

Be Ye Men of Valour





## November 1930

A fug of tobacco smoke and damp clammy air hit her as she entered the café. She had come in from the rain and drops of water still trembled like delicate dew on the fur coats of some of the women inside. A regiment of white-aproned waiters rushed around at tempo, serving the needs of the *Münchner* at leisure – coffee, cake and gossip.

He was at a table at the far end of the room, surrounded by the usual cohorts and toadies. There was a woman she had never seen before – a permed, platinum blonde with heavy make-up – an actress by the look of her. The blonde lit a cigarette, making a phallic performance out of it. Everyone knew that he preferred his women demure and wholesome, Bavarian preferably. All those dirndls and knee-socks, God help us.

The table was laden. *Bienenstich*, *Gugelhupf*, *Käsekuchen*. He was eating a slice of *Kirschtorte*. He loved his cakes. No wonder he looked so pasty, she was surprised he wasn't diabetic. The softly repellent body (she imagined pastry) beneath the clothes, never exposed to public view. Not a manly man. He smiled when he caught sight of her and half rose, saying, '*Guten Tag, gnädiges Fräulein*,' indicating the chair next to him. The bootlicker who was currently occupying it jumped up and moved away.

'*Unsere Englische Freundin,*' he said to the blonde, who blew cigarette smoke out slowly and examined her without any interest before eventually saying, '*Guten Tag.*' A Berliner.

She placed her handbag, heavy with its cargo, on the floor next to her chair and ordered *Schokolade*. He insisted that she try the *Pflaumen Streusel*.

'*Es regnet,*' she said by way of conversation. 'It's raining.'

'Yes, it's raining,' he said with a heavy accent. He laughed, pleased at his attempt. Everyone else at the table laughed as well. '*Bravo,*' someone said. '*Sehr gutes Englisch.*' He was in a good mood, tapping the back of his index finger against his lips with an amused smile as if he was listening to a tune in his head.

The *Streusel* was delicious.

'*Entschuldigung,*' she murmured, reaching down into her bag and delving for a handkerchief. Lace corners, monogrammed with her initials, 'UBT' – a birthday present from Pammy. She dabbed politely at the *Streusel* flakes on her lips and then bent down again to put the handkerchief back in her bag and retrieve the weighty object nesting there. Her father's old service revolver from the Great War, a Webley Mark V.

A move rehearsed a hundred times. One shot. Swiftmess was all, yet there was a moment, a bubble suspended in time after she had drawn the gun and levelled it at his heart when everything seemed to stop.

'*Führer,*' she said, breaking the spell. '*Für Sie.*'

Around the table guns were jerked from holsters and pointed at her. One breath. One shot.

Ursula pulled the trigger.

Darkness fell.

# Snow





*11 February 1910*

An icy rush of air, a freezing slipstream on the newly exposed skin. She is, with no warning, outside the inside and the familiar wet, tropical world has suddenly evaporated. Exposed to the elements. A prawn peeled, a nut shelled.

No breath. All the world come down to this. One breath.

Little lungs, like dragonfly wings failing to inflate in the foreign atmosphere. No wind in the strangled pipe. The buzzing of a thousand bees in the tiny curled pearl of an ear.

Panic. The drowning girl, the falling bird.



'Dr Fellowes should have been here,' Sylvie moaned. 'Why isn't he here yet? Where is he?' Big dewdrop pearls of sweat on her skin, a horse nearing the end of a hard race. The bedroom fire stoked like a ship's furnace. The thick brocade curtains drawn tightly against the enemy, the night. The black bat.

'Yer man'll be stuck in the snow, I expect, ma'am. It's sure dreadful wild out there. The road will be closed.'

Sylvie and Bridget were alone in their ordeal. Alice, the parlour maid, was visiting her sick mother. And Hugh, of course, was chasing down Isobel, his wild goose of a sister, *à Paris*. Sylvie had no wish to involve Mrs Glover, snoring in her attic room like a truffling hog. Sylvie imagined she would conduct proceedings like a parade-ground sergeant-major. The baby was early. Sylvie was expecting it to be late like the others. The best-laid plans, and so on.

'Oh, ma'am,' Bridget cried suddenly, 'she's all blue, so she is.'

'A girl?'

'The cord's wrapped around her neck. Oh, Mary, Mother of God. She's been strangled, the poor wee thing.'

'Not breathing? Let me see her. We must do something. What can we do?'

'Oh, Mrs Todd, ma'am, she's gone. Dead before she had a chance to live. I'm awful, awful sorry. She'll be a little cherub in heaven now, for sure. Oh, I wish Mr Todd was here. I'm awful sorry. Shall I wake Mrs Glover?'

The little heart. A helpless little heart beating wildly. Stopped suddenly like a bird dropped from the sky. A single shot.

Darkness fell.

# Snow





11 February 1910

'For God's sake, girl, stop running around like a headless chicken and fetch some hot water and towels. Do you know nothing? Were you raised in a field?'

'Sorry, sir.' Bridget dipped an apologetic curtsy as if Dr Fellowes were minor royalty.

'A girl, Dr Fellowes? May I see her?'

'Yes, Mrs Todd, a bonny, bouncing baby girl.' Sylvie thought Dr Fellowes might be over-egging the pudding with his alliteration. He was not one for bonhomie at the best of times. The health of his patients, particularly their exits and entrances, seemed designed to annoy him.

'She would have died from the cord around her neck. I arrived at Fox Corner in the nick of time. Literally.' Dr Fellowes held up his surgical scissors for Sylvie's admiration. They were small and neat and their sharp points curved upwards at the end. 'Snip, snip,' he said. Sylvie made a mental note, a small, vague one, given her exhaustion and the circumstances of it, to buy just such a pair of scissors, in case of similar emergency. (Unlikely, it was true.) Or a knife, a good sharp knife to be carried on one's person at all times, like the robber-girl in *The Snow Queen*.

'You were lucky I got here in time,' Dr Fellowes said.

'Before the snow closed the roads. I called for Mrs Haddock, the midwife, but I believe she is stuck somewhere outside Chalfont St Peter.'

'Mrs *Haddock*?' Sylvie said and frowned. Bridget laughed out loud and then quickly mumbled, 'Sorry, sorry, sir.' Sylvie supposed that she and Bridget were both on the edge of hysteria. Hardly surprising.

'Bog Irish,' Dr Fellowes muttered.

'Bridget's only a scullery maid, a child herself. I am very grateful to her. It all happened so quickly.' Sylvie thought how much she wanted to be alone, how she was never alone. 'You must stay until morning, I suppose, doctor,' she said reluctantly.

'Well, yes, I suppose I must,' Dr Fellowes said, equally reluctantly.

Sylvie sighed and suggested that he help himself to a glass of brandy in the kitchen. And perhaps some ham and pickles. 'Bridget will see to you.' She wanted rid of him. He had delivered all three (three!) of her children and she did not like him one bit. Only a husband should see what he saw. Pawing and poking with his instruments in her most delicate and secretive places. (But would she rather have a midwife called Mrs Haddock deliver her child?) Doctors for women should all be women themselves. Little chance of that.

Dr Fellowes lingered, humming and hawing, overseeing the washing and wrapping of the new arrival by a hot-faced Bridget. Bridget was the eldest of seven so she knew how to swaddle an infant. She was fourteen years old, ten years younger than Sylvie. When Sylvie was fourteen she was still in short skirts, in love with her pony, Tiffin. Had no idea where babies came from, even on her wedding

night she remained baffled. Her mother, Lottie, had hinted but had fallen shy of anatomical exactitude. Conjugal relations between man and wife seemed, mysteriously, to involve larks soaring at daybreak. Lottie was a reserved woman. Some might have said narcoleptic. Her husband, Sylvie's father, Llewellyn Beresford, was a famous society artist but not at all Bohemian. No nudity or louche behaviour in his household. He had painted Queen Alexandra, when she was still a princess. Said she was very pleasant.

They lived in a good house in Mayfair, while Tiffin was stabled in a mews near Hyde Park. In darker moments, Sylvie was wont to cheer herself up by imagining that she was back there in the sunny past, sitting neatly in her side-saddle on Tiffin's broad little back, trotting along Rotten Row on a clean spring morning, the blossom bright on the trees.

'How about some hot tea and a nice bit of buttered toast, Mrs Todd?' Bridget said.

'That would be lovely, Bridget.'

The baby, bandaged like a Pharaonic mummy, was finally passed to Sylvie. Softly, she stroked the peachy cheek and said, 'Hello, little one,' and Dr Fellowes turned away so as not to be a witness to such syrupy demonstrations of affection. He would have all children brought up in a new Sparta if it were up to him.

'Well, perhaps a little cold collation wouldn't go amiss,' he said. 'Is there, by chance, any of Mrs Glover's excellent piccalilli?'



Four Seasons Fill the  
Measure of the Year





*11 February 1910*

Sylvie was woken by a dazzling sliver of sunlight piercing the curtains like a shining silver sword. She lay languidly in lace and cashmere as Mrs Glover came into the room, proudly bearing a huge breakfast tray. Only an occasion of some importance seemed capable of drawing Mrs Glover this far out of her lair. A single, half-frozen snowdrop drooped in the bud vase on the tray. 'Oh, a snowdrop!' Sylvie said. 'The first flower to raise its poor head above the ground. How brave it is!'

Mrs Glover, who did not believe that flowers were capable of courage, or indeed any other character trait, laudable or otherwise, was a widow who had only been with them at Fox Corner a few weeks. Before her advent there had been a woman called Mary who slouched a great deal and burnt the roasts. Mrs Glover tended, if anything, to undercook food. In the prosperous household of Sylvie's childhood, Cook was called 'Cook' but Mrs Glover preferred 'Mrs Glover'. It made her irreplaceable. Sylvie still stubbornly thought of her as Cook.

'Thank you, Cook.' Mrs Glover blinked slowly like a lizard. 'Mrs Glover,' Sylvie corrected herself.

Mrs Glover set the tray down on the bed and opened the

curtains. The light was extraordinary, the black bat vanquished.

'So bright,' Sylvie said, shielding her eyes.

'So much snow,' Mrs Glover said, shaking her head in what could have been wonder or aversion. It was not always easy to tell with Mrs Glover.

'Where is Dr Fellowes?' Sylvie asked.

'There was an emergency. A farmer trampled by a bull.'

'How dreadful.'

'Some men came from the village and tried to dig his automobile out but in the end my George came and gave him a ride.'

'Ah,' Sylvie said, as if suddenly understanding something that had puzzled her.

'And they call it horsepower,' Mrs Glover snorted, bull-like herself. 'That's what comes of relying on new-fangled machines.'

'Mm,' Sylvie said, reluctant to argue with such strongly held views. She was surprised that Dr Fellowes had left without examining either herself or the baby.

'He looked in on you. You were asleep,' Mrs Glover said. Sylvie sometimes wondered if Mrs Glover was a mind-reader. A perfectly horrible thought.

'He ate his breakfast first,' Mrs Glover said, displaying both approval and disapproval in the same breath. 'The man has an appetite, that's for sure.'

'I could eat a horse,' Sylvie laughed. She couldn't, of course. Tiffin popped briefly into her mind. She picked up the silver cutlery, heavy like weapons, ready to tackle Mrs Glover's devilled kidneys. 'Lovely,' she said (were they?) but Mrs Glover was already busy inspecting the baby in the cradle. ('Plump as a suckling pig.') Sylvie idly wondered if

Mrs Haddock was still stuck somewhere outside Chalfont St Peter.

'I hear the baby nearly died,' Mrs Glover said.

'Well . . .' Sylvie said. Such a fine line between living and dying. Her own father, the society portraitist, slipped on an Isfahan rug on a first-floor landing after some fine cognac one evening. The next morning he was discovered dead at the foot of the stairs. No one had heard him fall or cry out. He had just begun a portrait of the Earl of Balfour. Never finished. Obviously.

Afterwards it turned out that he had been more profligate with his money than mother and daughter realized. A secret gambler, markers all over town. He had made no provision at all for unexpected death and soon there were creditors crawling over the nice house in Mayfair. A house of cards as it turned out. Tiffin had to go. Broke Sylvie's heart, the grief greater than any she felt for her father.

'I thought his only vice was women,' her mother said, roosting temporarily on a packing case as if modelling for a pietà.

They sank into genteel and well-mannered poverty. Sylvie's mother grew pale and uninteresting, larks soared no more for her as she faded, consumed by consumption. Seventeen-year-old Sylvie was rescued from becoming an artist's model by a man she met at the post-office counter. Hugh. A rising star in the prosperous world of banking. The epitome of bourgeois respectability. What more could a beautiful but penniless girl hope for?

Lottie died with less fuss than was expected and Hugh and Sylvie married quietly on Sylvie's eighteenth birthday. ('There,' Hugh said, 'now you will never forget the

anniversary of our marriage.')

They spent their honeymoon in France, a delightful *quinzaine* in Deauville, before settling in semi-rural bliss near Beaconsfield in a house that was vaguely Lutyens in style. It had everything one could ask for – a large kitchen, a drawing room with French windows on to the lawn, a pretty morning room and several bedrooms waiting to be filled with children. There was even a little room at the back of the house for Hugh to use as a study. 'Ah, my growler,' he laughed.

It was surrounded at a discreet distance by similar houses. There was a meadow and a copse and a bluebell wood beyond with a stream running through it. The train station, no more than a halt, would allow Hugh to be at his banker's desk in less than an hour.

'Sleepy hollow,' Hugh laughed as he gallantly carried Sylvie across the threshold. It was a relatively modest dwelling (nothing like Mayfair) but nonetheless a little beyond their means, a fiscal recklessness that surprised them both.

'We should give the house a name,' Hugh said. 'The Laurels, the Pines, the Elms.'

'But we have none of those in the garden,' Sylvie pointed out. They were standing at the French windows of the newly purchased house, looking at a swathe of overgrown lawn. 'We must get a gardener,' Hugh said. The house itself was echoingly empty. They had not yet begun to fill it with the Voysey rugs and Morris fabrics and all the other aesthetic comforts of a twentieth-century house. Sylvie would have quite happily lived in Liberty's rather than the as-yet-to-be-named marital home.

'Greenacres, Fairview, Sunnymead?' Hugh offered, putting his arm around his bride.

'No.'

The previous owner of their unnamed house had sold up and gone to live in Italy. 'Imagine,' Sylvie said dreamily. She had been to Italy when she was younger, a grand tour with her father while her mother went to Eastbourne for her lungs.

'Full of Italians,' Hugh said dismissively.

'Quite. That's rather the attraction,' Sylvie said, unwinding herself from his arm.

'The Gables, the Homestead?'

'Do stop,' Sylvie said.

A fox appeared out of the shrubbery and crossed the lawn. 'Oh, look,' Sylvie said. 'How tame it seems, it must have grown used to the house being unoccupied.'

'Let's hope the local hunt isn't following on its heels,' Hugh said. 'It's a scrawny beast.'

'It's a vixen. She's a nursing mother, you can see her teats.'

Hugh blinked at such blunt terminology falling from the lips of his recently virginal bride. (One presumed. One hoped.)

'Look,' Sylvie whispered. Two small cubs sprang out on to the grass and tumbled over each other in play. 'Oh, they're such handsome little creatures!'

'Some might say vermin.'

'Perhaps they see *us* as verminous,' Sylvie said. 'Fox Corner – that's what we should call the house. No one else has a house with that name and shouldn't that be the point?'

'Really?' Hugh said doubtfully. 'It's a little whimsical, isn't it? It sounds like a children's story. *The House at Fox Corner*.'

'A little whimsy never hurt anyone.'

'Strictly speaking though,' Hugh said, 'can a house *be* a corner? Isn't it *at* one?'

So this is marriage, Sylvie thought.

Two small children peered cautiously round the door. 'Here you are,' Sylvie said, smiling. 'Maurice, Pamela, come and say hello to your new sister.'

Warily, they approached the cradle and its contents as if unsure as to what it might contain. Sylvie remembered a similar feeling when viewing her father's body in its elaborate oak and brass coffin (charitably paid for by fellow members of the Royal Academy). Or perhaps it was Mrs Glover they were chary of.

'Another girl,' Maurice said gloomily. He was five, two years older than Pamela and the man of the family for as long as Hugh was away. 'On business,' Sylvie informed people although in fact he had crossed the Channel post-haste to rescue his foolish youngest sister from the clutches of the married man with whom she had eloped to Paris.

Maurice poked a finger in the baby's face and she woke up and squawked in alarm. Mrs Glover pinched Maurice's ear. Sylvie winced but Maurice accepted the pain stoically. Sylvie thought that she really must have a word with Mrs Glover when she was feeling stronger.

'What are you going to call her?' Mrs Glover asked.

'Ursula,' Sylvie said. 'I shall call her Ursula. It means little she-bear.'

Mrs Glover nodded non-committally. The middle classes were a law unto themselves. Her own strapping son was a straightforward George. 'Tiller of the soil, from the Greek,' according to the vicar who christened him and

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George was indeed a ploughman on the nearby Ettringham Hall estate farm, as if the very naming of him had formed his destiny. Not that Mrs Glover was much given to thinking about destiny. Or Greeks, for that matter.

'Well, must be getting on,' Mrs Glover said. 'There'll be a nice steak pie for lunch. And an Egyptian pudding to follow.'

Sylvie had no idea what an Egyptian pudding was. She imagined pyramids.

'We all have to keep up our strength,' Mrs Glover said.

'Yes indeed,' Sylvie said. 'I should probably feed Ursula again for just the same reason!' She was irritated by her own invisible exclamation mark. For reasons she couldn't quite fathom, Sylvie often found herself impelled to adopt an overly cheerful tone with Mrs Glover, as if trying to restore some kind of natural balance of humours in the world.

Mrs Glover couldn't suppress a slight shudder at the sight of Sylvie's pale, blue-veined breasts surging forth from her foamy lace peignoir. She hastily shooed the children ahead of her out of the room. 'Porridge,' she announced grimly to them.

'God surely wanted this baby back,' Bridget said when she came in later that morning with a cup of steaming beef tea.

'We have been tested,' Sylvie said, 'and found not wanting.'

'This time,' Bridget said.

*May 1910*

'A telegram,' Hugh said, coming unexpectedly into the nursery and ruffling Sylvie out of the pleasant doze she had fallen into while feeding Ursula. She quickly covered herself up and said, 'A telegram? Is someone dead?' for Hugh's expression hinted at catastrophe.

'From Wiesbaden.'

'Ah,' Sylvie said. 'Izzie has had her baby then.'

'If only the bouncer hadn't been married,' Hugh said. 'He could have made an honest woman of my sister.'

'An honest woman?' Sylvie mused. 'Is there such a thing?' (Did she say that out loud?) 'And anyway, she's so very *young* to be married.'

Hugh frowned. It made him seem more handsome. 'Only two years younger than you when you married me,' he said.

'Yet so much older somehow,' Sylvie murmured. 'Is all well? Is the baby well?'

It had turned out that Izzie was already noticeably *enceinte* by the time Hugh caught up with her and dragged her on to the boat train back from Paris. Adelaide, her mother, said she would have preferred it if Izzie had been kidnapped by white slave traders rather than throwing herself into the arms of debauchery with such enthusiasm.

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Sylvie found the idea of the white slave trade rather attractive – imagined herself being carried off by a desert sheikh on an Arabian steed and then lying on a cushioned divan, dressed in silks and veils, eating sweetmeats and sipping on sherbets to the bubbling sound of rills and fountains. (She expected it wasn't really like that.) A harem of women seemed like an eminently good idea to Sylvie – sharing the burden of a wife's duties and so on.

Adelaide, heroically Victorian in her attitudes, had barred the door, literally, at the sight of her youngest daughter's burgeoning belly and dispatched her back across the Channel to wait out her shame abroad. The baby would be adopted as swiftly as possible. 'A respectable German couple, unable to have their own child,' Adelaide said. Sylvie tried to imagine giving away a child. ('And will we never hear of it again?' she puzzled. 'I certainly hope not,' Adelaide said.) Izzie was now to be packed off to a finishing school in Switzerland, even though it seemed she was already finished, in more ways than one.

'A boy,' Hugh said, waving the telegram like a flag. 'Bouncing, etcetera.'

Ursula's own first spring had unfurled. Lying in her pram beneath the beech tree, she had watched the patterns that the light made flickering through the tender green leaves as the breeze delicately swayed the branches. The branches were arms and the leaves were like hands. The tree danced for her. *Rock-a-bye baby*, Sylvie crooned to her, *in the tree-top*.

*I had a little nut tree*, Pamela sang lispily, *and nothing would it bear, but a silver nutmeg and a golden pear.*

A tiny hare dangled from the hood of the carriage, twirling around, the sun glinting off its silver skin. The hare sat upright in a little basket and had once adorned the top of the infant Sylvie's rattle, the rattle itself, like Sylvie's childhood, long since gone.

Bare branches, buds, leaves – the world as she knew it came and went before Ursula's eyes. She observed the turn of seasons for the first time. She was born with winter already in her bones, but then came the sharp promise of spring, the fattening of the buds, the indolent heat of summer, the mould and mushroom of autumn. From within the limited frame of the pram hood she saw it all. To say nothing of the somewhat random embellishments the seasons brought with them – sun, clouds, birds, a stray cricket ball arcing silently overhead, a rainbow once or twice, rain more often than she would have liked. (There was sometimes a tardiness to rescuing her from the elements.)

Once there had even been the stars and a rising moon – astonishing and terrifying in equal measure – when she had been forgotten one autumn evening. Bridget was castigated. The pram was outside, whatever the weather, for Sylvie had inherited a fixation with fresh air from her own mother, Lottie, who when younger had spent some time in a Swiss sanatorium, spending her days wrapped in a rug, sitting on an outdoor terrace, gazing passively at snowy Alpine peaks.

The beech shed its leaves, papery bronze drifts filling the sky above her head. One boisterously windy November day a threatening figure appeared, peering into the baby carriage. Maurice, making faces at Ursula and chanting, 'Goo, goo, goo,' before prodding the blankets with a

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stick. 'Stupid baby,' he said before proceeding to bury her beneath a soft pile of leaves. She started to fall asleep again beneath her new leafy cover but then a hand suddenly swatted Maurice's head and he yelled, 'Ow!' and disappeared. The silver hare pirouetted round and round and a big pair of hands plucked her from the pram and Hugh said, 'Here she is,' as if she had been lost.

'Like a hedgehog in hibernation,' he said to Sylvie.

'Poor old thing,' she laughed.

Winter came again. She recognized it from the first time around.

## June 1914

Ursula entered her fifth summer without further mishap. Her mother was relieved that the baby, despite (or perhaps because of) her daunting start in life, grew, thanks to Sylvie's robust regime (or perhaps in spite of it) into a steady-seeming sort of child. Ursula didn't think too much, the way Pamela sometimes did, nor did she think too little, as was Maurice's wont.

*A little soldier*, Sylvie thought as she watched Ursula trooping along the beach in the wake of Maurice and Pamela. How small they all looked – they *were* small, she knew that – but sometimes Sylvie was taken by surprise by the breadth of her feelings for her children. The smallest, newest, of them all – Edward – was confined to a wicker Moses basket next to her on the sand and had not yet learned to cry havoc.

They had taken a house in Cornwall for a month. Hugh stayed for the first week and Bridget for the duration. Bridget and Sylvie managed the cooking between them (rather badly) as Sylvie gave Mrs Glover the month off so that she could go and stay in Salford with one of her sisters who had lost a son to diphtheria. Sylvie sighed with relief as she stood on the platform and watched Mrs Glover's broad back disappearing inside the railway

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carriage. 'You had no need to see her off,' Hugh said.  
'For the pleasure of seeing her go,' Sylvie said.

There was hot sun and boisterous sea breezes and a hard unfamiliar bed in which Sylvie lay undisturbed all night long. They bought meat pies and fried potatoes and apple turnovers and ate them sitting on a rug on the sand with their backs against the rocks. The rental of a beach hut took care of the always tricky problem of how to feed a baby in public. Sometimes Bridget and Sylvie took off their boots and daringly dabbled their toes in the water, other times they sat on the sand beneath enormous sunshades and read their books. Sylvie was reading Conrad, while Bridget had a copy of *Jane Eyre* that Sylvie had given her as she had not thought to bring one of her usual thrilling Gothic romances. Bridget proved to be an animated reader, frequently gasping in horror or stirred to disgust and, at the end, delight. It made *The Secret Agent* seem quite dry by comparison.

She was also an inland creature and spent a lot of time fretting about whether the tide was coming in or going out, seemingly incapable of understanding its predictability. 'It changes a little every day,' Sylvie explained patiently.

'But what on earth for?' a baffled Bridget asked.

'Well . . .' Sylvie had absolutely no idea. 'Why not?' she concluded crisply.

The children were returning from fishing with their nets in the rock pools at the far end of the beach. Pamela and Ursula stopped halfway along and began to paddle at the water's edge but Maurice picked up the pace, sprinting

towards Sylvie before flinging himself down in a flurry of sand. He was holding a small crab by its claw and Bridget screeched in alarm at the sight of it.

'Any meat pies left?' he asked.

'Manners, Maurice,' Sylvie admonished. He was going to boarding school after the summer. She was rather relieved.

'Come on, let's go and jump over the waves,' Pamela said. Pamela was bossy but in a nice way and Ursula was nearly always happy to fall in with her plans and even if she wasn't she still went along with them.

A hoop bowled past them along the sand, as if blown by the wind, and Ursula wanted to run after it and reunite it with its owner, but Pamela said, 'No, come on, let's paddle,' and so they put their nets down on the sand and waded into the surf. It was a mystery that no matter how hot they were in the sun the water was always freezing. They yelped and squealed as usual before holding hands and waiting for the waves to come. When they did they were disappointingly small, no more than a ripple with a lacy frill. So they waded out further.

The waves weren't waves at all now, just the surge and tug of a swell that lifted them and then moved on past them. Ursula gripped hard on to Pamela's hand whenever the swell approached. The water was already up to her waist. Pamela pushed further out into the water, a figurehead on a prow, ploughing through the buffeting waves. The water was up to Ursula's armpits now and she started to cry and pull on Pamela's hand, trying to stop her from going any further. Pamela glanced back at her and said, 'Careful, you'll make us both fall over,' and so didn't see the huge wave cresting behind her. Within a heartbeat,

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it had crashed over both of them, tossing them around as lightly as though they were leaves.

Ursula felt herself being pulled under, deeper and deeper, as if she were miles out to sea, not within sight of the shore. Her little legs bicycled beneath her, trying to find purchase on the sand. If she could just stand up and fight the waves, but there was no longer any sand to stand on and she began to choke on water, thrashing around in panic. Someone would come, surely? Bridget or Sylvie, and save her. Or Pamela – where was she?

No one came. And there was only water. Water and more water. Her helpless little heart was beating wildly, a bird trapped in her chest. A thousand bees buzzed in the curled pearl of her ear. No breath. A drowning child, a bird dropped from the sky.

Darkness fell.



# Snow





*11 February 1910*

Bridget removed the breakfast tray and Sylvie said, 'Oh, leave the little snowdrop. Here, put it on my bedside table.' She kept the baby with her too. The fire was blazing now and the bright snow-light from the window seemed both cheerful and oddly portentous at the same time. The snow was drifting against the walls of the house, pressing in on them, burying them. They were cocooned. She imagined Hugh tunnelling heroically through the snow to reach home. He had been away three days now, looking for his sister, Isobel. Yesterday (how long ago that seemed now) a telegram had arrived from Paris, saying, *THE QUARRY HAS GONE TO GROUND STOP AM IN PURSUIT STOP*, although Hugh was not really a hunting man. She must send her own telegram. What should she say? Something cryptic. Hugh liked puzzles. *WE WERE FOUR STOP YOU ARE GONE BUT WE ARE STILL FOUR STOP* (Bridget and Mrs Glover did not count in Sylvie's tally). Or something more prosaic. *BABY HAS ARRIVED STOP ALL WELL STOP*. Were they? All well? The baby had nearly died. She had been deprived of air. What if she wasn't quite right? They had triumphed over death this night. Sylvie wondered when death would seek his revenge.

Sylvie finally fell asleep and dreamed that she had

moved to a new house and was looking for her children, roaming the unfamiliar rooms, shouting their names, but she knew they had disappeared for ever and would never be found. She woke with a start and was relieved to see that at least the baby was still by her side in the great white snowfield of the bed. The baby. Ursula. Sylvie had had the name ready, Edward if it had turned out to be a boy. The naming of children was her preserve, Hugh seemed indifferent to what they were called although Sylvie supposed he had his limits. Scheherazade perhaps. Or Guinevere.

Ursula opened her milky eyes and seemed to fix her gaze on the weary snowdrop. *Rock-a-bye baby*, Sylvie crooned. How calm the house was. How deceptive that could be. One could lose everything in the blink of an eye, the slip of a foot. 'One must avoid dark thoughts at all costs,' she said to Ursula.

War





## *June 1914*

Mr Winton – Archibald – had set up his easel on the sand and was attempting to render a seascape in watery marine smears of blue and green – Prussians and Cobalt Blues, Viridian and Terre Verte. He daubed a couple of rather vague seagulls in the sky, sky that was virtually indistinguishable from the waves below. He imagined showing the picture on his return home, saying, ‘In the style of the Impressionists, you know.’

Mr Winton, a bachelor, was by profession a senior clerk in a factory in Birmingham that manufactured pins but was a romantic by nature. He was a member of a cycling club and every Sunday tried to wheel as far away from Birmingham’s smogs as he could, and he took his annual holiday by the sea so that he could breathe hospitable air and think himself an artist for a week.

He thought he might try to put some figures in his painting, it would give it a bit of life and ‘movement’, something his night-school teacher (he took an art class) had encouraged him to introduce into his work. Those two little girls down at the sea’s edge would do. Their sunhats meant he wouldn’t need to try and capture their features, a skill he hadn’t yet quite mastered.

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'Come on, let's go and jump the waves,' Pamela said.

'Oh,' Ursula said, hanging back. Pamela took her hand and dragged her into the water. 'Don't be a silly.' The closer she got to the water the more Ursula began to panic until she was swamped with fear but Pamela laughed and splashed her way into the water and she could only follow. She tried to think of something that would make Pamela want to return to the beach – a treasure map, a man with a puppy – but it was too late. A huge wave rose, curling above their heads, and came crashing over them, sending them down, down into the watery world.

Sylvie was startled to look up from her book and see a man, a stranger, walking towards her along the sand with one of her girls tucked under each arm, as if he was carrying geese or chickens. The girls were sopping wet and tearful. 'Went out a bit too far,' the man said. 'But they'll be fine.'

They treated their rescuer, a Mr Winton, a clerk ('senior') to tea and cakes in a hotel that overlooked the sea. 'It's the least I can do,' Sylvie said. 'You have ruined your boots.'

'It was nothing,' Mr Winton said modestly.

'Oh, no, it was most definitely *something*,' Sylvie said.

'Glad to be back?' Hugh beamed, greeting them on the station platform.

'Are you glad to have us back?' Sylvie said, somewhat combatively.

'There's a surprise for you at home,' Hugh said. Sylvie didn't like surprises, they all knew that.

'Guess,' Hugh said.

They guessed a new puppy which was a far cry from the

Petter engine that Hugh had had installed in the cellar. They all trooped down the steep stone staircase and stared at its oily throbbing presence, its rows of glass accumulators. 'Let there be light,' Hugh said.

It would be a long time before any of them were able to snap a light switch without expecting to be blown up. Light was all it could manage, of course. Bridget had hoped for a vacuum cleaner to replace her Ewbank but there wasn't enough voltage. 'Thank goodness,' Sylvie said.

## *July 1914*

From the open French windows Sylvie watched Maurice erecting a makeshift tennis net, which mostly seemed to involve whacking everything in sight with a mallet. Small boys were a mystery to Sylvie. The satisfaction they gained from throwing sticks or stones for hours on end, the obsessive collection of inanimate objects, the brutal destruction of the fragile world around them, all seemed at odds with the men they were supposed to become.

Noisy chatter in the hallway announced the jaunty arrival of Margaret and Lily, once schoolfriends and now infrequent acquaintances, bearing gaily beribboned gifts for the new baby, Edward.

Margaret was an artist, militantly unmarried, conceivably someone's mistress, a scandalous possibility that Sylvie hadn't mentioned to Hugh. Lily was a Fabian, a society suffragette who risked nothing for her beliefs. Sylvie thought of women being restrained while tubes were pushed down their throats and raised a reassuring hand to her own lovely white neck. Lily's husband, Cavendish (the name of a hotel, not a man, surely), had once cornered Sylvie at a tea-dance, pressing her up against a pillar with his goatish, cigar-scented body, suggesting something so outrageous that even now

she felt hot with embarrassment at the thought of it.

'Ah, the fresh air,' Lily exclaimed when Sylvie led them out into the garden. 'It's so *rural* here.' They cooed like doves – or pigeons, that lesser species – over the pram, admiring the baby almost as much as they applauded Sylvie's svelte figure.

'I'll ring for tea,' Sylvie said, already tired.

They had a dog. A big, brindled French mastiff called Bosun. 'The name of Byron's dog,' Sylvie said. Ursula had no idea who the mysterious Byron was but he showed no interest in reclaiming his dog from them. Bosun had soft loose furry skin that rolled beneath Ursula's fingers and his breath smelt of the scrag-end that Mrs Glover, to her disgust, had to stew for him. He was a good dog, Hugh said, a responsible dog, the kind that pulled people from burning buildings and rescued them from drowning.

Pamela liked to dress Bosun up in an old bonnet and shawl and pretend that he was her baby, although they had a real baby now – a boy, Edward. Everyone called him Teddy. Their mother seemed taken by surprise by the new baby. 'I don't know where he came from.' Sylvie had a laugh like a hiccup. She was taking tea on the lawn with two schoolfriends 'from her London days' who had come to inspect the new arrival. All three of them wore lovely flimsy dresses and big straw hats and sat in the wicker chairs, drinking tea and eating Mrs Glover's sherry cake. Ursula and Bosun sat on the grass a polite distance away, hoping for crumbs.

Maurice had put up a net and was trying, not very enthusiastically, to teach Pamela how to play tennis. Ursula was occupied in making a daisy-chain coronet for

Bosun. She had stubby, clumsy fingers. Sylvie had the long, deft fingers of an artist or a pianist. She played on the piano in the drawing room ('Chopin'). Sometimes they sang rounds after tea but Ursula never managed to sing her part at the right time. ('What a dolt,' Maurice said. 'Practice makes perfect,' Sylvie said.) When she opened the lid of the piano there was a smell that was like the insides of old suitcases. It reminded Ursula of her grandmother, Adelaide, who spent her days swathed in black, sipping Madeira.

The new arrival was tucked away in the huge baby carriage under the big beech tree. They had all been occupants of this magnificence but none of them could remember it. A little silver hare dangled from the hood and the baby was cosy beneath a coverlet 'embroidered by nuns', although no one ever explained who these nuns were and why they had spent their days embroidering small yellow ducks.

'Edward,' one of Sylvie's friends said. 'Teddy?'

'Ursula and Teddy. My two little bears,' Sylvie said and laughed her hiccup laugh. Ursula wasn't at all sure about being a bear. She would rather be a dog. She lay down on her back and stared up at the sky. Bosun groaned mightily and stretched out beside her. Swallows were knifing recklessly through the blue. She could hear the delicate chink of cups on saucers, the creak and clatter of a lawn-mower being pushed by Old Tom in the Coles' garden next door, and could smell the peppery-sweet perfume of the pinks in the border and the heady green of new-mown grass.

'Ah,' said one of Sylvie's London friends, stretching out her legs and revealing graceful white-stockinged ankles. 'A long, hot summer. Isn't it delicious?'

The peace was broken by a disgusted Maurice throwing

his racquet on to the grass where it bounced with a thump and a squeak. 'I can't teach her – she's a girl!' he yelled and stalked off into the shrubbery where he began to bash things with a stick, although in his head he was in the jungle with a machete. He was going to boarding school after the summer. It was the same school that Hugh had been to, and his father before *him*. ('And so on, back to the Conquest probably,' Sylvie said.) Hugh said it would be 'the making' of Maurice but he seemed quite made already to Ursula. Hugh said when he first went to the school he cried himself to sleep every night and yet he seemed more than happy to subject Maurice to the same torture. Maurice puffed out his chest and declared that *he* wouldn't cry.

('And what about us?' a worried Pamela asked. 'Shall we have to go away to school?')

'Not unless you're very naughty,' Hugh said, laughing.)

A pink-cheeked Pamela balled up her fists and, planting them on her hips, roared, 'You're such a pig!' after Maurice's indifferent, retreating back. She made 'pig' sound like a much worse word than it was. Pigs were quite nice.

'Pammy,' Sylvie said mildly. 'You sound like a fishwife.'

Ursula edged nearer to the source of cake.

'Oh, come here,' one of the women said to her, 'let me look at you.' Ursula tried to shy away but was held firmly in place by Sylvie. 'She's quite pretty, isn't she?' Sylvie's friend said. 'She takes after you, Sylvie.'

'Fish have wives?' Ursula said to her mother and Sylvie's friends laughed, lovely bubbling laughs. 'What a funny little thing,' one of them said.

'Yes, she's a real hoot,' Sylvie said.

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'Yes, she's a real hoot,' Sylvie said.

'Children,' Margaret said, 'they are droll, aren't they?'

They are so much more than that, Sylvie thought, but how do you explain the magnitude of motherhood to someone who has no children? Sylvie felt positively matronly in her present company, the friends of her brief girlhood curtailed by the relief of marriage.

Bridget came out with the tray and started to take away the tea things. In the mornings Bridget wore a striped print dress for housework but in the afternoons she changed into a black dress with white cuffs and collar and a matching white apron and little cap. She had been elevated out of the scullery. Alice had left to get married and Sylvie had engaged a girl from the village, Marjorie, a boss-eyed thirteen-year-old, to help with the rough work. ('We couldn't get by with just two of them?' Hugh queried mildly. 'Bridget and Mrs G? It's not as if they're running a mansion.')

'No, we can't,' Sylvie said and that was the end of that.)

The little white cap was too big for Bridget and was forever slipping over her eyes, like a blindfold. On her way back across the lawn she was suddenly blinkered by the cap and tripped, a music-hall tumble that she rescued just in time and the only casualties were the silver sugar bowl and tongs that went shooting through the air, lumps of sugar scattering like blind dice across the green of the lawn. Maurice laughed extravagantly at Bridget's misfortune, and Sylvie said, 'Maurice, stop playing the fool.'

She watched as Bosun and Ursula picked up the jettisoned sugar lumps, Bosun with his big pink tongue,

Ursula, eccentrically, with the tricky tongs. Bosun swallowed his quickly without chewing. Ursula sucked hers slowly, one by one. Sylvie suspected that Ursula was destined to be the odd one out. An only child herself, she was frequently disturbed by the complexity of sibling relationships among her own children.

'You should come up to London,' Margaret said suddenly. 'Stay with me for a few days. We could have such fun.'

'But the children,' Sylvie said. 'The baby. I can hardly leave them.'

'Why not?' Lily said. 'Your nanny can manage for a few days, surely?'

'But I have no nanny,' Sylvie said. Lily cast her eyes around the garden as if she was looking for a nanny lurking in the hydrangeas. 'Nor do I want one,' Sylvie added. (Or did she?) Motherhood was her responsibility, her destiny. It was, lacking anything else (and what else could there be?), her life. The future of England was clutched to Sylvie's bosom. Replacing her was not a casual undertaking, as if her absence meant little more than her presence. 'And I am feeding the baby myself,' she added. Both women seemed astonished. Lily unconsciously clasped a hand to her own bosom as if to protect it from assault.

'It's what God intended,' Sylvie said, even though she hadn't believed in God since the loss of Tiffin. Hugh rescued her, striding across the lawn like a man with a purpose. He laughed and said, 'What's going on here then?' picking up Ursula and tossing her casually in the air, only stopping when she started to choke on a sugar lump. He smiled at Sylvie and said, 'Your friends,' as if she might have forgotten who they were.

'Friday evening,' Hugh said, depositing Ursula back on the grass, 'the working man's labours are over and I believe the sun is officially over the yardarm. Would you lovely ladies like to move on to something stronger than tea? Gin slings perhaps?' Hugh had four younger sisters and felt comfortable with women. That in itself was enough to charm them. Sylvie knew his instincts were to chaperone, not to court, but she did occasionally wonder about his popularity and where it might lead. Or, indeed, have already led.

A détente was brokered between Maurice and Pamela. Sylvie asked Bridget to drag a table out on to the small but useful terrace so that the children could eat their tea outside – herring roe on toast and a pink shape that was barely set and quivered without restraint. The sight of it made Sylvie feel slightly queasy. 'Nursery food,' Hugh said with relish, observing his children eating.

'Austria has declared war on Serbia,' Hugh said conversationally and Margaret said, 'How silly. I spent a wonderful weekend in Vienna last year. At the Imperial, do you know it?'

'Not intimately,' Hugh said.

Sylvie knew it but did not say so.

The evening turned into gossamer. Sylvie, drifting gently on a mist of alcohol, suddenly remembered her father's cognac-induced demise and clapped her hands as if killing a small annoying fly and said, 'Time for bed, children,' and watched as Bridget pushed the heavy pram awkwardly across the grass. Sylvie sighed and Hugh helped her up from her chair, bussing her cheek once she was on her feet.

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Sylvie propped open the tiny skylight window in the baby's stuffy room. They called it the 'nursery' but it was no more than a box tucked into a corner of the eaves, airless in summer and freezing in winter, and thereby totally unsuitable for a tender infant. Like Hugh, Sylvie considered that children should be toughened up early, the better to take the blows in later life. (The loss of a nice house in Mayfair, a beloved pony, a faith in an omniscient deity.) She sat on the button-backed velvet nursing chair and fed Edward. 'Teddy,' she murmured fondly as he gulped and choked his way to sated sleep. Sylvie liked them all best as babies, when they were shiny and new, like the pink pads on a kitten's paw. This one was special though. She kissed the floss on his head.

Words floated up in the soft air. 'All good things must come to an end,' she heard Hugh say as he escorted Lily and Margaret indoors to dinner. 'I believe the poetically inclined Mrs Glover has baked a skate. But first, perhaps you would care to see my Petter engine?' The women twittered like the silly schoolgirls they still were.

Ursula was woken by an excited shouting and clapping of hands. 'Electricity!' she heard one of Sylvie's friends exclaim. 'How wonderful!'

She shared an attic room with Pamela. They had matching small beds with a rag rug and a bedside cabinet in between. Pamela slept with her arms above her head and sometimes cried out as if pricked with a pin (a horrible trick Maurice was fond of). On one side of the bedroom wall was Mrs Glover who snored like a train and on the other side Bridget muttered her way through the night. Bosun slept outside their door, always on guard even when

asleep. Sometimes he whined softly but whether in pleasure or pain they couldn't tell. The attic floor was a crowded and unquiet sort of place.

Ursula was woken again later by the visitors taking their leave. ('That child is an unnaturally light sleeper,' Mrs Glover said, as if it were a flaw in her character that should be corrected.) She climbed out of bed and padded over to the window. If she stood on a chair and looked out, something they were all expressly forbidden to do, then she could see Sylvie and her friends on the lawn below, their dresses fluttering like moths in the encroaching dusk. Hugh stood at the back gate, waiting to escort them along the lane to the station.

Sometimes Bridget walked the children to the station to meet their father off the train when he came home from work. Maurice said he might be an engine driver when he was older, or he might become an Antarctic explorer like Sir Ernest Shackleton who was about to set sail on his grand expedition. Or perhaps he would simply become a banker, like his father.

Hugh worked in London, a place they visited infrequently to spend stilted afternoons in their grandmother's drawing room in Hampstead, a quarrelsome Maurice and Pamela 'fraying' Sylvie's nerves so that she was always in a bad mood on the train home.

When everyone had left, their voices fading into the distance, Sylvie walked back across the lawn towards the house, a darkening shadow now as the black bat unfolded his wings. Unseen by Sylvie, a fox trotted purposefully in her footsteps before veering off and disappearing into the shrubbery.

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'Did you hear something?' Sylvie asked. She was propped up on pillows, reading an early Forster. "The baby perhaps?"

Hugh cocked his head to one side. For a moment he reminded Sylvie of Bosun.

'No,' he said.

The baby slept all through the night usually. He was a cherub. But not in heaven. Thankfully.

'The best one yet,' Hugh said.

'Yes, I think we should keep this one.'

'He doesn't look like me,' Hugh said.

'No,' she agreed amiably. 'Nothing like you at all.'

Hugh laughed and, kissing her affectionately, said, 'Good night, I'm turning out my light.'

'I think I'll read a little longer.'

One afternoon of heat a few days later they went to watch the harvest being brought in.

Sylvie and Bridget walked across the fields with the girls, Sylvie carrying the baby in a sling that Bridget fashioned from her shawl and tied around Sylvie's torso. 'Like a Hibernian peasant,' Hugh said, amused. It was a Saturday and, freed from the gloomy confines of banking, he was lying on the wicker chaise-longue on the terrace at the back of the house, cradling *Wisden Cricketers' Almanack* like a hymnal.

Maurice had disappeared after breakfast. He was a nine-year-old boy and free to go where he pleased with whomsoever he pleased, although he tended to keep to the exclusive company of other nine-year-old boys. Sylvie had no idea what they did but at the end of the day he would return, filthy from head to toe and with some unappetizing trophy, a jar of frogs or worms, a dead bird, the bleached skull of some small creature.

The sun had long since started on its steep climb into the sky by the time they finally set off, awkwardly encumbered with the baby, and picnic baskets, sun-bonnets and parasols. Bosun trotted along at their side like a small pony. 'Goodness, we're burdened like refugees,' Sylvie said. 'The Jews leaving Israel, perhaps.'

'Jews?' Bridget said, screwing up her plain features in distaste.

Teddy slept throughout the trek in his makeshift papoose while they clambered over stiles and stumbled on muddy ruts made hard by the sun. Bridget tore her dress on a nail and said she had blisters on her feet. Sylvie wondered about removing her corsets and leaving them by the wayside, imagined someone's puzzlement when they came across them. She had a sudden memory, unexpected in the dazzling daylight in a field of cows, of Hugh unlacing her stays on honeymoon in their hotel in Deauville while sounds drifted in from the open window – gulls screeching on the wing and a man and a woman arguing in rough, rapid French. On the boat home from Cherbourg Sylvie was already carrying the tiny homunculus that would become Maurice, although she had been blissfully unaware of this fact at the time.

'Ma'am?' Bridget said, breaking this reverie. 'Mrs Todd? They're not *cows*.'

They stopped to admire George Glover's plough horses, enormous Shires called Samson and Nelson who snorted and shook their heads when they caught sight of company. They made Ursula nervous but Sylvie fed them an apple each and they picked the fruit delicately from her palm with their big pink-velvet lips. Sylvie said they were

dappled greys and much more beautiful than people and Pamela said, 'Even children?' and Sylvie said, 'Yes, especially children,' and laughed.

They found George himself helping with the harvest. When he caught sight of them he strode across the field to greet them. 'Ma'am,' he said to Sylvie, removing his cap and wiping the sweat off his forehead with a big red and white spotted handkerchief. Tiny pieces of chaff were stuck to his arms. Like the chaff, the hairs on his arms were golden from the sun. 'It's hot,' he said unnecessarily. He looked at Sylvie from beneath the long lock of hair that always fell in his handsome blue eyes. Sylvie appeared to blush.

As well as their own lunch – bloater paste sandwiches, lemon curd sandwiches, ginger beer and seed cake – they had carried the remains of yesterday's pork pie that Mrs Glover had sent for George, along with a little jar of her famous piccalilli. The seed cake was already stale because Bridget had forgotten to put it back in the cake tin and it was left out in the warm kitchen overnight. 'I wouldn't be surprised if the ants had laid eggs in it,' Mrs Glover said. When it came to eating it, Ursula had to pick out the seeds, which were legion, checking each one to make sure it wasn't an ant egg.

The workers in the field stopped to have their lunch, bread and cheese and beer mainly. Bridget turned red and giggled as she handed over the pork pie to George. Pamela told Ursula that Maurice said Bridget had a pash on George, although it seemed to both of them that Maurice was an unlikely source of information on affairs of the heart. They ate their picnic at the edge of the stubble, George sprawled casually as he took great horse-sized bites

out of the pork pie, Bridget gazing at him in admiration as if he were a Greek god, while Sylvie fussed with the baby.

Sylvie traipsed off to find a discreet spot in order to feed Teddy. Girls brought up in nice houses in Mayfair did not generally duck behind hedges to suckle infants. Like Hibernian peasants, no doubt. She thought fondly of the beach hut in Cornwall. By the time she found a suitable covert in the lee of a hedge, Teddy was bawling his head off, little pugilistic fists clenched against the injustice of the world. Just as he settled at the breast she happened to glance up and caught sight of George Glover coming out of the trees at the far end of the field. Spotting her, he stopped, staring at her like a startled deer. For a second he didn't move but then he doffed his cap and said, 'Still hot, ma'am.'

'It certainly is,' Sylvie said briskly and then watched as George Glover hastened towards the five-bar gate that broke the hedgerow in the middle of the field and leapt over it as easily as a big hunter over a hurdle.

From a safe distance they watched the enormous harvester noisily eating the wheat. 'Hypnotic, isn't it?' Bridget said. She had recently learned the word. Sylvie took out her pretty little gold fob watch, an article much coveted by Pamela, and said, 'Heavens above, look at the time,' although none of them did. 'We must be getting back.'

Just as they were leaving, George Glover shouted, 'Heyathere!' and cantered towards them across the field. He was carrying something cuddled in his cap. Two baby rabbits. 'Oh,' Pamela said, tearful with excitement.

'Conies,' George Glover said. 'All huddled up in the

middle of the field. Their mother gone. Take them, why don't you? One each.'

On the way home, Pamela carried both baby rabbits in her pinafore, holding it out proudly in front of her like Bridget with a tea-tray.

'Look at you,' Hugh said when they walked wearily through the garden gate. 'Golden and kissed by the sun. You look like real countrywomen.'

'More red than gold, I'm afraid,' Sylvie said ruefully.

The gardener was at work. He was called Old Tom ('Like a cat,' Sylvie said. 'Do you think he was once called Young Tom?'). He worked six days a week, sharing his time between them and another house nearby. These neighbours, the Coles, addressed him as 'Mr Ridgely'. He gave no indication which he preferred. The Coles lived in a very similar house to the Todds' and Mr Cole, like Hugh, was a banker. 'Jewish,' Sylvie said in the same voice she would use for 'Catholic' - intrigued yet unsettled by such exoticism.

'I don't think they practise,' Hugh said. Practise what, Ursula wondered? Pamela had to practise her piano scales every evening before tea, a *plinking* and *plonking* that wasn't very pleasant to listen to.

Mr Cole had been born with a quite different name, according to their eldest son, Simon, something far too complicated for English tongues. The middle son, Daniel, was friends with Maurice, for although the grown-ups weren't friends the children were familiar with each other. Simon, 'a swot' (Maurice said), helped Maurice every Monday evening with his maths. Sylvie was unsure how to reward him for this disagreeable task, perplexed seemingly

by his Jewishness. 'Perhaps I might give him something that would offend them?' she speculated. 'If I give money they might think I'm referring to their well-known reputation for miserliness. If I give sweets they might not fit their dietary strictures.'

'They don't practise,' Hugh repeated. 'They're not *observant*.'

'Benjamin's very observant,' Pamela said. 'He found a blackbird's nest yesterday.' She glared at Maurice when she said this. He had come upon them marvelling at the beautiful eggs, blue and freckled brown, and had grabbed them and cracked them open on a stone. He thought it was a great joke. Pamela threw a small (well, smallish) rock at him that hit him on the head. 'There,' she said. 'How does it feel to have *your* shell broken open?' Now he had a nasty cut and a bruise on his temple. 'Fell,' he said shortly when Sylvie enquired how he came by the injury. He would, by nature, have told on Pamela, but the initial sin would have come to light and Sylvie would have punished him soundly for breaking the eggs. She had caught him stealing eggs before now and had boxed his ears. Sylvie said they should 'revere' nature, not destroy it, but reverence was not in Maurice's own nature, unfortunately.

'He's learning the violin, isn't he - Simon?' Sylvie said. 'Jews are usually very musical, aren't they? Perhaps I could give him some sheet music, something like that.' This discussion of the perils of offending Judaism had taken place around the breakfast table. Hugh always looked vaguely startled to find his children at the same table as him. He hadn't eaten breakfast with his parents until he was twelve years old and deemed fit to leave the nursery. He was the robust graduate of an efficient nanny, a household within

a household in Hampstead. The infant Sylvie, on the other hand, had dined late, on *Canard à la presse*, perched precariously on cushions, lulled by flickering candles and twinkling silverware, while her parents' conversation floated above her head. It was not, she now suspected, an entirely regular childhood.

Old Tom was double-digging a trench, he said, for a new asparagus bed. Hugh had long since abandoned *Wisden* and had been picking raspberries to fill a big white enamel bowl that both Pamela and Ursula recognized as the one that Maurice had until recently been keeping tadpoles in, although neither of them mentioned this fact. Pouring himself a glass of beer, Hugh said, 'Thirsty work, this agricultural labour,' and they all laughed. Except for Old Tom.

Mrs Glover came out to demand that Old Tom dig up some potatoes to go with her beef collops. She huffed and puffed at the sight of the rabbits, 'Not enough even for a stew.' Pamela screamed and had to be calmed down with a sip of Hugh's beer.

Pamela and Ursula made a nest, in a lost corner of the garden, out of grass and cotton wool, decorated with fallen rose petals, and carefully placed the baby rabbits in it. Pamela sang them a lullaby, she could keep a tune nicely, but they had been asleep ever since George Glover had handed them over.

'I think they might be too small,' Sylvie said. Too small for what? Ursula wondered but Sylvie didn't say.

They sat on the lawn and ate the raspberries with cream and sugar. Hugh looked up into the blue, blue sky and said, 'Did you hear that thunder? There's going to be a

tremendous storm, I can feel it coming. Can't you, Old Tom?' he raised his voice so that Old Tom, far away in the vegetable bed, could hear. Hugh believed that, as a gardener, Old Tom must know about weather. Old Tom said nothing and carried on digging.

'He's deaf,' Hugh said.

'No, he isn't,' Sylvie said, making a Rose Madder by mashing raspberries, beautiful like blood, into thick cream, and she thought, unexpectedly, about George Glover. A son of the soil. His strong square hands, his beautiful dappled greys, like big rocking horses, and the way he had lolled on the grassy bank eating his lunch, posed rather like Michelangelo's Adam in the Sistine Chapel but reaching for another slice of pork pie rather than the hand of his Creator. (When Sylvie had accompanied her father, Llewellyn, to Italy she had been astonished by the amount of male flesh available to view as art.) She imagined feeding George Glover apples from her hand and laughed.

'What?' Hugh said and Sylvie said, 'What a handsome boy George Glover is.'

'He must be adopted then,' Hugh said.

In bed that night Sylvie abandoned Forster for less cerebral pursuits, entwining overheated limbs in the marital bed, more a panting hart than a soaring lark. She found herself thinking not of Hugh's smooth, wiry body but of the great burnished centaureal limbs of George Glover. 'You're very . . .' a spent Hugh said, gazing at the bedroom cornice as he searched for an appropriate word. 'Lively,' he concluded finally.

'It must be all that fresh air,' Sylvie said.

## WAR

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Golden and kissed by the sun, she thought as she drifted comfortably off to sleep and then Shakespeare came unwontedly to mind. *Golden lads and girls all must, / as chimney-sweepers, come to dust*, and she felt suddenly afraid.

'There's the storm rolling in at last,' Hugh said. 'Shall I turn out the light?'

Sylvie and Hugh were ejected from their Sunday-morning slumber by a wailing Pamela. She and Ursula had woken early with excitement and rushed outside to find that the rabbits had disappeared, only the fluffy pom-pom of one tiny tail remaining, white smudged with red.

'Foxes,' Mrs Glover said, with some satisfaction. 'What did you expect?'

## January 1915

'Did you hear the latest news?' Bridget asked.

Sylvie sighed and put down the letter from Hugh, its pages as brittle as dead leaves. It was only a matter of months since he had left for the Front yet she could hardly remember being married to him any more. Hugh was a captain in the Ox and Bucks. Last summer he was a banker. It seemed absurd.

His letters were cheerful and guarded (*the men are wonderful, they have such character*). He used to mention these men by name ('Bert', 'Alfred', 'Wilfred') but since the Battle of Ypres they had become simply 'men' and Sylvie wondered if Bert and Alfred and Wilfred were dead. Hugh never mentioned death or dying, it was as if they were away on a jaunt, a picnic (*An awful lot of rain this week. Mud everywhere. Hope you are enjoying better weather than we are!*).

"To war? You are going to war?" she had shouted at him when he enlisted and it struck her that she had never shouted at him before. Perhaps she should have.

If there was to be a war, Hugh explained to her, he didn't want to look back and know that he had missed it, that others had stepped forward for their country's honour and he had not. 'It may be the only adventure I ever have,' he said.

'Adventure?' she echoed in disbelief. 'What about your children, what about your *wife*?'

'But it's for you that I am doing this,' he said, looking exquisitely pained, a misunderstood Theseus. Sylvie disliked him intensely in that moment. 'To protect hearth and home,' he persisted. 'To defend everything we believe in.'

'And yet I heard the word *adventure*,' Sylvie said, turning her back on him.

Nonetheless, she had, of course, gone up to London to see him off. They had been jostled by an enormous flag-waving throng who were cheering as if a great victory had already been won. Sylvie was surprised by the rabid patriotism of the women on the platform, surely war should make pacifists of all women?

Hugh had held her close to him as if they were new sweethearts and only jumped on the train at the very last moment. He was instantly swallowed by the crush of uniformed men. *His regiment*, she thought. How odd. Like the crowd, he had seemed immensely, stupidly cheerful.

When the train began to heave itself slowly out of the station the excitable crowd roared their approval, frantically waving their flags and throwing caps and hats in the air. Sylvie could only stare blindly at the carriage windows as they passed by, first slowly and then more and more rapidly until they were no more than a blur. She could see no sign of Hugh, nor, she supposed, could he see her.

She remained on the platform after everyone else had left, staring at the spot on the horizon where the train had disappeared.

Sylvie abandoned the letter and took up her knitting needles instead.

'Did you hear the news?' Bridget persisted. She was placing the cutlery on the tea-table. Sylvie frowned at the knitting on her needles and wondered if she wanted to hear any news that had Bridget as its provenance. She cast off a stitch on the raglan sleeve of the serviceable grey jersey that she was knitting for Maurice. All the women of the household now spent an inordinate amount of time knitting – mufflers and mittens, gloves and socks and hats, vests and sweaters – to keep their men warm.

Mrs Glover sat by the kitchen stove in the evening and knitted huge gloves, big enough to fit over the hooves of George's plough horses. They were not for Samson and Nelson, of course, but for George himself, one of the first to volunteer, Mrs Glover said proudly at every opportunity, making Sylvie quite crotchety. Even Marjorie, the scullery maid, had been taken by the knitting fad, labouring after lunch on something that looked like a dishcloth, although to call it 'knitting' was generous. 'More holes than wool' was Mrs Glover's verdict, before boxing her ears and telling her to get back to work.

Bridget had taken to making misshapen socks – she could not turn a heel for the life of her – for her new love. She had 'given her heart' to a groom from Ettringham Hall called Sam Wellington. 'Oh, for sure, he's an old boot,' she said and laughed her head off at her joke, several times a day, as if telling it for the first time. Bridget sent Sam Wellington sentimental postcards in which angels hovered in the air over women who wept while sitting at chenille-covered tables in domestic parlours. Sylvie had hinted to Bridget that perhaps she should send more cheerful missives to a man at war.

Bridget kept a photograph, a studio portrait, of Sam

Wellington on her rather poorly appointed dressing table. It took pride of place next to the old enamelled brush and comb set that Sylvie had given her when Hugh had bought her a silver vanity set for her birthday.

A similar obligatory likeness of George adorned Mrs Glover's bedside table. Trussed in uniform and uncomfortable before a studio backdrop that reminded Sylvie of the Amalfi coast, George Glover no longer resembled a Sistine Adam. Sylvie thought of all the enlisted men who had already undergone the same ritual, a keepsake for mothers and sweethearts, the only photograph that would ever be taken of some of them. 'He could be killed,' Bridget said of her beau, 'and I might forget what he looked like.' Sylvie had plenty of photographs of Hugh. He led a well-documented life.

All of the children, except for Pamela, were upstairs. Teddy was asleep in his cot, or perhaps he was awake in his cot, whichever state he was in, he was not complaining. Maurice and Ursula were doing Sylvie knew-not-what and was not interested in it as it meant that tranquillity reigned in the morning room, apart from the occasional suspicious thud on the ceiling and the metallic report of heavy pans in the kitchen where Mrs Glover was making her feelings about something known – the war or Marjorie's incompetence, or both.

Ever since the fighting on the continent began they had been taking their meals in the morning room, abandoning the Regency Revival dining table as too extravagant for wartime austerity and instead espousing the little parlour table. ('Not using the dining room isn't going to win the war,' Mrs Glover said.)

Sylvie gestured to Pamela who obediently followed her

mother's mute orders and trailed round the table after Bridget, turning the cutlery the right way round. Bridget couldn't tell her right from her left or her up from her down.

Pamela's support for the expeditionary force had taken the form of a mass production of dun-coloured mufflers of extraordinary and impractical lengths. Sylvie was pleasantly surprised by her elder daughter's capacity for monotony. It would stand her in good stead for her life to come. Sylvie lost a stitch and muttered an oath that startled Pamela and Bridget. 'What news?' she asked at last, reluctantly.

'Bombs have been dropped on Norfolk,' Bridget said, proud of her information.

'Bombs?' Sylvie said, looking up from her knitting. 'In Norfolk?'

'A Zeppelin raid,' Bridget said authoritatively. 'That's the Hun for you. They don't care who they kill. They're wicked, so they are. They eat Belgian babies.'

'Well . . .' Sylvie said, hooking the lost stitch, 'that might be a slight exaggeration.'

Pamela hesitated, dessert fork in one hand, spoon in the other, as if she was about to attempt an attack on one of Mrs Glover's heavyweight puddings. 'Eat?' she echoed in horror. 'Babies?'

'No,' Sylvie said crossly. 'Don't be silly.'

Mrs Glover shouted for Bridget from the depths of the kitchen and Bridget flew to her command. Sylvie could hear Bridget yelling, in turn, up the stairs to the other children, 'Yer tea is on the table!'

Pamela sighed the sigh of someone with a lifetime behind them already and sat at the table. She stared blankly at the cloth and said, 'I miss Daddy.'

'Me too, darling,' Sylvie said. 'Me too. Now don't be a goose, go and tell the others to wash their hands.'

At Christmas, Sylvie had packaged up a great box of goods for Hugh: the inevitable socks and gloves; one of Pamela's endless mufflers and, as an antidote to this, a two-ply cashmere comforter knitted by Sylvie and baptized with her favourite perfume, *La Rose Jacqueminot*, to remind him of home. She imagined Hugh on the battlefield wearing the comforter next to his skin, a gallant jousting knight sporting a lady's favour. This daydream of chivalry was a comfort in itself, preferable to the glimpses of something darker. They had spent a wintry weekend in Broadstairs, bundled in gaiters, bodices and balaclavas, and heard the booming of the great guns across the water.

The Christmas box also contained a plum cake baked by Mrs Glover, a tin of somewhat misshapen peppermint creams made by Pamela, cigarettes, a bottle of good malt whisky and a book of poetry – an anthology of English verse, mostly pastoral and not too taxing – as well as little hand-made gifts from Maurice (a balsa-wood plane) and a drawing from Ursula of blue sky and green grass and the tiny distorted figure of a dog. 'Bosun,' Sylvie wrote helpfully across the top. She had no idea whether or not Hugh had received the box.

Christmas was a dull affair. Izzie came and talked a great deal about nothing (or rather herself) before announcing that she had joined the Voluntary Aid Detachment and was leaving for France as soon as the festivities were over.

'But, Izzie,' Sylvie said, 'you can't nurse or cook or type or do anything useful.' The words came out harsher than she intended, but really Izzie was such a cuckoo. ('Flibbertigibbet' was Mrs Glover's verdict.)

'That's it then,' Bridget said when she heard of Izzie's call to alms, 'we'll have lost the war by Lent.' Izzie never mentioned her baby. He had been adopted in Germany and Sylvie supposed he was a German citizen. How strange that he was only a little younger than Ursula but, officially, he was the enemy.

Then at New Year, one by one, all the children came down with chickenpox. Izzie was on the next train to London as soon as the first spot erupted on Pamela's face. So much for Florence Nightingale, Sylvie said irritably to Bridget.

Ursula, despite her clumsy, stubby fingers, had now joined in the household's knitting frenzy. For Christmas she received a wooden French knitting doll called La Reine Solange which Sylvie said meant 'Queen Solange' although she was 'doubtful' that there ever was a Queen Solange in history. Queen Solange was painted in regal colours and wore an elaborate yellow crown, the points of which held her wool. Ursula was a devoted subject and spent all of her spare time, of which she had oceans at her disposal, creating long serpentine lengths of wool that had no purpose except to be coiled into mats and lopsided tea-cosies. ('Where are the holes for the spout and the handle?' Bridget puzzled.)

'Lovely, dear,' Sylvie said, examining one of the little mats that was slowly uncurling in her hands, like something waking from a long sleep. 'Practice makes perfect, remember.'

'Yer tea is on the table!'

Ursula ignored the call. She was in thrall to majesty, sitting on her bed, features scrunched up in concentration

as she hooked wool around Queen Solange's crown. It was an old bit of fawn worsted but 'needs must', Sylvie said.

Maurice should have been back at school but his chickenpox had been the worst of all of them and his face was still covered in little scars as if a bird had pecked at him. 'Another few days at home, young man,' Dr Fellowes said, but, in Ursula's eyes, Maurice seemed bursting with rude health.

He paced restlessly round the room, bored as a caged lion. He found one of Pamela's slippers beneath the bed and kicked it around like a football. Then he picked up a china ornament, the figure of a crinolined lady that was precious to Pamela, and tossed it so high in the air that it glanced off the vaseline glass shade of the light with an alarming *ting*. Ursula dropped her knitting, her hands flying to her mouth in horror. The crinolined lady found a soft landing on the pouchy quilt of Pamela's satin eider-down but not before Maurice had snatched up the discarded knitting doll instead and started running around with it, pretending it was an aeroplane. Ursula watched as poor Queen Solange flew round the room, the tail of wool that protruded from her innards streaming out behind her like a thin banner.

And then Maurice did something truly wicked. He opened the attic window, letting in a blast of unwelcome cold air, and sent the little wooden doll soaring out into the hostile night.

Ursula immediately hauled a chair over to the window, climbed aboard and peered out. Illuminated in the pool of light that flooded from the window, she spotted Queen Solange, stranded on the slates in the valley between the two attic roofs.

Maurice, a Red Indian now, was jumping from one bed to the other, emitting war whoops. 'Yer tea is on the table!' Bridget bellowed more urgently from the foot of the stairs. Ursula ignored both of them, her heroine heart beating loudly as she clambered out of the window – no easy task – determined to rescue her sovereign. The slates were slick with ice and Ursula had barely placed her small, slippered foot on the slope beneath the window before it slid out from under her. She let out a little cry, held out a hand towards the knitting queen as she raced past her, feet first, a tobogganer without a toboggan. There was no parapet to buffer her descent, nothing at all to stop her being propelled into the black wings of night. A kind of rush, a thrill almost, as she was launched into the bottomless air and then nothing.

Darkness fell.