergeant. "There's two of 'em. Throw them out!"

With order restored and the table straightened, Catherine sat down, showing remarkable composure, I have to say. Mr Stevens dusted his suit and returned to his seat. Catherine opened the tenants' ledger and ran a finger down the entries until she arrived at the name Ford at which point a very different voice piped up. "We live on Summer Avenue and I would like to know when the avenue is going to be tarmacked?"

Catherine looked up to see a plump man in pinstripe suit. Mr Stevens said, "I'm sorry but this meeting is about..."

"Yes, our road really is a mess," added a woman wearing fox-fur.

"We're Mr and Mrs Henry Fitz-Herbert," said the man, "And we live at The Firs, Summer Avenue."

Catherine brushed a hand across her face but I wasn't sure if it was frustration or relief.

By the time we left the hall to walk the short distance to the car, it was dark. I unlocked the car and Catherine slid wearily into the passenger seat. "I am exhausted. I do not want anything like that ever again. Silly people and unpleasant people. That man, Ford, I checked the ledger: his mother has held a tenancy longer than anyone else and what does he do? Turns up drunk and abusive. What a clown."

I started the engine and we set off. "It did go on," I said. "Much longer than expected but it was a success, don't you think?"

"Ellen, why do people hate us?"

"Oh, Catherine, I think that's a bit harsh."

She didn't answer.

We wound our way along the lane toward Maybury. We were about to turn through the gates and into the drive when a figure stepped out in front of us. I slammed on the brakes and Catherine called out, "It's Ford..." and before I could reply she was out of the car confronting him. When the two brothers appeared I grabbed the hefty torch kept in the door pocket and jumped out as well.

"What do you want?" demanded Catherine.

For a while there was no response. It seemed they were weighing up the situation. Ford raised a bottle to his mouth and drained it. I found myself facing a youth of about sixteen who constantly waved his arms and, in the headlights, I saw this ridiculous grin with tongue out. The youngest, though, remained apart, unsure.

"Well, Mr Ford?" Catherine continued. "Whatever it is you want this is not the time or place to..." she was cut off by a sudden shattering of glass as Ford smashed the empty bottle into one of the car's head lights, extinguishing it.

"This, you ladyshit," he bellowed, brandishing the broken bottle. "This in your pretty gob. Oh yes!"

"Go on, Jack," called out the grinning one opposite me. "Give it to yer, Jack. Pull her drawers down and give it to her!"

I flashed the torch directly into Ford's face. I saw Catherine gripping her shoulder bag ready to raise it when a shower of spittle struck me. "You horrible creature," I yelled and lashed my hand so hard across that grin that the youth fell backwards, whinging and cursing, and clutching his nose. Catherine saw her chance and swung at the broken bottle, sending it flying into hedge. That seemed to freeze the situation with the youngest suddenly calling out, "Jack I'm going home. I'm going to tell mom," and with that the lad ran off down the lane back to the village.

"Billy!" cried out Ford. But Billy was gone.

"You next!" I shouted at the one who'd spat at me. "Go on, clear off before I..." and he followed his brother. "And you..." I lunged at Ford with the torch but he only released another stream of bad language, yet at that the will to continue seemed to have abandoned him. "Go on home," I demanded, "After your brothers."

And it was all over. Except for Catherine who was leaning against the remaining headlight and I was seeing blood from her hand dripping onto the road.

49. Aftershocks

Catherine was on the point of collapse. "So stupid... so stupid..." she kept repeating.

I steadied her against the car and got an arm around her. "Let me see," I said. The glove had clearly taken the worst but there was a lot of blood and that lovely skirt was a mess. I pulled off my scarf and rolling the end into a ball eased it onto the wound before wrapping the rest around the hand.

"Ellen, what a fool, oh what a fool," she went on as I guided her to the open car door. "A man with a broken bottle, and I attacked him, fool that I am. Silly and stupid."

I got her seated and the door closed, and hurried round to the driver's side. She was pale, really pale. "Don't you dare faint on me," I said.

"I'm not going to." But her head was swaying and I reached across to steady her. I managed to get the car into gear and, steering one-handedly, negotiated the drive and round to the courtyard to park close to the back door. Then it was a matter of finding the torch – which was rolling around my feet – to find the key to the door... But at last we were inside the kitchen and I breathed with relief.

I pulled a chair to the sink, poked the range into life, and said, "Sit down and do not move."

"I'm not going to move," she mumbled.

Soon, the kettle was singing and that made me feel better.

"I'm sorry, Ellen," she said lifting her head. "I've been an idiot. He could have killed me."

I stared at her pale face. "Catherine, for God's sake."

"Ellen, why do people hate us?"

"Give me that hand," I demanded. Carefully, I unwrapped the scarf. "I'm going to cut off the glove." Easier said than done, the scissors were awkward and the doing of it proved painful, but now I could see the gash across the palm and thumb. "Move your fingers, one by one," I demanded. "That's it, let me see them move. Yes, that's right." I poured a little hot water from the kettle into a basin and set it on her lap. "Hold that with your good hand while I get the first aid." Cleaning a wound is a painful process. She screamed from the iodine but I got the dressing into place and the hand closed, and with considerable relief I applied the bandage. Then, on fitting a sling and seeing the tips of her fingers peeking sadly from under the bandage I gave them a tiny squeeze. "Feel better now?"

At last she smiled. "I love you, Ellen."

"I love you."

"You're good to me."

"We're good to each other, aren't we?"

She was close to tears, and not because of the pain. Her lips were trembling and suddenly I too felt myself well up but as quickly pushed it aside. "That skirt needs to soak in cold water," I said. "Stand up so I can unhook it. That's it. Step out of it." I was about to sweep up the garment to join my bloodied scarf in the sink, when she caught my arm. "Let me hug you," she said.

Of course nothing is easy with one hand and soon I was hugging her. For a while we swayed together until I felt the kitchen sink press against my backside at which point I took her face in my hands... only to brush my cheek to hers but now tears finally erupted. "Yes, my girl, that's right, you need to cry. You lock things up too

much, whether it's war, tenants, this house and everything else, you need a bloody good cry sometimes, believe me."

"Don't you?" she answered.

"Yes, of course I do."

Yet even as we stared at each other through mutual pig-headedness those eyelashes were starting to flutter. "Remember when we were little," she said. "How we would kiss like they did in the films?"

"Catherine, we're grown up now."

"Are we?" she said, pressing herself closer still until, suddenly, she kissed me roundly on the lips. "You see, Ellen, we're attached. That's the difference. We were born on the same day and we've been attached ever since... ever since we first set eyes on each other. Not even the war could break that..." her head flopped onto my shoulder and her voice sank to a whisper. "Ellen, he might have killed me."

"Oh you silly sod..." and now I too couldn't hold back and so we snuffled like sorrowful children until eventually I said, "But nothing of the sort happened, did it. Anyway, I think it time we both turned in."

She gave a big sigh. "This girl needs a bath."

"Catherine, for Heaven's sake..."

"I feel dirty."

"But I've just dressed your hand."

"I'm sorry, Ellen, but I do need a bath. My hair as well..."

"I am not going to bath you. I refuse absolutely!"

I ran the bath for her. "Come on, you can manage," I said. "I never bathed you when I was your maid and I'm not doing so now. I'll put soap on the sponge and shampoo in your hair. But that's all." Well, that was nearly how it was...

We always took turns to make cocoa at bedtime. Whoever it was would also bolt the back door and rake out the range while the other would have first bath. That night of the tenants' meeting things were different. Not because Catherine was injured, no, it was that one remark: "Why do people hate us?"

I still wonder about it. Were we hated? Was it hate that made Ford do what he did? Or was it drink? Whatever, we were confronted by a dangerous man. But had we also become carefree about our own safety? Two women who until then had always felt quite able to look after themselves now turning to look over their shoulders. I made sure windows were closed and out-buildings secure. Hate is as evil as fear.

We had our cocoa in Catherine's room. She was in bed and I put down the tray on her bedside table and there, glistening silver, was her pistol. "What the devil is that doing?" I demanded.

"Protecting us of course."

"Why? What for? Is it loaded?"

"Well it would be of little use if it were not."

"I won't have it."

"Ellen, dear, it's on my table, not yours."

"If you have one of your nightmares and I rush in you could shoot me..."

"Why would I do that?"

"Oh this is absurd! Are we about to be murdered in our beds? How ridiculous."

"Ellen dear, our cocoa's getting cold."

I passed her cocoa to her. "Mind not to spill it. And I'm putting that thing away."

"Where?"

"Back with your underwear where it belongs."

But she was staring into her cup, the little circle of bubbles around the edge, and not listening. "You know, Ellen, the war changed everything. Attitudes, a person's place, questioning what was never questioned before. Where does it leave us?"

"Catherine, we've had a bad experience."

"Of course we have. Everything we lived for, fought for, seems to have evaporated. The earldom is gone, tradition and order, all gone. We're left with this great house but what does it stand for?"

"Oh you are in a state..." I sat on her bed. "Tonight was bad..."

"We were called names, for God's sake. Horrible names. Where is decency? Where is respect?"

"One man called you a name."

"There were others."

"His brothers; one is a half-wit and the other a child."

"Yes..." she replied reflectively. "And I have to visit the mother."

As the pistol slid back into folded silk I saw a gold ring that I instantly recognised.

50. Reflections

We relax on Sundays, we rise later and make ready for church at eleven. That is when we go to church, when we feel the need for spiritual uplift, which for me never happens with the Reverend Watkinson. That morning after Catherine's meeting with tenants I was up and about before she was awake. When I looked round her door she was still fast asleep. A quick glance at her bedside table and I was relieved to see no pistol. Yet I paused there, not thinking of the pistol, but of the gold ring kept next to it in the drawer.

I pulled her door to. Considering the previous night's events I thought it better to let her emerge in her own good time.

Outside, the sun was already filling the courtyard. I opened the back door and was greeted by the scent of mock orange – a rogue bush that had somehow established itself behind the horse trough and I couldn't help thinking, let it be, oh let it be!

However, back inside the kitchen the reality was we had no porridge because I hadn't put the oats in to soak the night before. And nor was there bacon in the pantry, and now I heard Catherine padding along the corridor. She appeared in sandals and summer frock. I said, "Oh, I see you're ready for the sun. Sandals, no stockings and hair loose so I presume no church today."

"Correct. One cannot do with explaining all this," she raised her hand to show off the sling. "And what of you?" she asked noting my jumper and slacks.

"I guessed the same."

"Then one suggests we share this glorious sun."

She held out her wristwatch to me. "Would you be so kind as to place this on my wrist? My left wrist. It requires winding first."

"After I've changed your dressing."

"No more iodine."

"No, Catherine, no more iodine." I unwrapped the bandage and carefully removed the dressing. "This has sealed over well, no inflammation or swelling. A sprinkle of boracic powder and a fresh lint..." I had to smile: her eyes were tight shut. "And now your watch."

"You're so good to me, Ellen. But today we play truant. We will be children again."

"You seem to have recovered from last night."

She shrugged. "What's for breakfast?"

"I'm afraid there's no porridge. And I know it's Sunday but we'll have to make do with cornflakes and toast and a little butter."

"Oh dear... no eggs?"

"We had the last two yesterday."

It's how we were in 1946: we had food but the choice was limited. Yet we had the good fortune – luxury, one might say – of the home farm and the goodwill of the farmer and his wife, erstwhile privileges of the 'big house'. We took our seats at the huge kitchen table. I cut two slices of bread, set them one of them on the toasting fork and presented it to her to hold in front of the range.

"But lunch will be lamb chops," I said. "Bunty left them in a roasting pan with potatoes all ready for the oven."

"I think that girl does more and more," said Catherine. "I noticed the scullery was tidied up. Unless that was you." I shook my head. "Did you pay her?" I shook my head again. "Then is the girl paying herself?"

I went to the money box on the mantle shelf, opened it and counted the contents. "One pound two shillings and fourpence. Yes, I think she must be paying herself. Would you rather she stopped coming?"

"No."

"Do we want her to continue?"

"Yes!" we answered in unison.

Catherine beamed. "Then let us go out and enjoy the sunshine."

"Walk the park?"

"Splendid idea! Much more agreeable than church, don't you think? Let us be thoroughly remiss on Sunday. Let us relish the sunshine and fresh air caressing our bodies."

"That maybe so," I said, "But I think you'll need a cardigan over that frock."

"Oh you're such a fusspot. Put on your sun hat, the old straw one that droops down over your ears."

With breakfast cleared away we set off, savouring the mock orange on the way and crossing the courtyard and into the flower gardens. Neither of us spoke, the only sound was that of our feet shuffling around clumps of forget-me-not and bright blue birds-eye seeking to take over gravel and once tidy paving. We didn't pause until we reached the spot where Lady Eleanor's favourite walk branched off towards Top Woods. I said, "Lost to nature, I'm afraid. We'll go our way to you-know-where."

"Ah, our special place," said Catherine striding on ahead and with some urgency now, her dark hair bouncing about her shoulders. I smiled and settled my hat down more firmly.

Within no time we were at our place, and making sure it was as it always was: undisturbed, unseen, secret. No swans even, too busy with their own affairs to be bothered about ours. Immediately, Catherine kicked off her sandals and stepped into the water while I settled myself on our old park bench.

"Oooo... cold," she said, letting her toes curl into the soft silt. She crouched to reach down and of course it was inevitable she would flick water at me. I told her to mind her dressing but she put out her tongue to me. I let my eyes close and welcomed the warmth on my face. In the trees over on the far side a cuckoo was calling, another answering.

When next I looked Catherine was further away, the water almost to her knees and she was holding the frock to her thighs. She called to me, "Remember when we were little there used to be a boat here?" I did vaguely but my eyes remained closed. Then she was closer again and kicking the water at me. "Why don't you take off your shoes and join me?" she said. At that moment the church bells began and I said, "Doesn't that make you feel guilty on the Lord's day?"

"No," she replied. "Today I dissent." She went further, moving round an overhang of branches.

"Mind you don't step on something and..." but she was out of earshot. I pulled my hat down and stretched out my legs. Next I remember was her splashing out of the water. "So invigorating," she said, "When one gets used to the cold." She sat by me, drawing up her knees to put her feet on the bench and let the sun dry them.

There was a strand of weed between her toes and she carefully pulled it out. "Oh, the bells have stopped..." She looked up in surprise. "You know almost exactly a year ago I was watching spring water bubble over pebbles just like here, and a church bell was ringing. We were somewhere in Germany, a small village. We had started out early that morning and had driven all day. It was a hot day and my French General was desperate to get to this place – it doesn't matter where or why as the surrender was announced earlier that afternoon. We arrived, the air was still hot. As for the village..." she sighed as if recovering a memory lost. "Typically German, neat and tidy, and in the square was a church and one doleful bell that suddenly stopped and would you believe, I could hear children, squeals of laughter and lots of splashing. I crossed the square to look over a wall and there was this stream and... Oh, Ellen, I thought of here, of us as children being here. It was the very first time I had allowed myself to think like that, of being here at Maybury. Was it like that for you? Did you ever think of Maybury?"

"Of course I did."

"Really? Did you? You know, the way we used to be?"

I sighed. "No, not like that. Not deeply. It would be pushed aside, wouldn't it? Afraid it would never happen."

She thought a moment. "You're quite right. I'm glad it was the same for you. We always think alike, don't we. Yes, we're so very alike," and she squeezed her knees together as if to hold onto the memory.

I found myself gazing across the lake. As children we never considered how alike we were. To us it was simply normal. Now, I realise our sheer good fortune of being born and raised here. Now my head was filling with days of childhood... the house, my mother, above all the one sitting by me now. "Catherine," I began and hesitated, unsure of what I was about to ask. She was waiting. I took a deep breath. "When we left for London, do you remember? Yes, of course you will but..."

She prompted, "Go on, what are you trying to say?"

"The gold rings that your grandmama gave to us."

For a moment she didn't reply. "Yes. What about them?"

"We should wear them. They were Lady Eleanor's gift to us before we went off to war. She said they were to remember her by and I think we should wear them." I looked at her, she at me, eyes bright. "I happened to see yours last night. It was in your underwear drawer when I put your pistol away and... well, yesterday was such an awful shock and seeing your ring like that... Catherine, did you know it's identical to mine?"

Her expression went blank.

"That's right. I didn't know either, not until I saw yours. They're identical and the delicate engraving really sparkles... exactly the same. Doesn't that tell us something?"

"Ellen, what are you trying to say?"

"That it's your grandmama's wish. Why else would she give us identical rings? Of course I knew you had been given a ring too but I didn't know it was exactly the same as mine. Don't you think that means something?"

"What for instance?"

"Only moments ago you were saying how alike we were, that being born on the same day made us what we are. Oh for goodness sake, you must know what I mean."

She said, "Do you keep your ring with your knickers?"

"Now you're making fun."

"Well, since we think alike maybe you do."

"I keep mine with my medals. During the war my mother looked after it."

"Really? I kept mine on a chain around my neck."

"The whole time?"

"Why not? I didn't have anyone to leave it with and I couldn't lose it if it was around my neck and if I didn't come back... well, it would still be with me."

"Catherine, for Goodness sake..."

We left our special place in silence. I was embarrassed. An idea that had taken hold that morning on catching sight of that ring, now seemed shattered and I wasn't sure why or even if it was relevant. Our way back took us by the walled garden, not that we had intended that way, it just came about. Catherine was ahead while I lagged behind, still brooding my thoughts, when I noticed the door into the garden was open. I paused looked in and was almost knocked over by Mr Hoskins the gardener.

"I do beg yer pardon, Miss, didn't know as anyone was about." He was in Sunday best, except his jacket was slung over one shoulder and shirt sleeves rolled up; he was clearly busying himself. "And yer caught me on the Lord's Day with the first of the greenhouse earlies, sweet as they come." He held up a bowl of new potatoes, small and deliciously sweet-looking. "And I caught sight of her Ladyship hurrying along just afore you. Hand in a sling. Hope she's not hurt herself. Saw as she wasn't in church, her place and yours being empty." He shook the bowl of potatoes. "Like some with yer Sunday dinner?"

"That's very kind of you, Mr Hoskins." He tipped a few of the potatoes into my cupped hands. I thanked him and was grateful for not getting into deeper conversation regarding our absence and hurried to catch up with Catherine.

We enjoyed our chops with the new potatoes. Afterwards, we read the Sunday papers, in the evening we listened to the radio, and nothing more was said about rings.

51. Lady Eleanor's Rings

On Monday morning I was woken by Catherine coming into my room. "Are you all right?" I asked pulling myself up onto one elbow. "Is it your hand?"

"No, but the bandage won't let me do a thing." She hadn't even managed to put on her dressing gown.

"What were you trying to do?"

"I want to remove my ring from the chain. Would you do it for me, please?" She held out the chain with the ring swinging from it.

My surprise must have shown. She said, "Isn't this what you were asking about?"

I took the chain from her. "Of course it is. But aren't you cold without your dressing gown? Here, get into my bed." I lifted the bedclothes and shuffled across to make room for her. Now my bed is single and there was never going to be enough room... "Catherine, I can't see with your head in the way." However, the job was quickly done and I handed her the ring. She studied it, turning it over this way and that. I said, "Aren't you going to try it on?" She didn't answer.

I felt miffed at this seeming indifference. Like yesterday when I mentioned Lady Eleanor had given us identical gold rings, I was hoping for more enthusiasm for what I thought was a precious discovery. But, then, Catherine could be obdurate if the mood took her. "I'll get mine," I said, swinging my legs out of the bed. "I keep it with my medals in my writing desk. And while I'm out of bed I'll go and make tea." I thrust feet into slippers, pulled on my own dressing gown, and swept out of the room.

Downstairs, I thought over all of this. And now I was worried. Was I out of order? Looking back to those few days just before we went off to war, Lady Eleanor, always calm with wise words, took charge of our arrangements. We two girls simply did as we were told: packed cases, change of clothes, rainwear, sturdy shoes, nightwear, nothing non-essential. And then on the day we left she handed us each a little red velvet bag. "Gold rings to remember me by." Yes, I remember those words as if she had spoken them only yesterday.

With our cups of tea on a tray and a biscuit each, I returned upstairs. "Is there room for me in my own bed?" I put Catherine's cup down by her but she ignored it. Instead, she showed me her left hand, the third finger with the ring settled comfortably as if it had been there for ever.

"Oh..." I said

"You seem surprised."

"Well, I wasn't sure what you thought of the idea..."

"But this isn't my ring."

"What do you mean?"

"This one is yours, it's slightly smaller than mine. Yours fits me perfectly. I'm sure mine will fit you because... well, you're quite right: it's what dear granny intended and we really do need all that lovely granny magic, don't we... you and I... to work through all that we have to do," and she sank back onto my pillow, eyes bright, presenting her ring for my finger to slip into. It fitted perfectly.

"Dear Ellen, thank you for such a beautiful thought and thank you for knowing what granny intended. We will never take them off." With that she took my hand to clasp both rings tightly together and press them to her lips. "There, sealed with a kiss."

"You are an old softie..." I said. "But sometimes I never know how to take you..."

"Of course you do. Granny was a witch, she knew everything about us. We will wear her rings for ever."

"Yes but now it's time you went back to your own room so that I can make my bed."

At breakfast we decided that I would take the Alvis to Mr Jones at the garage and Catherine was determined to visit Mrs Ford.

52. I Take the Alvis to be Repaired and Catherine Visits Mrs Ford

On Monday morning I took the Alvis to Mr Jones at the garage to have it repaired. I went a roundabout route to avoid driving through the village where everyone would see the damaged headlight. I parked out of sight beyond the petrol pumps against the garage building. The folding doors were pulled to but not quite closed and from within came a jangle of mechanical noises. A doorknob polished over years easily gained me entry and as light flooded in the noises ceased.

Mr Jones is the brother of Sergeant Jones. They share similar features, but Jones the mechanic walks with a limp: I suspect a war injury but it's never been said. He's also more cheerful than his policeman brother and welcomed me with his regular smile.

"Miss Macpherson, good morning to you. Is it petrol you want? I'll be there in a sec. Just wipe m'hands." He caught my expression. "Oh, not trouble with the Alvis, I hope."

"I'm afraid we have broken a headlight, Mr Jones. Just one of those things. Quite absurd, really." We walked to the car. "One might say, embarrassing. But I'm sure in your way of work you come across such things every day."

I stood to one side, hands thrust deep into the pockets of my dungarees. He stooped to look at the light, closer still and removed something. Straightening up he showed me a piece of brown glass.

"Well, Miss, this isn't part of the light and..." he was looking down, then suddenly stepping back, said, "What's that?"

There, down the radiator and along the chrome bumper, were streaks of Catherine's blood from Saturday night, now dried and darkened. Now I'm pretty immune to the sight of blood but right there like that, a cold shiver went through me.

"I take it it's not yours, Miss Macpherson?" said Mr Jones.

"No, it is not."

He turned the piece of glass over and studied it for a moment before placing it on the car's bonnet. "It'll straighten out, fit a new glass. Will you leave the car? If so, I'll put it inside."

I thanked him and handed him the key.

Walking back into the village, I passed The Bush Inn at which, I assume, Jack Ford acquired his liquor. In the High Street I noticed Mrs Roberts' pony and trap outside the Post Office and was reminded that we needed stamps. I was of two minds whether to bother, the Post Office being such a cradle of gossip which would be in top gear that Monday morning after the Saturday meeting. But at that moment the door opened and Mrs Roberts came out. "Good morning, Miss Macpherson, are you shopping here?" She held the door for me; I thanked her and now felt obliged to enter.

The Post Office was busy and both the postmistress and her husband were serving. I eventually reached the counter and the husband, on seeing me, came over. I asked for a dozen tuppence-ha'penny stamps and as I was counting out the change from my purse he said, "I was at the meeting. What happened should never have happened. No one should have to put up with that kind of behaviour. But the lady carried herself with great dignity, oh yes she did."

I was quite taken aback. Others present would have heard those words. I thanked him and made my way out to find Mrs Roberts, seated on the trap, the pony's reins in hand. "Can I give you a lift back, Miss Macpherson?" I gladly accepted and climbed up to sit by her. "Have to drop in at the farm first to collect your provisions," she said. "There's eggs and a nice piece of bacon I thought you'd like. Won't take long."

The village slipped behind and soon Tibs was trotting comfortably along the open road. It was a lovely morning, the Spring sunshine was fresh and warm. We turned into the drive and stopped at the gate.

"Let me..." I said getting down to open the gate, the trap went through, and I closed it again. As I regained my seat, Mrs Roberts turned to me. "Wasn't there m'self but heard as the tenants' meeting was a lively affair."

"Yes, there was a lot of interest," I said.

"Village wanting to know, Miss Macpherson, that's what it is. Not just rent, cottages need work done." Her weathered face stiffened. "Heard as Jack Ford got thrown out. Nothing but a troublemaker, that man. Never changes... dances, fetes, when the beer's in the brains are out. He's a fool and no mistake." If she was expecting a response I'm afraid I didn't give one and she continued, "I take it her Ladyship was satisfied?"

"Oh yes," I said, "Very satisfied."

"And that new gentleman, the parish clerk, was helpful?"

I had to smile at such determination to know the ins and outs of it all. "Yes, it was a success and well attended."

We arrived at the farm and I offered to help but it was politely declined. Instead I sat waiting and thinking... thinking of that Saturday evening. Was Jack Ford really a fool? Was it only drink that made him do what he did? My mind flipped back to the present as Mrs Roberts came out of the farmhouse with a covered wicker basket. "I put in a jar of jam and some pork dripping as well," she said, grinning. "Nice on your toast with a sprinkle of salt." She stowed the basket under the seat and climbed up beside me. Gathering the reins she clickered to the pony and with his dark mane a-bobbing, we set off up the back drive through the Park to the house.

We arrived in the courtyard and I was about to step down from the trap when I heard the back door close. Sergeant Jones came down the steps to collect his bicycle from where it was propped against the horse trough. He touched a finger to his cap and uttering the barest, "Good morning, ladies," disappeared round the front of the house.

"Well I never," said Mrs Roberts. "Short shrift and no mistake. Wonder what he wanted."

Catherine was waiting for me in the kitchen. "The sergeant knows," she said, curtly. "He went to find Jack Ford only to be told he was gone. But the whole sorry tale came out. His brother at the garage confirmed and he stormed up her to know the rest of it. He asked if it was my blood on the car. One cannot understand why since my bandaged hand is surely sufficient to put two and two together." She sat down at the table on which was teapot, two cups and saucers, both of which had been used. "Kettle's still warm if you want to help yourself." She propped her face on her good hand. "So there it is, out for everyone to know and nothing can be done about it. Tell me, how is the poor Alvis? Not dead, I hope."

"Mr Jones has it in hand," I said, "Can't say how long, though. He will keep the car out of sight."

"Much good that will do."

"Did the sergeant offer any other information?"

"Jack Ford returned to camp yesterday. The sergeant was decidedly put out by his sudden disappearance, the more so by my refusal to pursue a prosecution. As for stating my intention to visit Mrs Ford this afternoon... well, I'm sure you observed the sergeant's thunderous face just now."

Lunch over, we set off for the village and the Ford cottage. We caught the bus at the end of the drive. As we alighted by the church I asked Catherine the number of the cottage.

"The tenancy ledger has it as number 2."

"There it is," I said, "Near to the church."

"Yes, but I don't remember ever seeing Jack Ford in church." Catherine stopped suddenly. "Ellen, I am quite determined, that incident on Saturday isn't going to stop me from doing this. I'm not sure how it will work but thank you for being here."

"I'm just as determined," I said.

"Ellen, our rings will help us, you'll see."

The little front garden was neatly kept with a few flowers. We knocked on the door. We knocked again. The second time brought forth a strident female voice, "Door don't open. Come round the back."

I cast a quick glance at Catherine and indicated her to follow. Washing was blowing nicely over a back garden of fruit bushes and neat rows of vegetables. The back door was open and Mrs Ford was there. "'E ain't 'ere," she said.

"Mrs Ford, it's you we're here to see."

"I tell yer, 'e ain't 'ere."

Catherine attempted to introduce herself.

"I knows who you are."

Catherine tried again. "Mrs Ford, I'm sorry to trouble you but as you weren't at the meeting..."

"If it's to do with Jack, he's gone back. Jones the policeman knows about it."

"Mrs Ford, it's about building a bathroom for you," said Catherine. "May we come in, please."

At last we were shown into a tidy kitchen with loaded laundry airer and scrubbed table.

"I hope we haven't interrupted your wash day," I said.

The woman pulled out chairs from the table but stopped dead on seeing Catherine's bandaged hand. "That what 'e did to yer?"

"Mrs Ford, this is about your cottage, not about your son. What took place on Saturday night is behind now. Let me tell you about plans to provide you with a bathroom. As your family has held the tenancy longest, you will be first to have a new bathroom. Now I'm sure you have your rent book..." the woman opened a drawer in the table, took out a bound but aged book and passed it to Catherine. "Good, then let us sit down and I will explain everything." She opened the book, taking care with her one hand as some pages were loose. "Oh my... Michaelmas 1853 was when your family began the tenancy, Mrs Ford, over eighty years ago."

"I don't know anything about it," said the woman. "Jack took it on 'iself. What's it all mean?"

"As regards rent," said Catherine, "Everyone will pay whatever they paid in 1940. In your case that is nothing because of your situation."

"You mean you'll do me a bathroom for nothing."

"Yes, it does."

"When'll it be?"

At that moment the kitchen door flew open and the two younger brothers burst in, the older one on seeing us, shrank behind his mother.

"Billie, get Aaron out. Out into the garden, d'yer hear?" then adding for our benefit, "The big'un follows his brother. Billie's all right with 'im. Yes, Billie's all right, if yer get m' meaning."

Catherine waited for the interruption to pass and continued, "Mrs Ford, the work will begin as soon as possible. I'm sure you know how tight everything is at present but I am quite determined. And if that concludes everything we'll be out of your way. Thank you for giving us your time."

As we were leaving a thought struck me. "Mrs Ford, would Billie do gardening?"

She nodded, "Aye..."

"Aaron also?"

"Aye, he will with Billie. They'd do gardenin' together. Aaron's good with Billie. Does as told."

We left it at that. However, I made a mental note to have a little chat with Joe Hoskins the next time we met in Maybury gardens.

The moment we were out of earshot of the Ford cottage, Catherine said, "I do wonder, Ellen, how much all this is going to cost. Am I being imprudent? Tell me, what do you think?"

"We need advice."

"Of course, but from where?"

And we hadn't gone more than a step or so before a car drew alongside and Mr Stevens, the parish clerk was winding down the window. "Good afternoon, Ladies..."

"Mr Stevens..." said Cathrine. "How fortuitous."

"Or not," I murmured under my breath.

53. Hugh Stevens Reveals More

We were seated around the table in the parish office. Mr Stevens began by unrolling a map. "I came across this in the council archive. It may be familiar to you, Lady Shelham because it is initialled by – I'm sure you'll remember him very well – the agent at Maybury Park, Ernest Prior, until closure in 1940. The map tells us quite a lot. For instance, did you know that land north of the village also falls within your tenure? Including..." he swept a hand over a large part of the map, "A couple of farms and the golf course. The Earl of Maybury's very exclusive golf course is now your property. This fact has only just emerged much to the consternation of the committee. They have just realised that their new landlord is – if I may put it this way – a modern young woman of title and means." He settled his gaze on Catherine as he assumed that smooth self-confident manner I had seen before and did not like.

"Is that so," she answered.

Mr Stevens continued, "Ernest Prior was very diligent, as soon as the War Office gave notice to requisition Maybury Park he placed all deeds and documents into secure depository. Next day he departed Maybury along with the remaining staff. With the house now under military command, the records in safe keeping, there was no one to collect rents." Here he paused awaiting a response but none came. "Now, of course, the rent is potentially quite considerable and the president of the golf club, is a worried man. I have met him. I can reveal that he is right now wondering if he is about to receive a substantial bill for four years unpaid rent? Or is the new owner going to extend to the club the same rent holiday she has to her other tenants?"

Catherine merely placed a hand on the map, her fingers spreading over the golf course. Then she turned to me, her eye lashes fluttering. "Ellen, haven't we already come across the golf club? I think we must pay them a visit. What do you say?"

Stevens interjected. "Your Ladyship should be aware that Maybury Golf Club is exclusively men only."

"All the more reason to visit," I said.

"Quite right, Ellen, quite right. Mr Stevens, thank you for the information. It is most helpful. On another topic: we have just visited Mrs Ford – you recall her son's outburst at the meeting – and I explained to her plans for a bathroom but I have to confess I know little about materials or costs and..."

"Lady Shelham, do I take it you visited the Ford cottage?"

"Yes. Does that cause difficulty?"

"Well, if the son was there..."

"He was not. And to return to my question about costs and so on."

"Did you discuss costs with Mrs Ford?"

"Of course not. I need to know more of such matters and that is why I seek assistance. Guidance, if you will. I know of publications on the subject. For example, I have seen Carpenter and Builder in newsagents. Would that be suitable, do you think? Is there a Teach Yourself book on the subject?"

His mouth opened and closed. For once the man seemed stumped for words. "Forgive me, Lady Shelham, but are you serious? I mean, these are matters of a technical nature and best left to those who understand..."

"Exactly," replied Catherine smiling broadly.

Words seemed to fail him entirely now and he looked down at the map on the table as if to seek help... at where Catherine's hand was spread over the golf club... and would you believe, he placed his hand right by hers. A sudden idea came – oh quite naughty I know, but I placed my hand exactly over hers so that our fingers spread and our rings glinted together, and did so quite impishly. He looked up in surprise, forcing a smile. "What delightful rings you have."

"Gifts of the Dowager Countess Eleanor," I quickly replied. "On the day we left for the war."

"I see," he said. "Indeed I do. And you returned to enjoy them," and now I remembered him speaking of losing his wife so dreadfully to an unexploded bomb. He moved away and crossed to the door to light a cigarette.

"Thank you, Mr Stevens," said Catherine. "May we take the map?"

He shrugged. "Of course. It's your property, Lady Shelham."

We were about to leave when he said, "May I offer to drive us back. Maybury is on my way."

We accepted the offer.

He brought the car to a halt in the courtyard and turned round in his seat to face us. "You know, Ladies, I'm sure it was not your intention but I am not used to feeling a fool or, for that matter, end up being one. But today I think I came close to that."

Catherine was quick to respond. "Mr Stevens, whatever do you mean?"

"Wanting to know the building trade from a book. What nonsense!"

"Is this because I'm a woman?"

"No, Lady Shelham, it's because it is a trade that you haven't grown up with."

"One is not stupid."

"Of course you're not stupid."

"As owner of this estate I have a duty to my tenants."

He took off his hat to smooth down his hair. "Lady Shelham..."

I slapped the back of his seat. "A car is no place for sensible discussion. I will make tea. Mr Stevens, if you would please hold the door for Lady Shelham, she is unable to use her hand. Catherine, why don't you show Mr Stevens into our drawing room and continue your conversation there. I will join you shortly."

I went into the kitchen and closed the door, and gave a little snort. I did not like Hugh Stevens. In truth I cannot say why. But I made tea and set out a tray.

When I went into the drawing room Catherine was sitting by herself on the settee. "Mr Stevens has just excused himself," she said. "I can announce that he is retained. As advisor, you understand, nothing more, but at £15 per calendar month payable on the first, I thought it all right. What do you think?"

"But he's the parish clerk."

"It seems parish work doesn't provide sufficiently."

I set down the tray on the sideboard. "I presume he won't be paid from the tin on the mantle?"

"Of course not," she snapped back. "It will be by cheque. We will visit the bank to have you made signatory."

"Catherine, have you given this sufficient thought?"

"What do you mean?"

"We barely know the man."

"One cannot know everything or do everything, Ellen," she said, scowling at her bandaged hand with fingers poking out pathetically. "Already the man is critical of me and what I'm doing."

"Critical! Why, for Goodness sake?"

"The rent should be raised. He says everyone charges more for rent now. And do I know how much building costs have shot up?"

"But isn't this why he's here? To advise? Speaking of which... where is the man?" I went out into the hall to hear the echo of footsteps somewhere on the grand staircase. And there he was, up on the landing studying the portrait of Catherine's mother. He said nothing as I went up to him. I don't think he knew I was there. I could jolly well have remonstrated... I really could! Did people simply wander around other's houses like this?

"Mr Stevens, are you lost?"

"Ellen, you should have your portrait here," he said waving a hand at the portrait. "A double portrait... you and Catherine... right here on the stairs. Both of you together and full length."

I was astonished. I turned and went straight down into the Hall, obliging him to follow. I stopped at the drawing room door, my arm barring the way. "Mr Stevens, Maybury has over many, many years enjoyed an old-fashioned etiquette. We think it important. And although times are changed we will remain Lady Catherine and Miss Ellen. Please respect our home and the formality of who we are as we respect you and yours." As I ushered the man in, Catherine was smiling widely, her good arm stretched across the back of the sofa. I went straight to the tray of tea on the sideboard. "Now, Mr Stevens, remind me: do you take sugar?"

I didn't contribute to the discussion that followed. I was sure that Catherine was well able to deal with it and I was still bristling from the display of gross impudence. So I left them pouring over the map of Maybury while I went to a window seat to sit and muse to myself. As a free-thinking person, I like to maintain an open mind. The war years left many voids, physical and spiritual. It was all too easy to be reminded of Maybury in better times. But were those times really better? Soon, I was distracted by urgency of voices from across the room and I found myself listening because, deep down, it is hard not to listen when you're so very, very concerned. Mention of the golf course popped up as did a name new to me: "McGowan, Irish fellow, club secretary, ex-navy, good talker," and Catherine's reply, "Then, Mr Steven's we must surely visit him. Did you hear that, Ellen?" I looked up to see her wink at me furtively and went to join her. "How thrilling, a men only club," and she winked again.

I showed Mr Stevens out by the front doors. "Maybury has always been our home," I said, "But nowadays it is an inconvenient one."

"Without servants to open doors," he replied, holding the door for me and adding as he closed it behind him, "It seems I have offended you. I regret that."

"Yes, I regret it too... and since you've closed the door I'm shut out and will have to walk round with you."

No more was said until we reached his car where he turned to me. "I'm sorry we're at odds but so much is not what it seems. I admire you both but everything is not easy."

"I don't understand," I replied. "Why, how?"

He shook his head.

"Well, I like your tie," I said brightly. It was said without thinking and until that moment his tie hadn't registered with me but his reaction was profound.

"For God's sake..." he hissed, twisting away. He leaned on the car, and I was left staring at his back. When at last he spoke it was quiet and deliberate. "This tie was given to me by my wife. It was her last gift. The day she was blown to smithereens in her garden. Our garden. She loved our garden. In a flash everything was gone. Nothing." He pushed back his hat to sweep a hand across his face. "And so I came here to Maybury. Far and away to Maybury and what do I find? All around me? A beautiful place and two beautiful women." His eyes narrowed, spearing at me. "Oh yes, it's true. The moment I saw you – or Catherine, it matters not which but it was one of you cycling through the village that day I arrived. It was as if she was here. You dress as she did. Even in headscarf and overalls, you remind me. And there's two of you. There, in church, the family pew, you the fair one, the other darkly mysterious, both of you charming and lovely, just as she would be in whatever mood took her," and at that the poor man crumpled into tears.

I had seen men cry. I never wished to be reminded of the anguish that welled up inside them. Yet, here it was again. Once I would have taken a hand, wiped a brow, put an arm around, murmured nothings into a bloodstained ear. Yes, I'd done all those things. Now, I simply placed my hand on one shaking arm. He looked down at my ring. "Thank you," he said as, gently, he took my hand, raised it and I knew what was to happen.

I said, "I'm so sorry, Mr Stevens..." and tried to draw back but he would not let me.

"No, Ellen, I do this because you are safe," and he touched his lips to the ring. "Safe and secure. Yes, both of you because you're attached to each other. That makes you safe. You see, that that happened left behind a demon." His eyes closed tightly but his lips were as soft as his breath on my knuckles and I could only let this happen until, slowly, he returned my hand to me. "Let me be with you... both of you together. Let me help you in your work at Maybury. We have differences, I know but... somehow when you're there the demon isn't." He gave a sharp little laugh. "My God, you must think me unhinged."

"Mr Stevens, if we bring such distressing memories..."

"Distress is the demon," he shot back. "Somehow you and Catherine help. You help in ways I don't understand. She was like you, like Catherine. She had style and grace, was full of life as you are, reminding me in some perverse way that I don't understand. But my God, it helps."

He straightened his hat, got into the car and drove off.

54. We Pay a Call on the Golf Club

This all came about because of our lovely birthday bicycle ride and one silly confrontation with a gang of golfers. For Catherine – and for me too – this was business that had to be dealt with.

Once again we found ourselves choosing what to wear. We decided on uniform. Not in any military sense, of course, but the golf club was, as far as we were concerned, hostile territory.

"How do two women challenge such a male bastion?" mused Catherine as we sat outside that birthday evening with our sherry. "Remove our clothes and bowl them over with our nakedness? Lady Godiva did so and by all accounts the ploy worked."

"She had a horse," I said.

Catherine nodded. "But you understand my meaning."

I sipped my sherry.

Next morning I wondered where she was. Catherine can be impulsive if the whim takes her. I looked in her room, poked my head round the bathroom door, the back door was still locked. I unlocked it.

She eventually turned up. "Look what I've found." Over her arm was a garment, neatly folded, expensive looking... she held it against herself and I gasped. "Is it...?"

"Oh yes, it is."

"From you mother's wardrobe?"

"Hidden away. Skirt and jacket – but what a skirt and jacket!" She opened the jacket to reveal a silken lining and... "Look at that label."

Eyes wide I could barely utter the word, "Chanel."

Well, you can imagine. Gorgeous material, soft, sophisticated, sensational, colours to die for and Catherine was in a different world. She slipped on the jacket, turned and swayed, and her smile swelled all the way to heaven. I thought, if she wears a suit by Chanel, what do I wear? Oh yes, everything was changed.

We had already agreed: nothing frumpy, nothing old-ladyish. Dear Catherine... she did try to help. "Why not – how should one put it: be alluring in summer dress? These are men, Ellen. Be risqué! Let them ogle you. Let old men drool and dribble over you. Let then be overcome by your wild feminine superiority. What do you think?"

Well, I made my decision. I would be the height of summer fashion, a dress as full of colour as Chanel, that swished and swirled, hat with big bow, gloves and bright red shoes, lipstick to match. But risqué? No.

And so we prepared...

"Is my petticoat showing?"

"No, but one seam isn't quite straight."

"Would you do it, please?"

"Stand still then."

And before anyone thinks: what an outrageous pair of show-offs we were, let me say 1946 was that strange and unknown peace into which we had emerged as women. We liked to think ourselves grown up, confident, able to take on the world,

shoulder our way through. So we would arrive at the golf club without invitation, without warning, dressed to kill, the Alvis freshly polished, and it would be like a military operation...

And we would be deadly serious. There was, we knew, a great deal at stake. The Earl of Maybury Golf Club, respected, hallowed, exclusive, known only to the invited few, and only men. But it was none of this that fired us: a line had been crossed and that for Catherine – and for me – had to be challenged.

One bright and sunny morning we were ready. I checked my watch and said, "Time to go."

The golf club is a rambling place built just before the war in that 30s style of the time: fake half-timbering, roof ridiculously large, windows too small, clock with a frown, car park shared with roses and flowerbeds and gardeners.

I swung the Alvis round to draw up right in front of the entrance. "I wonder, did they play golf when the war was on?"

"They didn't pay rent," replied Catherine.

"But drank in the bar."

"Oh yes, there was money around."

I huffed. "Really, golf, liquor, and no rent."

"Let's hit them."

"Where it counts."

A uniformed man appeared and was about to speak when I opened my door and sidled out a nyloned leg and red shoe and announced, "Good morning. Lady Shelham and Miss Macpherson of Maybury Park."

Catherine closed her door with a flourish. "We wish to speak with whoever is in charge. If you would be so good." Her smile beamed out at the fellow.

We were shown into a vestibule, two leather armchairs, trophies in a glass cabinet, honours board above, and men passing through, drinks in hand, talking loudly then, on seeing us, simply gawping.

I whispered, "Is the bar part of the game of golf, do you think?"

Catherine whispered back, "Like an officers' mess."

"Away from wives."

We quietly giggled.

A man entered from another door. I was somewhat surprised to see a youngish, intent looking fellow, in Fair-isle sweater and sporting a full-set black beard. He nodded to us doubtfully, "Ladies from Maybury Park?"

"Lady Catherine Shelham," said Catherine.

"Miss Ellen Macpherson," said I.

More noise, a cloud of smoke and more drinkers passed through. We were ushered through into an office. Oak panelling, more leather, and two chairs were dragged to face a large desk and when we were comfortably seated and our host with the beard had assumed his place, he announced, "Allow me to welcome you to The Earl of Maybury Golf Club. I am the club secretary, Martin Maxwell..." he loosened a little and flicked open the inevitable cigarette case on the desk and at which we both declined. He propped hefty arms on the desk and now his eyes wandered freely, unwavering settled on Catherine. "Yes, of course... the late Earl's..." and there he hesitated.

"Daughter," said Catherine. "Now I'm sure you're a busy man, Mr Maxwell, so shall we get down to why we are here. We have points to raise regarding the golf club and its activities." She paused, fluttering her eye lashes.

"Oh, what activities might these be?"

"There has been a trespass of the common by the golf club. Part of the common has been misappropriated. As Lord of the Manor of Maybury I am responsible for the ancient laws and the rights of commoners, and demand these activities cease forthwith and the common land be restored."

The fellow looked non-plussed. I took up the campaign. "There is also the question of rent, Mr Maxwell."

The fellow was on the back foot, his grin was gone. He said, "Please excuse me a moment," and hurried out to reappear a minute or so later. "I do apologise..." he began only to be interrupted by the door flying open and a voice demanding, "Marty, what the Devil's all this?" and door slamming shut again. Maxwell ran across to yank open the door and call to someone. But no answer came, the door quietly closed and we were left looking at each other. We heard exchange of words but couldn't make them out. Catherine winked at me, I winked at her. And so we waited a little more, patiently and demurely. Another voice came to the fore. A moment later Maxwell returned followed by two others, both in golfing garb, one older sporting floppy bowtie and monocle.

Maxwell, standing almost to attention, introduce them, "Sir Toby Featherstone, our Member of Parliament and Mr Ralph Greeves, Captain of the Earl of Maybury Golf Club. I have briefly stated your concerns, Lady Shelham, but you may prefer to express them yourself..."

"No need, Maxwell," said Sir Toby bouncing to the front. "I think we get the picture. It seems Her Ladyship is troubled by the club taking over common land. The truth is the common is wilderness." He paused, letting the monocle fall for effect. "There's even a derelict quarry left from the First War. However, this establishment created by her Ladyship's forbears, and that we have the good fortune to be part of, is no ordinary golf club. This is the exclusive Earl of Maybury's Golf Club and it is putting this land to good use. I'm sure the dear lady understands the importance of making proper use of all our assets in these difficult times in which we find ourselves. Oh yes, the dear lady's father was proud of his achievement and we are proud to be associated with that. I'm sure – as his daughter – her Ladyship will understand." He restored the monocle and squinting through it leaned over to say smoothly as if to a naughty child, "That, dear lady, is the crux of it. One cannot be sentimental about it. You see, there's been a war. Everything's changed." He straightened, and turned to the others. "There we are, gentlemen, it's done. I'm sure Her Ladyship and her delightful..." the monocled eye came to slither over me, "yes, her delightful companion will come to understand. Now, I have a train to catch. Maxwell, please see to a car to take me to the station?"

Catherine jumped to her feet. "This won't do. Sir Toby. Do you hear, this won't do at all. Common land is there by decree. Only Act of Parliament can make changes."

"Hah!" he spat out, "Parliament, dear lady, is for those who understand," and with that he was gone. The club captain hard on his heels, called over his shoulder, "Do please excuse us. Maxwell, please see to everything."

The door slammed so hard it shook the trophies on the sideboard.

The sun dazzled as I stepped outside but the fresh air was such a relief. I adjusted my hat to shade my face. Catherine peeled off her jacket and said, "Ellen, I'm going to the car."

Maxwell came over having seen Sir Toby off. "I do apologise," he breathed, "Not easy sometimes, I'm afraid. Ralph, has asked me to offer you refreshment..."

"Her Ladyship declines, Mr Maxwell."

"Yes, of course."

An awkward moment and we both fell silent. The morning had been a bad experience; perplexing, clumsy, rude at the same time. I said, "This is unfinished business, Mr Maxwell. We will be in touch, of course." It was then I noticed the man's tiepin: a crown with dolphins. "Tell me, were you a submariner?"

"Yes," he replied, clearly surprised.

"It's your tiepin. May I ask where you served?"

"The Med."

"Would that be the Italian campaign?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Well, Mr Maxwell, I think we may have served together."

He stared at me as I pressed my gloved hands together with a smile of satisfaction. "British Army Medical Corps. My unit followed the first wave. A tough old fight, wasn't it, all the way to Rome but... really, Mr Maxwell, you under the waves and me above..."

His demeanour instantly changed. "Looking up to your well-being, Miss Macpherson."

"That may be so but it's too easily forgotten that women fought this war as well. Catherine and I served for the duration. While I was in Italy, she followed the D-Day landings to hunt out Nazi collaborators. A tough old fight for all of us. But we were the lucky ones. So pleased to meet you, Mr Maxwell."

Later, back home, Catherine was subdued. I found her in her room looking out of the window, deep in thought, the Chanel jacket hanging limply from one finger. She heard me approach. "Failure, Ellen."

"Oh I wouldn't go that far."

"We were insulted."

Her back remained to me. I said, "It's not as bad as that, surely." I came behind her to fold my arms around her. She clasped my hands tightly.

"Ellen, I always want you with me. I can't do these things without you."

55. A Shocking State of Affairs

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, Cathrine, 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.

56. Good Girls Go To Church

To the sound of bells on Sunday, Catherine and I walked the High Street to church. We acknowledged the various people along the way who nodded their 'good mornings' to which we likewise replied. Yet that morning, my mind was firmly on church and vicar and I was not looking forward to either. Catherine said, "Ellen, you must not allow this man to disturb your soul." I raised my hand against the sun and thought, how can I not?

We arrived at the lychgate. I was relieved to see the vicar was not there to greet his parishioners and so, thankfully, we proceeded into the calm and peace. Ordinarily, I like our church, the organ quietly playing, gentle rustle of hymn and prayer books as sidesmen silently hand them out. As usual, we were escorted to the front and the family pew and there our sidesman stopped, unsure, for the pew was occupied. It was that woman, sister of the vicar, kneeling, hands clasped, eyes shut, face fixed, and seemingly unaware of our presence. The sidesman was embarrassed. We smiled our thanks, took the offered books and moved into the pew behind and there to join in silent prayer.

For me, though, there were no prayers, only the going back over how I came to be here today. At breakfast Catherine had suggested we go to communion and I'd said no. She didn't argue. I didn't have to repeat my distaste of him glowering down at my humbled, kneeling, self. I quickly rose to sit. She in front remained kneeling, grey bob under frumpy hat, starched white collar hiding the gold chain from which, I knew, would be hanging the wooden cross. A choir boy came to arrange the reading on the lectern. A shaft of sunlight snatched at the gilt on the alter hanging. Suddenly, the organ boomed and everyone stood.

And so the service began. The procession, choir and clergy... and there he was, upright and righteous. Why this effect on me? One year since and one word. First hymn and I sang with all my might. Prayers and first psalm – the Lord is – I knew by heart and from that moment all seemed as it should, as if nothing bad had ever come about. The man was as normal as... I fixed on him but he looked everywhere else. As if I wasn't there. As if all was normal. Then came the sermon. The man mounted the steps and there, for a moment, he hesitated, the paper in his hand shaking. A chorister – clearly prepared – came forward to prompt but was waved away, a glance at the sister, and the sermon began. The voice filled every part of the church, and now I fixed on him hard. He stared ahead, right ahead, as far as the tower and beyond, as if no one mattered. At one point he caught me and I held him... held and he faltered. The chorister stepped up again, was waved away... and the delivery of sermon carried on and the gaze drifted away to settle somewhere but where doesn't matter...

Outside, the sun still shone.

Outside, there seemed an air of relief. The vicar was nowhere to be seen. Folk drifted away and no one mentioned anything about what everyone had witnessed because it wasn't the sort of thing for polite folk. Now he was gone. We fell in with the Roberts family and away from the church Mrs Roberts asked Catherine about giving her talk to the Women's Institute. It was then I saw him. Something made me turn... a casual glance and there he was, striding through the churchyard, vestment billowing, striding on, sister hurrying to keep up. Now the path was

empty. He was gone from us. I said, "I don't know what came over me. I thought it was behind, forgotten. Then, suddenly, he's here again... Ugh!"

"Come on," said Catherine taking my arm to draw it through hers. "Let's go home."

Next morning I was on the grand stairs when I heard the telephone ringing in the hall. Catherine called from the drawing room. "Ellen, did I hear the telephone?" I was halfway down when it stopped ringing. One has to remember these were the days of the telephone operator and at Maybury that was the village Post Office. Catherine would have none of it. "The village will know everything before we do," she said. "The telephone is out of bounds." Out of use and out of sight behind goodness knows what. But now it was ringing again and I couldn't find it. And now it was stopped. "Oh stupid thing..." and I stumped back upstairs.

It rang again. Catherine swore as she swept aside coats and sou'westers. "Oh where the devil is it? Why can one never find the... Oh here it is. Hello." She pressed the receiver to an ear. "Hello, yes..."

Curious, I came to lean my ear against hers. She clamped a hand over the mouthpiece. "Ellen, do we know anyone called Bishop?" Then taking her hand away, said, "Operator, do you have the correct number? We are... what was that?" a squeaky female voice leaped out of the earpiece, "BISHOP FROM THE CATHEDRAL!"

We stared at each other. Only for a moment before I moved away after hearing only bits of a one-sided conversation. Catherine clamped the mouthpiece again. "Ellen, the bishop wishes to see me. This is his secretary speaking. Something to do with the church council. Quite urgent, apparently." She pressed the receiver to her ear. "Yes, of course. I can manage tomorrow morning. At his residence... the summer residence. At ten-thirty. Yes, of course... and please inform His Grace I do look forward to meeting him. Thank you. Good bye." She replaced the telephone and looked round at me. "Ellen, where does the bishop live?" I could only shrug. "Well, can you take me there, please?"

But for what and why: we were at a total loss.

Somehow, from long ago in the earl's time, I seemed to remember the bishop lived not far away in the country. But there'd been a war since and so many changes. In a flash of inspiration I caught our postman delivering letters. He said the palace was just off the main road into town, a couple of miles after the big double bend and it's on the right, a large Georgian house down an avenue of lime trees.

I turned the car through open gates into a courtyard and stopped at a large door.

"Give me an hour," said Catherine and got out. The door was opened by an unseen person. She went inside and the door closed.

I drove on into town, the bank, then to the coffee shop to enjoy a cup and watch the owner as he weighed out coffee onto sheets of paper to fold into bags and tie with string. The scent was wonderful. An hour quickly passed and by now very eager to hear what Catherine had to say, I hurried back. I was greeted by a young man who introduced himself as the bishop's chaplain. "His Grace invites you to

join him and Lady Shelham for luncheon. Please do come in." This was unexpected but of course I accepted.

I was shown into a drawing room, comfortably furnished, scent of polish, portraits of vested clergy along oak panelled walls, ponderous chime of a clock. I heard Catherine's voice, she sounded subdued but I was bursting to know what all this was about. Yet, of course, politeness precluded my asking. She came in followed by a small rotund man with shock of white hair and wearing a clerical collar who took both my hands in his. "Miss, Macpherson, Bishop Stanley, how very pleased I am to meet you. Lady Shelham has described to me your circumstances at Maybury Park. I feel it is so right what you do there. Now, please let us take our places for luncheon." We were conducted into a dining room. I was intrigued as to what circumstances Catherine had described. The bishop stood behind his chair at the head, indicated Catherine to his right, me to his left. The table was set precisely: white tablecloth, silverware, napkins on side plates, condiments, everything as it should be. An elderly lady in pinafore served helpings of shepherd's pie. I looked at Catherine, she at me. Did she mouth the words 'loaves and fishes'? I'm not sure but each portion was so small it was obvious that the bishop was sharing repast with us. However, as each plate was quickly cloaked in cabbage, it didn't matter. The bishop gave thanks and we took our seats. He served water, we sat hands in our laps, and I was reminded of earlier gracious times. And now conversation could begin.

"Now, Miss Macpherson, you must tell me about yourself. I understand you served in the Italian campaign. Awarded the Military Medal. You must be very proud. I can't claim anything of the sort. I was a chaplain in the Air Force during the Battle for Britain, padre as we were styled on station. But the squadron was posted abroad and I was retired. Too old, they said. Hah... never too old. Isn't that so?" He grinned at the pinafored lady who had reappeared to serve equally small apple dessert, but she didn't answer. "And never too young. Isn't that so, Lady Shelham? Never too young: fine young women that you are. Here to do good work." He took up his spoon and silence fell. And I never got to say very much.

Catherine remained quiet as I turned the car out of the courtyard and headed for Maybury. "Has the bishop sworn you to silence?" But her face was fixed on the road ahead. "Catherine, are you all right?"

"Of course I am," she said. "Rather a shock, that's all. The Reverend Watkinson is dead."

I pulled the car over to the side of the road. "Good Heavens..."

"On Monday morning his sister found him at the bottom of the stairs. The Bishop was informed yesterday and called me immediately. Ellen, you won't believe what he's asked me to do."

"Go on..."

"He has requested that I reconvene the parochial church council. Ellen, I have to do this to appoint a new vicar. And do so as soon as possible." She took a deep breath. "The bishop has informed – with greatest curtesy of course – that as the highest ranked in the parish, it is a duty one must carry out. I opened my mouth but words failed me. Can you believe it, Ellen? He guessed, of course. Dismissed with a wave of the hand before I could speak: Queen Elizabeth was twenty-five when she succeeded and Edward the Sixth only nine. What can one say?"

"Good Lord..."

"Quite so, Ellen, one does most sincerely wish for the good Lord but..." at that she faltered and pressed her hands to the dashboard. "Please drive on," she demanded. "Drive to the Roberts. They will know."

"Wait a minute," I said, "Why are we doing this?"

"We have to make a start. Now please drive on."

"Catherine, why 'we'?"

"Because..." she faltered again. "Please, Ellen, let us do it together."

I slipped the car into gear and we moved off.

However, at Maybury gates I stopped. "Catherine, this is for you to do. Not me. Tell me about it later." I got out and held the door for her. She said not a word but head high and face set, she slid into the driving seat and drove off. Quite the earl's daughter, I thought, and smiled for her proudly.

Four o'clock came and she wasn't back. I made a pot of tea. Of course I wasn't worried. Only curious. I'd been working on one of the flower beds, wearing boots and dungarees, digging out bramble and nettle, when it struck me: the vicar was dead. Unable to wait any longer, I put away the spade and set off on my bicycle down the back drive to the farm.

Why?

I wasn't worried. Why should I be worried? About Catherine? Were we the only ones to know about the vicar? There, at the farm gate, it all seemed to pile up. Where was the Alvis? Inside the yard? No. Always so tidy, only a few hens pecking about. Had she gone back? Would she be wondering where I was since my empty cup and saucer would still be on the kitchen table? I peddled back along the track. But she wouldn't have come this way. Not in the car. Then I heard voices. I was by the walled garden and I heard her... the other side... inside the garden. The wall was tumbled here. I propped the bicycle and clambered up the loose piles of bricks to see Catherine addressing Mr Hoskins, the gardener.

"Really, Mr Hoskins, I don't think this is safe for you. Onions or not, it really is not safe. Oh..." she'd seen me. "What are you doing here? Ellen, this wall is not safe. Really, you should know better. What are you doing here, anyway?" I carefully made my way down into the garden and dusted my hands on my dungarees. Mr Hoskins touched his cap and I nodded to him. "I just came looking, that's all." I don't think Catherine quite believed me.

"Well, since you're here," she said, "Mr Hoskins has kindly agreed to join the church council. Or I should say: re-join as he was a member before the war. The Roberts as well. So isn't that good? And we've arranged to have our first meeting on Thursday afternoon in the church and we hope others will come along too. Now, Mr Hoskins, I don't want you working near this wall again. Do you understand? It is not safe." Then to me, "Mr Hoskins has built a shelter here against the wall to dry his onions but it keeps crumbling away." There was a steady grin from under the old gentleman's cap. I could have smiled: Catherine in her smart city wear fresh from visiting the bishop, expounding like this about an onion shelter. She noticed I wasn't listening and with a brief nod to the gardener, came away.

"Things to talk about," she said quietly. "Let's go to our special place."

I took her hand. "Yes, let's."

"Why, what's the matter?" she said, realising agitation.

I didn't reply, simply pushed branches out of the way until we were there. Where, as usual we were greeted by the quietness and easement. As it always had, always did. Still does. We sat close together. She unpinned her hat, slipped off her jacket. I pressed my hands together, waiting.

"Well," she repeated, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Yes, there is."

"Just been a bit of a crazy day, that's all."

"Yes, it has, hasn't it. And all rather sudden." There came a pause. "Mrs Roberts knew about you and the vicar." For a moment I wasn't sure I'd heard correctly, then I froze. "Sorry," she went on, "I thought you should know, that's all. As I was leaving, Mrs Roberts took me aside. She had worked it out. Quite astute, that woman. She said he was never the same after his wife passed away. When you were present, he had wandering eyes. That was how she put it."

"For God's sake," I blurted out.

"But since he's dead he can't hurt you anymore."

"Hurt me, hurt me! How many know of this?"

"No one. Mrs Robert's is safe."

"Oh for God's sake..."

"Ellen, it's over. He's gone. Put it behind."

I lifted my eyes to that place, to allow its enfolding calm to take me and steady me. "Catherine, why have you told me this?"

She shrugged. "One should know these things. You and I don't have secrets."

57. The National Trust and Maybury Moves On

I was annoyed. Catherine has had a letter from a new man at the National Trust saying he would like to visit us. I remembered the visit twelve months previous and that person, Mr Knox, who was so unhelpful.

"One hopes this man will be different," said Catherine, passing a single type-written sheet to me. We were sitting at the kitchen table, our breakfast of porridge finished and awaiting clearing away.

"Why do you think that? Oh..." a little handwritten aside had caught my eye: *I very much look forward to meeting you both...* "Does he indeed?" I mused. "Let us hope he will be more helpful than his predecessor."

We were at the same landing window. Catherine said, "Remember last year, Ellen, watching a smoky little car drive up to our front door and remembering that once there were Rolls Royces and Lagondas here."

"And we raided your mother's wardrobe."

"To play the part of ladies for someone who had so little to say."

"He's here," I said. "And bigger car this time."

"Let us hope for a bigger man."

We made our way down the grand staircase as the doorbell sounded.

Mr McIntyre was not bigger but he did smile. I thought that a good start. We introduced ourselves and went into the drawing room. He was also very courteous, and I liked that. He seemed a man who was used to the company of... well, well-bred ladies. I had a little smile. He patiently waited while I poured coffee. We sat and listened and said nothing as he reiterated what we already knew. I was beginning to feel disappointed. I stole a glance at Catherine. Then he suddenly said, "But that was then, Lady Shelham. Maybury has moved on. I wonder, can I see around. Would that be all right, do you think?"

I guessed Catherine's patience was beginning to slip, she was on her feet in an instant. "Of course, Mr McIntyre. Where first?"

"Outside? Would that be all right?"

They quickly struck up a conversation. I followed, remembering to wedge the door so we didn't get shut out. I caught up with them just in time to hear the word 'maintenance'.

"Maintenance, Mr McIntyre? One does as required. The roof leaks: we see to it. A broken window: we put in new glass. The gutter had come away – oh yes, your Mr Knox noted it last year but did he note that it was repaired?" Suddenly she launched into the shrubbery – mindful of her nylons, of course – to point up at the eaves. "D'you see, Mr McIntyre? A job well done."

"By whom, if I may ask?"

"By Ellen here. I held the ladder..." she grinned impishly. "Because of one's head for heights, you see."

The man took a step back. "Lady Shelham, that isn't right. Ladders are not for..."

"Ladies? Bad show, Mr McIntyre, we do as required, don't we Ellen?"

"Is there no one you can engage?"

"Yes, I employ a man. A good worker. But he also does my estate." She came to join us on the path. "You see, it is how things are. My dear grandmama saw to it that Maybury Park is our home. But the parish of Maybury – larger than the Park,

I would add – is in my tenure, with many homes and families that make most urgent demands on their landlord. I'm sure you will understand, Mr McIntyre."

"Lady Shelham, should you not consider a housekeeper at least?"

"Mr McKintyre," I snapped. "We housekeep here. Maybury does not employ servants now."

The man straightened. "Lady Shelham, Miss Macpherson, please allow me to explain. As occupants of Maybury you may – if you feel so inclined and to be frank – it would be most welcome if you would assume the National Trust role here and do whatever you deem necessary and employ whomsoever you require. I have already arranged with our head office to handle any such costs incurred by the house and estate. Would that be agreeable to you?"

Catherine was quite taken aback. "This is most unexpected."

"It is how the Trust feels best able deal with its responsibilities post war, I'm afraid; to encourage wherever possible donor families to continue to look after their properties. And as I understand, Lady Eleanor, your grandmother, was most supportive of this position. I do hope you approve."

The smile widened across his face as if there was really no alternative. I don't believe there was, such was Britain at that time: bankrupt.

However, we continued our tour with Mr McKintyre. Indeed, we had little alternative but to accept his comments as the work required was clear enough. He was quite intrigued to find an upstairs room still holding hospital beds. "These could remain," he said.

"Whatever for?" I asked. "The war is over."

He considered for a moment. "Who can say what interest there may be in the future years as regards the contribution made by Polish forces to the war." Catherine fluttered her eye lashes. I knew what was going through her mind. It was done with... who would possibly want to go back over all that? Catherine was ready for the next part of the Maybury story whatever that might turn out to be. And rather to my dismay, I have to say.

She'd cycled into the village and was caught by Mrs Roberts, daughter Bunty, and the pony trap being loaded from one of the cottages. She asked what was going on.

"Water leak," replied Bunty, "Bad. Mrs Carter and her husband need to move out."

"Oh dear," said Catherine. "But where to?"

Like mother, like daughter, Bunty Roberts was never one to be backward. She added with serious due reverence, "Your Ladyship, it's for you to decide."

Catherine told me later, "Our meeting with Mr McIntyre, Ellen, was fortuitous. Mrs Carter and her husband are moving into the house today. I have told them to take the rooms occupied by your mother before the war."

We were in the drawing room, in our armchairs. Seeing my expression she got up and came over. "Please don't be angry with me, dear. I know it contradicts your social disposition but as we now carry National Trust responsibility here one feels it perfectly right."

"But Mrs Carter was my schoolteacher. An ogre..."

"Oh how ridiculous! She did you well. Dear grandmama saw to it."

"I will not have her a servant..."

"No, but she may housekeep. And her husband – an excellent fellow, I'm told, is a most useful handyman – so let there be no argument. Please do not be angry. Things are changed. I have decided."

I could have smacked her... and smacked her hard... her bottom was close enough. But I did not, just gently patted her. "You're a good girl," I said. "As usual, we'll do it together."

Tibs trotted the trap merrily up the drive with Mrs Roberts at the reins while behind Mr and Mrs Carter squeezed primly next to Bunty Roberts. I said, "Has the daughter taken over?"

"Mmm..." replied Catherine thoughtfully. "One wonders what will come of it."

Round into the courtyard and everyone clambered down, leaving Tibs snuffling into his bran bag. We greeted them. I could not help thinking how odd: Catherine and I, companion ladies of this great house welcoming a homeless couple from the village. Real parish relief and that made me pleased. Of course I forgave Catherine but as she said, "We will see what comes of it."

The Carter's furniture was moved in. There was not a great deal: two ordinary chairs, a double bed and washstand with chamfered mirror in pretty carved frame. Without thinking I took Catherine's arm and we moved out of the way as they and the Roberts carried everything along our back corridor to where my mother gave birth to me twenty-five years before. Let this happen. It's for others now. And we will see to it. And suddenly that sense came over us – I felt the tremor run through Catherine – we were really putting Maybury back together again. Our home and we would share. Never as before... that was gone. But we both felt it so perfectly right.

Catherine cycled off to meet her agent Mr Stevens to acquaint him with latest developments regarding Maybury Park and the National Trust and review her own property situation. I know she was concerned that yet another of the cottages had fallen into such disrepair that it had to be vacated. "I will see to the Carters," I said, waving her off down the drive. She blew me a kiss in reply. She was really upbeat over this sudden shift in circumstances.

But I was anxious. I did not know Mr Carter but Mrs Carter was school mistress and highly respected by village children. Straight of back, grey hair in a net, strict demeanour, but a face that readily smiled kindness. The school was built on the edge of the village in Victorian times by the Shelham family, meaning it now falls into Catherine's curtilage. I was one of three children to attend from Maybury Park. And as daughter of the housekeeper to the Earl, things were expected of me. Well, looking back, I think I did all right, much of which was down to Mrs Carter, and my mother of course, never forgetting the long arm of the redoubtable Dowager Lady Eleanor. That respect for Mrs Carter has stayed with me and so, on that day, I kept out of the way as she and her husband made their new home with us.

But shocks were still to come as I was to find out. I'd been in my octagon office going through more old family records, and was on my way down the grand staircase when I saw Mrs Carter below in the hall.

"Miss Ellen... do forgive me for intruding but..." she stopped, one hand clutching something to her chest and in evident distress. "I came upon this... I pulled a drawer out of the dresser... the one in the housekeeper's room and this fell onto

the floor. It must have been there from..." she paused to draw breath. "I couldn't help but glimpse inside. Please forgive me," and she thrust a torn-open envelope stuffed with letters into my hand before hurrying off.

Yes, it was a shock. A long time sinking in. The envelope addressed: Macpherson, c/o Maybury Park, England, in one corner a stamp US Postage. I turned it over and the letters spilled out. I caught them, small pages. A dozen? In a scrawly pencil, a man's hand. Yes, a man's hand. Not female. No female tidiness. No name. No date. None of it I recognised. Gibberish...

...we dock at 10 so not too late. Much to say... can't wait for you know what - smile cheeky smile for me.

Late for what? Who will smile?

I sat in that great hall of Maybury Park and tried to let all this in. The name Macpherson on an envelope I knew nothing of. Letters... but not for me. Shuffling and turning them, suddenly one page tore. Not across, still joined but the shock of it, the unknown fragility. Had this envelope carried one of the letters? Or all of them? Returning to sender? From America. How could I possibly know? And why America? I was left staring at the corridor where Mrs Carter had made her exit only minutes ago and then at the letters, pressed into my lap, and the name... my name: Macpherson. I wonder, did Mrs Carter realise they were written by my father?

58. Letters and Secrets

The letters, I decided, were nothing to do with me. If they were written by my father – and I could only assume that they were – then it would be before I was born and better that they were thrown away. But I did not throw them away. They remained on my dressing table, staring at me. The only tangible connection with the father I never knew somehow clung on. I could hardly bring myself to touch them... in truth, I hid them under the morning paper. It was as if I was jinxed by them! His hand... his love ramblings that had lain in this house all this time, jinxed me.

I would post them to my mother. To this day I have no idea why I chose to send them to my mother. I wrapped them round and round in brown paper, tied with string, firmly knotted and dabbed on sealing wax, and was off to the Post Office straight after breakfast. I didn't even tell Catherine.

But the jinx followed. Buying a stamp for the parcel, the girl behind the counter caused a rumpus. Catherine and I have come up against this person before, she seems to have a real chip on her shoulder where we're concerned. Why? It can only be because of who we are and where we live. That day I handed over the parcel, got out my purse for a sixpence, and when I looked up the girl was licking the stamp and before I could stop her, she'd stuck the stamp on upside down. I could not believe it.

"Why did you do that?" I demanded. "The stamp is upside down."

She smirked, smacked the change from the sixpence down on the counter, franked my parcel and dropped it into the mail bag behind her, and turned to the next customer.

"Excuse me," I said. "That stamp is upside down."

"So?" she snapped.

"The king's head is upside down. Don't you know that to turn the monarch upside down is an insult."

"Then you'd better not let him see it."

"I demand you take out my parcel and put it right."

"That sack is Post Office property now. Not yours."

By now the whole place was quiet, waiting and watching. "I'm very sorry," I said to everyone. "But there's a snag here..."

The girl bounced to her feet, belligerent. "You're the snag, **Miss**," spitting out the last word. "Strutting in here from the big house in your lipstick, fine hair and fancy clothes... and wearing her ring on your finger. Oh yes, I know. We all know... you and your pretty lady." And she turned to the next customer – a mild faced man who seemed utterly confused – with a terse, "Yes."

I went out. Someone spoke to me but I don't know who. I would have crossed the street but the baker's van was going by. Then something hit me on the back. I twisted round to see the post girl swinging the mail bag, keys in hand ready to open the post box. She deliberately swung the heavy bag at me again, pushing me out of her way to get to the box. I almost fell. She emptied the mail into the bag. It was over in no time.

I was left with my hair all over the place, a hair clip gone, and a sore place near my eye.

"Miss Macpherson, are you all right?" Sergeant Jones was staring into my face.

"Yes, thank you, Sergeant."

"I saw what happened..."

"It's all right, Sergeant."

He bent down to retrieve my hair clip. "This is the Post Office, Miss." He looked closely at me. "That bag has marked your face. I should report this."

"No, Sergeant, let it be."

"Well, if you're sure, Miss." He handed me my hair clip.

I forced a smile and thanked him.

Catherine was livid when I told her. "That girl needs a good hiding! Sit down and let me see your face." She had a cold flannel. "Keep still, keep still. There... only a bruise." She placed the flannel over my eye and told me to hold it there, and sat by me.

We were sitting on the bench in the courtyard. It was pleasantly sunny and I wriggled to get comfortable while holding tight to the flannel. But Catherine was not done. "And to criticise ones dress. And in front of others. Shocking, quite shocking." She paused, eyes fluttering, "You weren't wearing anything outrageous, were you?"

I gave her a one-eyed smile. "Of course not. Just trousers and flowery blouse. Quite ordinary, really. Oh and favourite lipstick."

"All because of mysterious letters." She looked hard at me. "Ellen, are you telling me everything?"

"Yes..."

"You were funny this morning, that's all."

I sighed. "Well it was rather shock. Mrs Carter seeing my father's love letters to God-knows-who spilling out his secrets all the floor. I had to go and see her this morning to tell her not to worry. She thanked me and... well, would you believe, she asked about rent."

"Good Lord..." muttered Catherine.

"Yes," I said, thankful for the change of subject. "She asked how much it would be."

Catherine gave a little snort. "How perverse. I employ an agent to collect all my rents while it seems I must collect for the National Trust."

"Do we know how much?" I asked.

"Ellen, there is no rent book."

"I'm sure we can find one but what do we charge? This isn't the cottage, remember. One small bedroom..."

"But decent size living room," she replied. "And bathroom. We must consider that."

"But it can't be as much as the cottage."

She hummed, unsure. "No, of course not."

"Let's knock a couple of bob off."

"Really, Ellen..." then after a moment's thought, "Yes, you're quite right."

"Then I've got an old exercise book that'll do for the rent."

We both sighed with relief and stretched out our legs into the sun. But I could see Catherine's mind was elsewhere.

"Ellen, all this has set me thinking." She reached up to thrust fingers into that glorious mane of dark hair. "You know, one wonders how far one should go... you know, in a charitable way." Now she was shaking her hair vigorously.

"Catherine, will you stop that. Anyone would think you've got nits." Only said in jest, and I expected a sharp jab in the ribs, but instead she was gazing up into the blue, then she said quietly, "Ellen, I have to admit, I am ashamed."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Something happened and I was careless. No, not that... not careless. You'll understand. No, no... don't stop me. It's suddenly become clear. The other day, at the church meeting... Only a little whisper, and I didn't give much thought to it... too busy thinking about a new vicar, I suppose, but... well, one wonders how far should charity go? We have just provided accommodation for the Carters. But that isn't charity, is it." She paused again.

"For goodness sake, whatever's going through your head now?"

"I think I've been asked to pay a doctor's fees. Not directly, you understand. Rather roundabout but... well, you know Mr Hoskins the gardener, the meeting in church was over and we were all filing out when – most unusual for him, you know how very courteous he always is – he pushed passed the others to catch me and whisper, 'Your Ladyship, Your Ladyship, please may I speak to you...' He was obviously upset. I said 'Of course, Mr Hoskins, what is it?' Well, it was rather garbled, poor man. And there in the church porch with others trying to get passed, I could only catch a little. But it was something about a relative and a doctor's bill, a child had had an operation and... Really, Ellen, it was quite awkward, others present, and in the doorway, I was distracted and then he was walking away, shaking his head. I think he was just too embarrassed. Now, of course, I'm worried." She straightened up, serious faced. "He must think me most discourteous."

"But you don't know what he wanted."

"I don't think he could bring himself to tell me."

"Then you must see him."

"But he's such a proud old gentleman."

"Catherine, he's known you since you were tiny. You're worried. He's worried. Go and find out what it's all about."

"Ellen, one cannot just knock on a door and ask about that sort of thing."

"No, you simply say sorry you didn't manage to talk to him the other day. He'll invite you in. Believe me. Just go and sit with him."

"You're so much better than I am at this sort of thing."

"Rubbish! Don't think about it. Just smile and be yourself."

"Yes, of course... You're quite right."

"Go now. He'll be home. By the time you get there he'll have had his afternoon nap." I squeezed her hand as she got up but I don't think she noticed.

She was gone over an hour. As soon as I heard the car turn into the courtyard I put the kettle on, prepared a tray and took it into the drawing room. She came in, removed her hat, undid her tunic, sighed and sat down and began.

"Oh, Ellen, the things I've learnt you would not believe. You were quite right, Mr Hoskins invited me in. His wife was there but a strange thing happened: Mrs Hoskins excused herself. It was as if what we were going to discuss was not her concern. I thought that quite odd. And the poor man was very troubled. Not at all like his usual self, upright man of the soil that we know so well. I asked him how he was and he answered well enough. And then I found it easy – that little aside helped and he seemed to let go. A relief, I think. There's a child, little boy, five years

old, who had an operation that was expected to be straightforward, but wasn't. I won't go into detail but it required further treatment. The doctor prescribed this new penicillin. By then the poor man had tears in his eyes. I said, 'Mr Hoskins, please tell me what it is.' He said, 'Your Ladyship doesn't know the whole of it.' 'Then tell me,' I said. He had such difficulty, Ellen. The poor man was struggling to keep himself together. 'Our family has never asked for anything,' he said. 'Not once... no never. But it has come about and I'm ashamed to ask now.' He began to sob. Oh, the poor man broke down, saying 'It isn't right, it isn't right.' Ellen, I held his hand. I did. I took his hand and held it. Oh that was a comfort to us both. And here I go as well..." and she dabbed a finger to her eyes. "And then it all came out. Just tumbled out... Ellen, it's that girl in the Post Office. She's his niece. The little boy is hers... taken poorly last year with TB gland. Nothing must be said, of course because the father isn't..." Catherine was slowly shaking her head. The inference was clear enough.

"Lucky girl," I said. "To have such a good family.

"I've already seen the doctor and paid the bill."

I gave her hand a squeeze, and this time she did notice.

59. We Acquire a Jeep Among Other Things

We were disturbed at breakfast by a lot of noise and a vehicle sweeping into the courtyard. "I know that sound," I said, jumping up and going to the window. "Good Lord. Yes, it is..." I flung open the door and called to Catherine. "Come and see this."

Right up close to our door was an ex-army jeep with a grinning John Roberts at the wheel. There was more revving, exhaust smoke swirled around us and I pulled the door to.

"Well, young John, what's all this..." but I was interrupted by a burst of more noise and smoke, and then sudden silence.

Catherine was not amused. She wafted her hand across her face. "Really, Ellen, one wonders..." she gave me a long hard look. "Is this your doing?"

"No it is not."

She stepped out into the courtyard, hands on hips. "Well, John Roberts, explain if you will... now what is the fellow doing?"

"Just checking something," came the reply followed by the bonnet banging "Sorry, your Ladyship, but I gave the engine a dose of mineral oil and I was just making sure it's okay. Soon clear."

"Well if you're satisfied with its medicine, will you please now tell us what all this is about?"

The young man proudly propped himself against the side of the jeep, "Dad got a bargain: two jeeps. We thought one would do as spares for the other. But both turned out okay. Cleaned up well. Know what I mean? Good runners, just needed a proper going over, change oil and plugs. I swapped the transfer box from the other because this one's smoother."

I went over, placed a hand on the windscreen and looked inside. All clean and tidy, seats not too worn. "Johnny, what are you saying?"

"Not bad is it..." he said ignoring my question.

"No, it's not but why is it here?"

"We were just thinking, that's all. You know... useful round the estate, get jobs done."

"This isn't anything to do with the National Trust, is it?"

"Oh no..." he took a deep breath as if, suddenly, he'd been rumbled. "We made two good ones and... well, Dad thought you could use one."

"Johnnie, that isn't the point." I had to smile, he was quite crestfallen. "I know these and, yes, this one's a lot better than the battered one I drove into Rome. And a lot more expensive..."

"It's perfectly legit, Miss. Honest..."

"Of that I have no doubt. Which leads us to..."

At which Catherine entered the discussion. "Is one..." her eyes flicked from him to me. "Does anyone know what's going on here?"

"I think we're being offered a jeep, Catherine."

She came over rather warily. "Is that so. I never drove one."

"No, you had your posh limousine."

"Ellen, really..." she caught my grin and turned to Johnnie. "Please explain; is this an arrangement?"

"Dad says, try it out." He unfolded himself to swing over the side in one deft move and waited for us to follow. We did so but with a little more grace. I seated myself behind. Catherine sat next to the driver, watching... and with some

apprehension as Johnie pressed the starter and called out, "Hold tight, ladies," and we were off. Round the courtyard once and then round to the front of the house, down the drive to the gates.

"Not insured for the road," he called out as he braked to halt. Catherine held on to her seat as he swung the wheel, viewed with concern as took a couple of goes to engage low gear – which was quite near her leg – and looked up just as the coat of arms on of the gates swept by. We roared back up to the house to stop at the portico steps. Johnie jumped out and with wave of the hand, invited Catherine to take the wheel.

"You carry on," I called out, making my exit as they swapped seats. It didn't take long for Catherine to get the hang of it. I sat on the steps to watch. They went round and round the in front of the house then up and down the drive again before disappearing into the courtyard. I caught up with them just as Catherine turned off the ignition. She sat back, smiling. "Mmm... yes, one can enjoy this."

It was then I noticed Mrs Roberts had arrived in the courtyard from the farm with our delivery of produce, and Bunty was with her. But Johnnie was in full flow again, describing the various features and benefits of having a jeep. There was no ignoring Catherine enthusiasm. She asked to see under the bonnet, about tyres, and what was the 'transfer box?' I listened and I was thinking.

"Ellen, did you hear that? We don't need petrol coupons."

"What was that about petrol coupons?" Mrs Roberts was just putting down the ever-patient pony's bag of bran. "Who needs those?" she said before picking up our basket of provisions. I followed her through to the larder. But this morning Bunty brought in a second basket. Both baskets were covered. As they passed a cloth covering one of the baskets slipped and I saw what it contained. One has to remember these were the days of rationing but little etiquettes and customs of earlier times remained and contents of baskets were a private matter and no more so than where Mrs Roberts was concerned. And so it was that morning. And I would not have seen what the basket contained until Mrs Roberts had restocked our larder and left. But the cloth had slipped.

"Mrs Roberts, you shouldn't be giving us all this."

"Why not?"

"There's more than we need..."

She frowned as if insulted. "And why not?" she replied.

I pointed to a screw-top jar. There was a small pencilled label. "Is that honey?"

"Yes. The first honey of the season."

"But Mrs Roberts..."

"For you and her Ladyship."

The basket was packed... I could not help but see. "But why? I mean..."

"Because you're here. Because you're here in this house. This great house is here because you are here. And the farm. And the village. If you were not here none of us would be here. It's how it is, Miss Ellen, the farm has always provided and we will always see to it." With that both baskets were taken through to the larder and I had no answer to any of it.

I thanked her and saw her out by the kitchen door. She picked up the pony's bran and climbed up into her seat by Bunty. Johnie joined them. A little quick nod to us and a shake of the reins and off they went at an easy trot back to the farm.

"What was all that about in the larder?" Catherine came in and crossed to the sink to wash her hands.

"Oh, nothing much... usual farm delivery."

"You sounded rather put about."

"Not really..."

She dried her hands carefully, mindful of her nails.

"Jeeps are inclined to be dirty," I said.

She folded the towel and placed it on the rail. "Are you still troubled by the Roberts?"

"Catherine, have you thought about this?" Her puzzled expression said she had not. "Are we letting the Roberts take over?"

"What on earth do you mean? Oh, this isn't another of your social sympathies, is it?"

I walked away.

I was in my pentagon office, not doing anything particular, just sitting watching a pair of blackbirds jostling each other in the central bed, scattering dead leaves, seeking insects. The fountain was overgrown. It hadn't worked for a long time. Before the war, as I remember. It was late afternoon, the sun had moved round. I folded my arms as if to close off a difficult thought. The blackbirds had gone. I was aware of the door behind me opening. She came to stand behind me.

She spoke softly, "We used to sit back to each other."

"When we were upset with each other."

"We were children then."

"Aren't we still?"

I pulled her arms around me. She stroked my hair. She said, "I love the scent of your hair."

60. We Invite the Village and get a Regal Surprise

I could have been flabbergasted. Had I heard correctly? That we were inviting the village to Maybury Park? Indeed it seemed that this was the case: Catherine had made up her mind. "I'm sure it is how dear Grandmamma would have wished. Come now, Ellen, what have you to say? Don't stare at me as if you have no opinion because I know you too well for that."

At last I found words. "And what if I say I don't approve?"

"Then I will say rubbish! You love Maybury as much as I. Of course one will approve."

Oh what a high she was on and who was I to argue!

We put a poster in the Post Office window, another in the church porch. Each a simple sheet of paper written in coloured crayon:

WE INVITE **YOU** TO MAYBURY
Saturday next
Catherine Shelham and Ellen Macpherson
Look Forward to
*Welcoming **You** to Maybury Park*

Catherine said as we left the Post Office, "That post girl was very quiet about it, don't you think?"

"So she should be after the favour you did last week for her child," I replied. "Her aunt pinned up our notice straightaway."

We had cycled down to the village and were about to return when I heard a familiar voice call. "Ellen, I'd like to help." It was Angela Russell. "Will you be doing teas?" We hadn't thought of that but from there on things moved quickly. As soon as the Mrs Roberts found out she also volunteered, as did other's from the WI and Mothers' Union.

The biggest surprise, though, was Mr Foxhall the baker. His little van appeared in the courtyard just as we were putting our bicycles away. Wide of girth, waxed moustache and rosy cheeks, but a likeable if flamboyant fellow and first rate baker who never once failed us at Maybury. What he had to say that day was completely unexpected.

"Lady Shelham, Miss Macpherson, I saw your notice. Forgive me, but I'm sure you will know the importance of the date of the Saturday in question."

We had no idea.

"On that day 400 years ago King Charles passed through Maybury on his way to gather support against Cromwell. I wonder – though far be it from me wishing to impose – but if maybe this could be reason for celebration? A small commemoration? Nothing more, a token, a reminder. I would see to it all, your Ladyship. No need for you or Miss Macpherson to be concerned. But the opportunity to show the village a little of its history is there should you think it appropriate, of course. So much has happened in recent years that much of what has gone before is at risk of being forgotten. The setting on your lawn would be ideal for a pageant."

Catherine raised an eyebrow. "A pageant, Mr Foxhall?"

"Yes, I would see to everything. Hire of costumes and accessories. I have connections with theatrical costumeries in town. The king would present mounted with his entourage but that is no matter. Mr Trott, the ostler from your father's time, Lady Shelham, has been approached." Clearly, this had already gone well into planning. And he was not finished. "Something for the children as well. Mrs Foxhall and I were thinking to prepare a small picnic for the children. They – and their parents – I'm sure, would appreciate that and the cost would be very reasonable."

How could we possibly refuse?

Before the day was out I had attached a note to our posters in the village:

In Addition...
There will be a Pageant of Celebration
-- King Charles Victory over Cromwell --
by Mr Foxhall

Little thought was given to the possibility of anti-Royalist sentiment and no thought whatsoever to the king's eventual surrender...

As to plans for the day, I have to admit to being pleased as we had no experience of doing anything like this before. However, we set a few rules. Teas to be served outside on the lawn, a route through the house was decided with some rooms locked while the gardens would be open but most importantly, our special place by the lake would remain our secret.

I hoped for a nice day. And Saturday wasn't far away, we hadn't given ourselves a great deal of time. What would we wear? What else but respectable summer dresses in the presence of a monarch! Would we conduct tours? Possibly.

The day duly arrived, bright and promising. Husbands were recruited to help. Tables were found in the stables and dusted them off, and Mrs Carter's husband mowed an area of lawn for them to be set up and served from. Two large teapots and one large kettle were produced by the WI. I have to say there seemed more to do with refreshments than house but I wouldn't interfere. Catherine just let it happen, and wisely so.

Mr Foxhall arrived early... no one noticed until we heard the loud clang of the front door bell (he was the 'king', after all). Before I could enquire, he told me exactly what he required, "Any convenient room, Miss Macpherson." He carried a large holdall over one shoulder. "Mrs Foxhall has more. Habit of ENSA times. I'm sure you will remember," he winked and twirled his moustache.

I conducted him upstairs and handed him the key to the room next to my octagon office. Mrs Foxhall followed, likewise laden, smiling silently, knowing her part in all this.

I left them to it.

With no indication of who or how many might attend we could do nothing but wait. We put our two deckchairs on the lawn and then realised we wouldn't be seen from the back drive if folk came that way. Of course, there was no need to worry – the children found us. They quickly got used to playing in the garden. Young Tommy Russell proudly showed off all he knew, leading a group on discovery to the orchard. His mother demanded that he be careful and not climb

any of the trees. His sister Lizzie arrived, ready to help and eager to relate how her studies were going.

Catherine and I found ourselves with precious little to do. Were we surprised? Well, we accepted. The village women seemed altogether very willing, their children were occupied, they themselves seeming to enjoy the welcome change.

It made me think about our new role as guardians on behalf of the National Trust: how we might present Maybury Park to the curious public. As for the Foxhalls... where were they? Were we the only ones waiting in anticipation?

However, there came about an unexpected distraction: the children discovered the jeep.

I had put it next to the Alvis in the stable but they tried the door and it wasn't locked. I heard the horn sound and went straight over. One might know that by then the jeep would hold near magical appeal. Jeeps had been seen in every wartime cinema newsreel, and later, of course, as convoys going home as Catherine and I had ourselves witnessed. Now, to be actually close up and clamber inside, was for them, wonderful. There was no harm done. Jeeps were tough, built for a war, and had survived. Nonetheless, seeing them running around the stables I called to young Tommy Russell and an older boy: "Now you're in charge. Make sure not to damage anything." It was interesting to observe them: youngsters taking seriously what was for them the unfamiliar but exciting. I peeked in later to see Tommy and his friend discussing how fast the jeep could go compared to the Alvis and solely based on the speedometer dials. "The jeep only goes to 50 miles an hour but this one..." there was a scuffling of feet, "This one goes to... can't make it out through the window."

"I'm taller. Let me see," said the other. "Oh the Alvis goes to 80 miles an hour." And that seemed to settle it.

Then we heard a different horn. "That's a hunting horn if I'm not mistaken. There it is again... the far side of the lawn." We hurried across to where the huge old willow that filled that part of the garden, reaching right to the ground and concealing ... we weren't sure what. We were quickly joined by others.

A figure appeared through the willow fronds, a young face, and another, determined to be serious. The pageant had begun. And reverently, like a curtain, the willow parted to reveal the King in all his pomp and dignity. Huge Cavalier hat and ostrich plume, doublet and high boots, scarlet sash, sword a-swinging. Silence fell. A moment later the horn sounded again and from somewhere a voice pronounced: "All Hail His Majesty, the King..." and with a great thespian flourish the hat was swept across the scene. The horn sounded again but this time and for some reason – the horse shied. How fortunate that poor Mr Foxhall was able to let go the hat and grab the horse's mane in time to steady himself before coming to rest on the ground. The ostler was quickly there, helping to feet, untangling sword, heaving the monarch back into place, and broad smiles all round, everyone clapped. It was the highpoint of the afternoon. The pageant processed twice around the garden before retiring inside the giant willow.

Now tables were set out and the children were called for their picnic of cake and lemon barley water. The latter was served from a large brewing vat and by now this was the most popular after the jeep and it was gulped down.

And I should have expected, I suppose... a familiar voice close by, asking: "Miss, can we have a ride in the jeep?" It was Tommy. Now, rather stupidly, I had given no thought to this. I wasn't suitably dressed. The pedals demanded boots and as

for a dress... after the seats had been scrambled all over, but Catherine merely grinned and said, "Ellen, you know all about jeeps."

The boy's face was full of eagerness. His mother, though, was serious. "Tommy, you shouldn't ask..."

Disappointed, the boy turned away. But others had gathered, and all now eager for a ride. "Please, Miss, please, Miss..." there was no going back.

"Righto," I said, "How many want a ride?" Silly question. I couldn't count how many hands shot up. I went inside to change into boots but as for my dress, it would have to take its chance – and as for the hazardous getting legs over the side, no one noticed as they were all too excited to notice my difficulties. They sat two and more to a seat, on laps, on the side... "Hey, now that's not safe. Get inside properly, all of you. Yes, you as well, Tommy, and your friend. I'm driving nowhere until you're holding on tight. Some of you will have to wait, won't you." I pressed my foot on the starter. "Now remember, hold on!" And we were off. Only around the courtyard, I thought that quite sufficient, then all change.

It all went well – too well – the second crowd were too many and with so much giggling and jiggling, one of the grannies – pinafore flying – managed to come alongside and breathlessly shout, "Stop, Miss, stop! They're hanging on the petrol tank." In the end all went well, no one fell out or fell under and everyone had a turn round the courtyard.

Meanwhile, Catherine managed the gracious, dignified part, showing around the house. She described to me afterwards that she was impressed by the interest shown. "Most positive. One could have been greeted by the kind of antagonism shown by the post office girl. But no..." she nodded perceptively, "People know some of the history now and of the National Trust connection. One feels most satisfied, oh yes."

I asked what they found the most interesting Catherine thought a moment.

"The grand stairs But not the portraits. When one considers the effort to re-hang them, it was hardly worth it. Except the one of my mother."

"Well, she was the family beauty."

"No more than you, dear," came the quick reply. "We share that, you and I. In the absence of men let that become a Maybury resolution."

I had to agree. "So where else was popular?" I asked.

"The dining room received a lot of comment. Would you believe we had offers of help to put it back as it was. One man, claimed to be a furniture restorer, offered to do some work there. And someone discovered the gramophone... thankfully, you were not there because they lifted the lid and it started to play..."

"Catherine, I'm sure I'm over that now."

"But it was so sad to see our beautiful dining room in such a state. And how do you explain a bullet hole? We really must try to do... well, something."

"Then let it be a reminder," I replied. "Let us see if these offers of assistance lead anywhere We are now officially the National Trust here."

"As for the kitchen..." continued Catherine, "Where one would expect wives to be interested... yes, they were. But only because we lived there. No mention of the great family that once lived here. All that seems to have receded into the past. As if better forgotten. One cannot help but feel a sadness there. As if..." she paused to look the other way.

"Go on," I prompted.

"As if that post girl, in some way, has a point. That all this isn't..."

"Catherine, stop it!"

She drew in a long breath. "Yes, Maybury is our home and we'll make it right again."

61. We Save the Golf Club Ladies' Summer Evening

It all began with an unexpected visit by Mr Stevens. "Ellen, please forgive me for walking into your home like this but the door was open..."

I was about to go up to my octagon office. I said, "I'm afraid Catherine is out."

"I must talk to her. It's about the golf club. There's been some financial irregularity."

I looked up at the clock. "I don't think she'll be long."

"A crime may have been committed. It is a matter of urgency." As if to add drama to the situation the Alvis swept into the courtyard. Hugh Stevens went straight out to meet Catherine. There was short conversation before she called to me. "Ellen, this may be a police matter. You could be a witness. Please join us."

Well, as far as I was concerned the golf club was better left to get on by itself and I didn't move.

"Ellen, please..."

I collected my cardigan and went out, locking the door behind me.

Catherine remained in the car and the engine was still running. Hugh Stevens held the passenger door for me. She said, "Sorry, Ellen, I know the golf club isn't favourite but I don't think we can avoid getting involved. We're going there now."

Nothing more was said. We arrived at the club but no uniformed attendant came to greet us. Mr Stevens found the door shut and locked. He banged hard. A worried Martin Maxwell answered. "Thank you for coming so promptly. I hope this isn't a police matter." We were conducted through to his office. I trailed behind still wondering what it had to do with me.

Martin Maxwell, secretary – the one man of this establishment that I had any time for – introduced the situation. "Money has gone missing. The bar cash box has been emptied. This came to light when Mr Stevens came to collect the rent and the bar steward – a man I have come to trust – opened it. And then in this morning's post cheques I issued last week have been returned. It seems our account is empty."

I caught Catherine's eye and shrugged. Suddenly, she said, "There may be a simple answer: Sir Toby Featherstone." She looked from one to the other of us. "I believe it's that illustrious knight of the realm, one-time patron of this establishment who's now slunk off back to London. This morning when I was in the bank a little bird spoke to me... just off the cuff, you understand, the manager there is very discrete but certain happenings have come about. Mr Maxwell has had cheques returned because there are no funds to cover them."

"I've had to cancel the ladies' evening," said Maxwell.

Catherine continued, "It wasn't difficult to put two and two together. Sir Toby had been supporting the golf club financially for some time and now, of a sudden, he chooses to end it." She bristled. "That man makes me angry. Very angry! He's done this to hit back at us. Yes, Ellen, you and me, because we came here – Mr Martin will remember our visit regarding the club's interference with the common. Well, he couldn't accept women interfering." She turned to the secretary. "Does that fit with what you know, Mr Maxwell?"

The fellow nodded, "Yes, it does. Sir Toby had access to everything. No was allowed to question."

"And I think that, gentlemen, kind of closes the circle. Mr Martin, please put in place the ladies' evening and resend those invitations. I will see the bank manager. The ladies are going to have their evening."

Even I had to admit to some satisfaction at the outcome of that meeting. Me, who would quite happily see the golf club disappear from the face of the earth. However, we did avoid discussing the subject further. And with so little time left it was better to leave Catherine and Martin Maxwell to pull it all together.

I wasn't involved again until Catherine asked what I would be wearing.

"Something light and cool," I said.

"Definitely," came the reply. "I have also enquired of John Roberts if he will chauffeur us, my thinking being: he will call for us at a reasonable hour, say, no later than ten. Do you agree?" Suddenly, as if a flood gate was opened, she slapped her hand down on the table. "Ellen, the club has to change. If it doesn't then I will close it."

"Well, you're in charge..."

"Mathew Martin is in full agreement. I will subsidise it for a year. One year and no more. If it changes, all to the good. If not, I'll turn it into a servicemen's recovery sanatorium. Yes, I will. What do you say?"

My mouth opened and closed.

"Oh come now, Ellen. I will make an announcement on that evening. Oh yes, I will."

I felt a smile coming... and a big one. "Then we'd better choose what to wear."

John Roberts, wearing chauffeur's cap, collected us at seven. People were about when we arrived enjoying a pleasant evening, chatting, admiring the rose beds in the evening sun. I wondered how many – if any – knew of the hiatus the club had gone through. We were greeted by Martin Maxwell, our host for the evening. He wore black tie, as were all the men escorting their ladies clutching tiny handbags. As it was for me but for the tiny handbag as my hankie was tucked away in a sleeve. And our escort? Catherine and I knew exactly how to conduct ourselves. With linked arms, we smiled and proceeded. All rather sweet, really. In the lounge we were served apéritifs, introductions were made, polite conversations begun. But of course, for us, this was all familiar ground.

Dining room seating was clearly labelled. We were seated either side of Martin Maxwell. And now I had the opportunity to survey the room. Did I recognise any of the faces? The well-to-do-of Maybury? How many did I know from church, or WI? Not many. But I was soon engaged in conversation with the elderly gentleman on my right and so my observations ended there.

I enjoyed the food, light and perfectly suited to summertime. Simple hors d'oeuvres, game, dessert, accompanied by a light white wine. One or two of the men muttered but it was for ladies, not for them.

But I could not detach myself from why we were here. I was still not sure what Catherine was going to say. And when she was on her feet anything could happen. And so it did. She had obviously arranged with Mr Maxwell to address the gathering when all was cleared away and glasses topped, he introduced her and invited her to speak.

She was in no hurry but surveyed the room from one end to the other and began. "How many women are members of this club?" The room fell quiet. "How

many women would like to be members?" Now faces turned to each other and there was a buzz of enthusiasm. "Then the club should put that right and invite women members. I suggest a ladies' day. Yes, that's right. A day exclusively for women players. I will create a new competition, the Ladies' Challenge Cup."

I heard a someone whisper, "Oh yes..." someone else clapped, followed by another. There were a couple of stern male looks and these soon faded when their owners realised they were out of favour. And Martin Maxwell seemed very satisfied.

Catherine, still on her feet, was not finished. "I will also finance the club for one year. I have agreed a plan with your secretary. He will see to it that a new committee is formed." Now she sat. Glasses were raised, there was growing applause, 'hear hears' echoed around, and it was most satisfying to note that even some of the men

