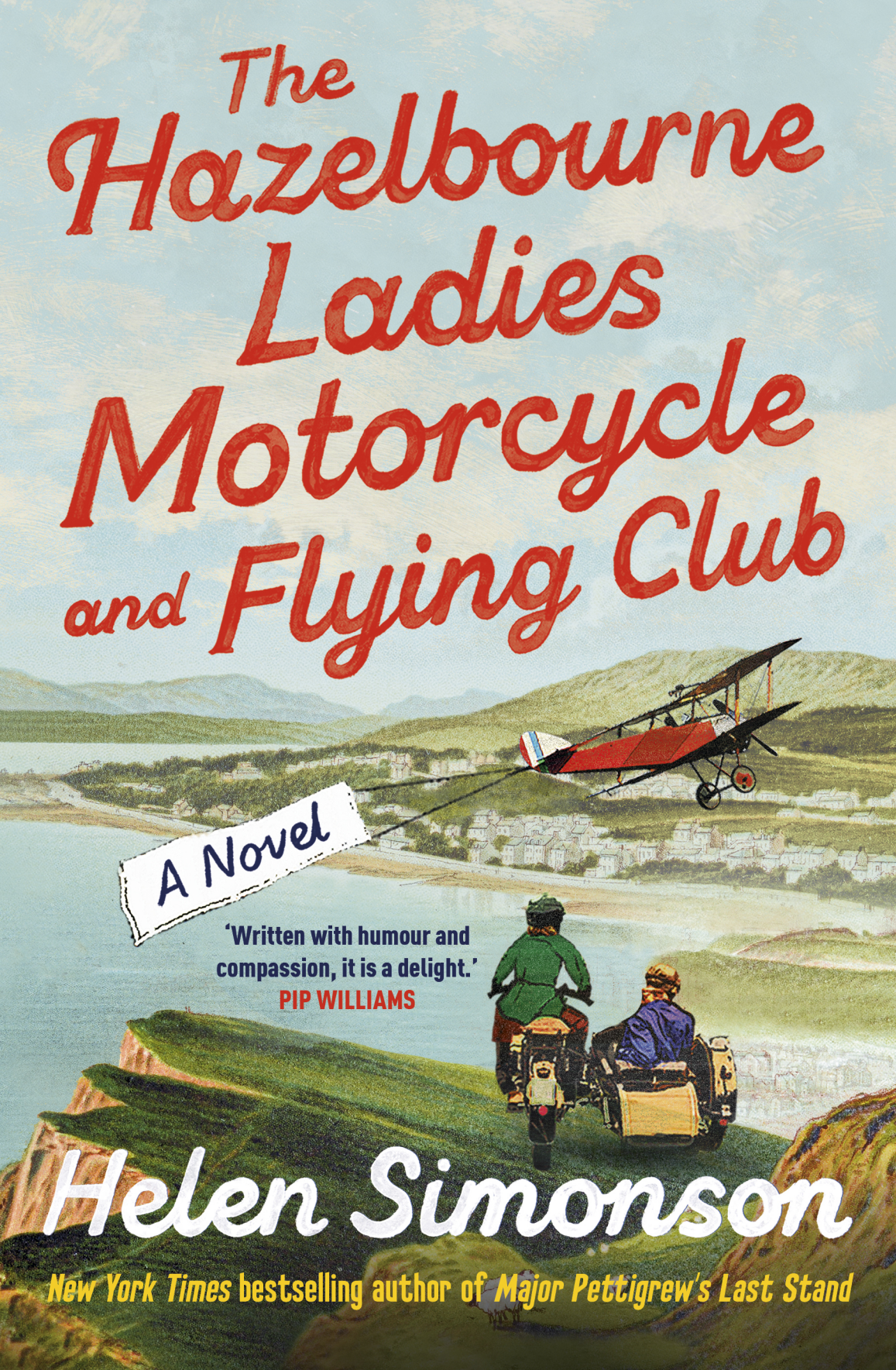
The Hazelbourne Ladies Motorcycle and Flying Club



A Novel

'Written with humour and compassion, it is a delight.'
PIP WILLIAMS

Helen Simonson

New York Times bestselling author of *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*

The Hazelbourne Ladies Motorcycle and Flying Club

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Chapter 1

In the first place, it did not seem quite right that a girl that young should be free to wander the hotel and seaside town without a chaperone. She looked respectable enough, though she was pale as alabaster and thin as a wet string. She was clothed in a brown wool dress, perhaps a bit too big, that fell decently to the ankles, and her leather boots still had a shine of newness on them. She was some sort of connection and companion to Mrs Fog, an old lady from a grand family in the shires, but it seemed to Klaus Zieger that the old lady encouraged far too much independence. Since her arrival at the Meredith Hotel, the girl was always to be found tripping through the grand public rooms alone, or curled up in an armchair deep in a book, oblivious to all. And now, with the old lady having ordered dinner in her room again, the girl wished to be seated in the Grand Dining Room alone.

'I hoped, because it was early . . .' she said, peering past Klaus into the high-ceilinged room, which functioned as both restaurant and ballroom. She spoke respectfully but there was a firmness to her tone and a faint lift of the chin. 'A quiet corner somewhere?' Only two tables were occupied; each with a pair of elderly ladies nodding their hats at each other. The room echoed a little. Silverware pinging against glass, shoes loud against the parquet floor. The tall potted palms stirred in an unknown draught and from beyond the tall French windows came the murmur of voices from the seafront and the low booming of the sea against the pebbled

shore. Later would come the dancing crowds, the loud hotel orchestra and the crude drunken Saturday night carousing – all things that would never have been countenanced before the war.

'I'm very sorry, miss,' Klaus repeated, drawing himself up. He was the lone waiter at this hour, and in the absence of the headwaiter, who was having his own dinner in the kitchen, he felt keenly the need to defend the ragged standards that were left. 'Can I arrange to have something sent to your room?'

'Please don't be sorry,' the girl said. 'We are all bound by our duties, are we not?' She gave him a brief smile and walked away down the long marble floor of the glass-enclosed Palm Terrace. Her smile made him ashamed. Not answering him about the dinner tray made him irritated. Turning away a hotel customer added a new string to the vibration of anxiety that hummed in his veins.

He tugged down surreptitiously at the sleeves of his black jacket, now a little stiff from age and mothballs, and rubbed the arthritis in his knuckles, wondering if he should have relented. Would this quiet young woman eating tonight's chicken quenelles behind a potted palm have been more scandalous than the women who would come later in the evening to dine intimately or in great parties, with men, laughing open-mouthed over champagne and bending the fringed edges of their décolletages into the mock turtle soup?

He cast a discreet eye over his tables, looking for the dropping of hands, the setting down of cutlery that would signal he was needed, and sighed. Everything was confusing now. He had recognised one of the pair of diners from before the war, the widow of a wealthy brick manufacturer and her spinster sister, who lived in a large villa on a hill above the town. Kind women who appreciated fine service, who blushed at a carefully dispensed compliment, who always left a little gratuity hidden under the napkin. He had made a mistake today, exclaiming at seeing them after so long, trying to kiss their gloved hands. They had responded with squeezed lips, their eyes darting and anxious. Like a blow to the ribs, he understood why the hotel manager had been hesitant and cruel

in hiring him back. Two months' trial only and an instruction to keep his mouth shut as much as possible. Klaus had been hurt, almost to the point of refusing.

Before the war, a German waiter commanded the greatest respect. But what was the point of standing on his pride? After six humiliating months in the internment camp, and banned from returning to the coast, he had nearly starved in London, scratching for whatever job they would give to a German. He remembered the long steaming hours at the sink, washing dishes in a men's hostel; waiting tables at an asylum where an inmate might thank you for the supper or throw it in your face; a pallet on the cellar floor in exchange for working in a boarding house dining room. To return home to Hazelbourne-on-Sea he needed this job and the room that came with it. He wondered, as a tremor ran down his spine, where he would go now if the two women, or the young girl, made a complaint.

IN THE LOBBY of the Meredith Hotel, Constance Haverhill paused, pretending to admire the flowers in the towering urn on a marble table at the foot of the grand staircase. The reception desk seemed busy with a large party arriving and two or three gentlemen chatting to the concierge. Her rejection from the dining room fresh, she felt too humiliated to push herself forward to the centre where the clerk would offer her the menu of the day and she would be forced to publicly decide between broth or fish paste on toast and then accept the plain dinner and one of the three rotating puddings, most of them custard. On their first night, she and Mrs Fog had dined together, but dinner had been taken in her room these last three days, and Constance was tired of the lingering smell of gravy and the awkward waiting for the used tray to be removed.

There would be plenty of time in the years to come to feel the limits of a life as a spinster. Lady Mercer, who fancied herself Constance's patron and had sent her to the seaside to look after Mrs Fog, her mother, had been loud in her opinion that now, with the war over and women no

longer needed in men's professions, Constance would be well advised to take up as a governess. Joining the family once a week for dinner with the children, trays in one's room when important guests came to dine, sharing one's room on occasion if there were too many ladies' maids at a weekend party. Constance shivered at the thought. As a young girl, she had seen the governesses come and go, for Lady Mercer couldn't seem to keep one. And when one left, Constance's mother would be called in to help during the transition. On those occasions, Constance would go with her mother to the big house and join in the lessons with Rachel, their daughter.

Her mother and Lady Mercer had been schoolgirls together, and though the former married a farmer and the latter a lord, they maintained the fiction of a lifelong affection of friends and equals by never allowing the crudeness of money to come between them. Constance's mother had never received a wage for the many services she had provided under the guise of friendship and the patronage of the Clivehill estate. Instead there was always a small velvet bag of sovereigns at Christmas, the discarded dresses of prior seasons, a supply of preserved fruit that she and Constance helped the kitchen put up every summer. There were invitations to hunt balls and to fill out the numbers at some of the less distinguished dinners held in Clivehill's magnificent dining room. Constance herself had plenty of training in working for, and being grateful to, the Mercer family, including having run their estate office for most of the war. But with the Armistice, it had been made clear she was surplus to requirements and her need for paid employment was now pressing. As a thank-you, she had been promised these few short weeks at the seaside, during which she might float in the luxurious anonymity of hotel life. But her rejection from the dining room made her uncertain future seem all the more immediate.

Her reverie was interrupted by the slightest ripple of tension in the lobby. There were no raised voices but only the urgent cadence of a disagreement being conducted discreetly by the open French windows. The hotel's undermanager, a shy youth of some relation to the hotel

manager, was bent to converse with a woman about Constance's age, who was sitting half-concealed on a settee, reading a newspaper. There seemed to be some issue regarding the woman's ordering tea and Constance drifted closer with all the natural curiosity of someone fresh from her own humiliation.

'Oh, don't turn me out, Dudley. I'm having dinner here with my mother later,' said the young woman. 'Just bring me a tea table and I'll promise to hide behind the tablecloth.'

'But we cannot serve you, Miss Wirrall . . .' said the undermanager, his face reddening at her familiarity. He seemed like a man on the third or fourth round of saying exactly the same thing. Constance could see that the young woman, though discreetly tucking her ankles under the seat and partly covered by the day's headlines, was wearing slim brown wool trousers tucked into the tops of thick black knee boots. A green tweed jacket and white silk scarf completed the ensemble. A leather helmet and goggles lay abandoned on a low table. The woman's chestnut hair was fuzzy and loose in its pins, no doubt from wearing the helmet, and gave her a slightly disreputable look.

'Take pity on me,' said the girl, but the undermanager shook his head. She seemed to catch sight of Constance in that instant and grinned before tossing the newest of her long list of arguments. 'I'm liable to die of thirst, Dudley.'

'May I be of assistance?' asked Constance. 'I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but if the lady needs a companion for you to bring her tea?'

'We only serve ladies on the Palm Terrace,' said Dudley, his face stiffening. 'And afternoon attire is required.' Constance was distracted by his Adam's apple bobbing awkwardly above the too-large ring of his stiff shirt collar. Everywhere she looked these days it seemed that the people, at least those not swathed in the comforting blanket of rank and money, had become smaller than their clothes. Hollowed out perhaps by the rationing, the ravages of influenza, the usual ailments of the British damp. But maybe it was just the long years of the war itself, which could not be sloughed off in a few days of Armistice celebrations. Everywhere, she

saw the cinched-in belts and frayed cuffs, the stiff shoulders and old-fashioned clothes. Everywhere in the gaunt but cheerful faces, the flickering ghosts of loss. The young undermanager's face might have shown a hint of disdain at Constance's interference, but she saw the war in his eyes too and could not resent him.

'Bless you, but I'm unchaperonable,' said the girl, laughing. Her cheeks were pink, but from fresh air not from blushing; her posture was relaxed and her blue eyes were clear and full of mischief. She really did not look as humiliated as the situation seemed to require, and Constance realised she was only playing with the poor youth. The girl was amused and Constance felt a slight indignation creeping inside her.

'I shouldn't have presumed,' she said stiffly. 'I didn't mean to interfere.' She turned on her heel, anxious to escape.

'I say, is there any chance you would help me?' said the girl, jumping up and extending a slightly oil-stained hand. 'I'm Poppy Wirrall. I've been out all day on the motorcycle and damn it all if I didn't leave my bag behind at home. My mother is still out visiting and the powers that be here have decided that after four years of war and pestilence they should still have the vapours over a woman having tea in trousers.'

'I foresee no chance of either of us persuading them as to any softening of the rules,' said Constance, shaking hands.

'Yes, but could you be an absolute saint and lend me a skirt for an hour?' asked Poppy. 'Probably be a bit of a squeeze for me but I take it you have pins?'

'Well, I . . .' Constance paused, her mind racing. How was one supposed to respond to a complete stranger asking to borrow from one's small stock of clothing? And when most of the clothing is not yours to begin with and the only good skirt left would be one's best . . .

'It's too much, I know,' said the girl. She began to cheerfully tidy up the newspaper and handed it to the young man. 'Not to worry. My mother will be back for dinner and she'll be only too delighted to stuff me into something frivolous of hers, perish the thought.' She sighed. 'I'll just have to slowly dehydrate in the gardens until then.'

'I'm very sorry . . . but we just cannot make exceptions . . .' babbled young Mr Dudley, flushed and confused. He waved his hands as some sort of deflective protection. 'I'm sure you understand.'

'Yes, the floodgates will open and tea will become a bacchanal of oddly dressed bohemians and suffragettes.'

'Exactly,' said Dudley.

'I'll lend you something,' said Constance, leaping in as much for the poor undermanager as for the strange girl. 'I know something about how awkward hotels can be.'

'Would you really? You are a lifesaver,' said Poppy, as if the whole thing was Constance's idea. She began gathering her helmet and goggles. 'Shall we go to your room?'

'Of course,' said Constance, quailing at the thought, as she couldn't quite remember if she had left the bedroom absolutely tidy. It was quite a large room in the back of the hotel but there might be books and papers on the bed and floor. There might also be stockings drying over a chair, slippers abandoned under the dressing table and a pear ripening on the windowsill.

'While I'm dressing, could you arrange a late tea for two on the terrace, Dudley, and charge it to my mother?' said Poppy. She stopped and raised an enquiring eyebrow at Constance. 'Would that be all right? You will have some tea with me, won't you?'

'Oh, that's not necessary,' said Constance, though she felt suddenly desperate for the chance to talk to someone so interesting and of her own age.

'Nonsense!' said Poppy. 'I insist you let me treat you. It's the least I can do.'

'Well, that would be lovely,' said Constance. She did not look to see if the undermanager was raising his eyebrows at her.

'As well as tea, we'll have sardines on toast, some deviled eggs and two glasses of sherry,' added Poppy to the undermanager. She tucked her arm beneath Constance's as if they were old friends and added, 'We wouldn't want to faint from hunger before dinner.'

Constance's room was bigger than she had expected it to be, and she was grateful it was not some narrow attic reserved for ladies' maids and children. It faced a small, fern-filled courtyard and was furnished with only a bed, a dressing table with a triple mirror and two small gilt chairs, all in the French style. It seemed to shrink with Poppy in it, and Constance, hauling her best lilac silk skirt from the wardrobe and laying it on the bed, wished she had the elegance of a screened dressing area or a full-length mirror to offer.

'What's that blue skirt in there?' asked Poppy, peering brazenly into the wardrobe. Constance, busy whisking the dried stockings out of sight, stiffened at the casual sense of entitlement, a hallmark of the wealthy so familiar to her from many years' acquaintance with Lady Mercer. But in Poppy's case she was charmed to see that it seemed to come without criticism.

'The blue is really a walking skirt; the lilac is more formal,' said Constance. She took out the plain blue wool skirt, trimmed with a narrow black ribbon around the hem, and laid it alongside the lilac skirt she had not yet worn. It was worked around the hem with embroidered sweet peas and caught up at one side to reveal an underskirt of darker purple. It was really too fine for her and she had hesitated to wear it. Perhaps she would wear it tomorrow, Sunday, when a string quartet would play on the hotel's terrace at teatime. The wardrobe also contained two white summer dresses she hesitated to dirty, several blouses and a stiffly boned, dark-blue lace evening dress. Some of the clothes were cast-offs of a decidedly old-fashioned cut, retrieved from dusty trunks and hastily altered to fit Constance. But some were more fashionable. They had been ordered for Lady Mercer's daughter, Rachel, early in the war, but when the first Zeppelin raids on London appeared in the newspapers, Rachel had been rushed away to wealthy friends in Virginia. There, she had apparently made quite an impression on American society and presumably acquired a new wardrobe along with a fiancé from a prominent political family.

Rachel and Constance called each other 'cousin', but they were not close friends as their mothers had been. There had been help, and not a little self-congratulation from the Mercers, in securing a scholarship for Constance as a day girl at the local boarding school. But Rachel had been sent away to a much more prestigious boarding school, and they had naturally, or by design, grown apart. Now Constance fingered the blue silk knots that decorated the evening gown's bodice. 'If you're having dinner later would you prefer to borrow an evening dress?' she asked. 'It is Saturday night.'

'I despise all fuss and furbelows so I'll take the blue,' said Poppy, nodding at the plain skirt. 'Do you have a scarf I can use?' She was unlacing her boots as she spoke, and then she was shimmying out of her trousers while Constance turned her back and dug in her dressing table drawer for a scarf of blue silk flowers. In another moment Poppy had slipped on the skirt, buttoning it in the front and swivelling it around to its proper position. Removing her tweed jacket, she revealed a plain white blouse with two jet pins carved into swallows at the collar. She took one and used it to fasten the scarf around her waist like a broad sash.

'You look transformed,' said Constance. 'I'm astonished.'

'I'm used to making do with very little luggage,' said Poppy, unpinning two strategic hairpins and combing her locks with her fingers.

'You can use my comb if you like,' said Constance shyly.

'Well, now I am really in your debt,' said Poppy, barely scraping her hair with the comb before loosely twisting and pinning it up again. 'Lending another girl your comb – it's sort of like my brother and his friends declaring blood brothers.'

'I would offer to lend you shoes but I'm not sure . . .'

'Oh, not to worry, I have the feet of an elephant,' said Poppy, sitting and hitching up her skirt over her knees to put on her boots. 'To my mother's eternal despair. My father would always tell her not to worry. 'In the event of a flood, Poppy will always have her own canoe,' he'd say. It really didn't help.' She shook her head, and though she gave a short laugh, her face grew soft and her eyes wet.

'Are you all right?'

'I'm sorry. My father died in the autumn. Spanish flu. I forget sometimes and then . . . well, it catches me unaware.'

Not used to such naked openness of feeling, Constance sank onto the other chair and turned her head away. In the sudden silence an unknown bird in the courtyard spilled its song into the last rays of the afternoon sun and something cracked in her usual reserve.

'My mother too,' she said at last. 'We buried her on Armistice Day.'

Constance could still hear the sounds of church bells ringing and the village band playing; see the cheering crowd gathered in front of the Rose and Crown, children waving flags and racing across the village green. The band had fallen raggedly silent as the hearse and the small band of family following it on foot had rounded the bend, heading for the church. The cheering people hushed and men removed their caps. Women nodded to her and tried to disguise a slight backing away. A pair of small girls froze where they were on the green, clutching dolls, unsure. She smiled at the girls, releasing them to run to their mother. The funeral procession was a small group; just Constance, her brother and his wife, who did not know there was worse grief to come; the Vicar, clutching a handkerchief to his nose; and two or three farmers who had been friends of the family for years, each walking carefully apart. Lady Mercer had wanted to come, of course. She made that very clear. But for the fear of the influenza and her weak heart. The Vicar had been relieved that theirs was the only funeral of the day. After they passed into the churchyard, Constance heard the cheering resume. The band struck up a march. And why not? Today marked the end of the war, and perhaps the end of the war would bring an end to the influenza, which had created so many new-turned mounds of dirt in the churchyard.

'One gets exhausted exchanging condolences,' said Poppy, and her face seemed to have lost some of its colour. 'It feels as if no one is untouched.'

'And my brother's child,' Constance added, almost a whisper. 'We lost him just before Christmas.' She could see the baby, small hands

turning blue, breath bubbling as his lungs drowned. Her sister-in-law, Mary, shrieking at her, convinced that even a full month after her mother's death, it was somehow Constance's fault that the pestilence had come to the farm. That she was blameless did not stop her feeling guilty, and the crushing weight of it had helped drive her from home. She would be a governess before she would live at her brother's farm again.

'As if the war wasn't enough,' said Poppy. 'Do you think God laughs at us for our hubris?'

They sat in silence for a moment, companions of circumstance.

'Shall we go down?' said Constance.

'Don't you want to put on the pretty skirt for Saturday night?' asked Poppy. 'I'm a frump of the first order, but don't let me stop you from kitting out.'

'I'm not dressing for dinner tonight,' said Constance, smoothing at her plain wool dress, which until then she had considered appropriately demure but suitable. Perhaps if she had worn the lilac the waiter might have seated her in the dining room, she thought. 'I'll just have them bring something up later.' She turned away, touching at her hair in the mirror to disguise any blush that might betray her nonchalance.

'I have an idea,' said Poppy. 'After we have tea, why don't you do me another enormous favour and join us for dinner? Mother always has extra room at her table.'

'I couldn't possibly,' said Constance. 'It's a family dinner.'

'Well, you would have to put up with Mother,' agreed Poppy. 'But she would love the extra company. That's why she lives in a hotel.' Constance would have liked to ask where Poppy lived, but she feared it rude to ask why an unmarried daughter would not live with her perfectly available mother.

'I wouldn't like to impose' was all she managed.

'And look, my brother is a decent chap; bit morose, but he lost his leg so that's understandable,' added Poppy. 'You're not afraid of a man with one leg, are you?'

'Losing a leg? How awful,' said Constance. She had seen the broken

men at the railway stations in London; leaning on crutches in their tattered coats, sleeves or trouser legs pinned up; rattling tin cans for alms. There had been a man in her carriage, all his limbs intact but rocking silently all the way to Sussex, humming low and tuneless. The war seemed to have shattered those it had not killed. Even in the seaside atmosphere of the hotel, there seemed a slight strain to the jollity, as if the same low humming vibrated behind the potted palms and between the notes of the hotel's dance orchestra. 'I'm only afraid of not knowing how to behave,' she added.

'Honestly spoken,' said Poppy. 'I know we've only just met, but I have a feeling we're going to be great friends. Do say you'll come to dinner with us. When you know me better you'll understand I find it hard to take no for an answer.'

'I believe I have already learned that,' said Constance, laughing. 'So I would be delighted.' The invitation might have been unconventional, but Constance was suddenly tired of being a dull moth. So she would let herself be drawn to this rather alarming young woman and trust that, for the length of one dinner, she was sensible enough to protect her brown powdered wings from being singed.

Chapter 2

The small orchestra was in full swing, making elegant fox-trots out of wartime music hall songs, and the electric chandeliers glittered over a full dining room, hot with the smell of flowers and ladies' perfume. Klaus manoeuvred carefully through the crush, holding aloft an enormous silver tray of empty dinner plates. It was some satisfaction that he could still deftly serve scalloped potatoes between two silver spoons, describe all the ingredients in the mornay sauce and carry away a full table's worth of plates, glasses and cutlery with a flourish. Despite the long-forced absence from fine dining, he could still outperform the large-eared young men labouring with him, who stumbled over the names of French ingredients, slopped food onto plates and forgot how to fold a lady's napkin. In the heat of service, Klaus spun and floated like a dancer, and tried to forget that the mornay sauce contained only powdered cheese and that he would pay for his elegant flourishes tonight, soaking his arthritic knuckles in a bowl of hot water and vinegar and trying to find any comfortable position to sleep on the thin cot in his attic room. Returning from the service area, he caught the headwaiter's discreet sign and positioned himself at a large window table, sheltered under a potted palm, to welcome the guests now being led, with simpering ceremony, across the room.

He recognised Mrs Wirrall, who lived in a suite of rooms with its own

dining room on the second floor of the hotel. She partook of dinner in the main dining room on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The wife of a local baronet, Sir John Wirrall, she had come down from London last spring and registered at the hotel without her title. The gossips said it was because she feared it might be stripped from her any day in the impending divorce mentioned in the newspapers. The baronet's sudden death last autumn – another one lost to the influenza – had saved her from scandal. Penneston, the family's country estate, had recently been returned from wartime use, but it was said Mrs Wirrall was in no rush to move in and preferred hotel living. She was also, they whispered in the kitchen, a former actress, which might explain the decided glitter about her as she glided across the carpet in her many jewels, a fur stole and the sculpted layers of a black silk evening dress.

Behind her came her two children, both with her blue eyes, straight nose and thick hair. The young man, returned from the war an amputee, was drawn and stiff around the jaw, wincing now and again as he leaned on his cane. He lived with his mother upstairs too. The young woman did not live at the hotel and Klaus had only seen her a few times. Hair barely restrained in its combs, she was bright-faced and pretty in a jolly, athletic sort of way. She seemed unconcerned that she was dressed in day clothes. To Klaus's surprise, the fourth guest, for whom he was even now pulling out a chair, was the young girl from earlier. She had changed into a tight jacket of dark blue worsted and an embroidered lilac silk evening skirt. Two bright spots augmented her anxious cheeks, but she thanked him in a calm voice, and where some might have met him with a note of triumph or spite, she threw him a smile of gratitude and friendly recognition. In that moment Klaus became as smitten and devoted as the ageing Don Quixote. Though by all reports, he thought, as he handed her a menu, the former actress was more a Dulcinea and only slightly more respectable as a chaperone than having none at all.

It was a little discomfiting to Constance that she was welcomed by Mrs Wirrall, as a friend of Poppy, with a knowing air of pleasant distraction. It was as if Poppy were an eccentric child always bringing home stray puppies, injured sparrows and jars of frog spawn.

'Lovely Poppy. I'm so glad your friend has joined us for dinner. How lucky they could find an extra chair. I always have the Dover sole.' This last was confided to Constance as Mrs Wirrall slid her sable wrap from around her shoulders, as if it were necessary and perfectly normal to wear sable in late June, in a provincial English seaside town. Mrs Wirrall was thin in the deliberate way of some women who are used to being beauties and who seek to extend the fading glow through active discipline. In a perfectly oval face, now hollowing into handsome under high cheekbones, her eyes glittered below the blink and flicker of painted lashes. Her hair was curled and pomaded into shiny submission and worn in a thickly coiled and braided chignon adorned with a small crest of black feathers. She had drawn every eye as they promenaded across the dining room.

Poppy's brother, Harris, had greeted Constance with a blank politeness. He was a taller, thinner version of Poppy, with weary angles to his face and a pronounced limp. Now he caught his mother's fur awkwardly, with one arm, and passed it hastily to the headwaiter, along with his cane.

The waiter who had pulled out Constance's chair was the same thin and faded man who had refused her entry earlier. She blushed at what he must think of her, breaching the castle with company and a lilac silk evening skirt. Despite the headwaiter's imperious clicking of fingers, the waiter had taken the time to make her a short bow and to drop her napkin carefully into her lap while murmuring a welcome.

'I'm very hungry,' said Poppy, as if she had not so recently eaten a whole plate of sardines on the Palm Terrace. 'I hope you have roast beef, Klaus.'

'The chef recommends the chicken quenelles tonight,' said the waiter,

in his faint German accent, filling their water glasses. 'But we do offer beef pie with barley, mushroom and parsnip.'

'That's a mushroom barley pie with a beef promise,' said Constance. 'I've eaten it twice in hopes of something more.'

'In my dreams I sometimes actually smell roast beef and horseradish,' said Poppy.

'Perhaps you should bathe more often, darling,' said Mrs Wirrall as Poppy's brother gave a reluctant chuckle. She turned to the waiter to ask, 'Is the celery fresh, Klaus? Last week it was quite limp and exhausted.'

'Perhaps it's taking lessons from Harris?' said Poppy, her eyes sparkling with the friendly malice of siblings.

'I'm glad my crippled state amuses you,' said Harris. No smile softened his response.

'You're right, I should not tease,' said Poppy. She turned as Constance raised her glass to her lips, and added, 'My poor brother was badly wounded in the war and apparently they had to amputate his sense of humour.' Constance choked on her water.

'Don't squabble, darlings. Miss Haverhill is not used to your savagery,' said Mrs Wirrall mildly. She turned to give their order to the waiter, who looked somewhat bemused as she detailed several dishes not on the menu and seemingly far in excess of the three courses allowed under the rationing rules. 'And bring us the salad after the Dover sole, and a small cheese before the pudding,' she finished. 'That way we will at least have the illusion of an adequate repast.'

Harris raised his eyes to Constance. 'You will have to forgive my awful sister, Miss Haverhill. She loves to shock. But she is right that I am abominably out of temper these days. I make a dismal dinner companion and am not to be trusted in company.' A brief smile showed he might be handsome if he cared to be.

'I am very glad for any company besides my own,' said Constance. 'My companion, Mrs Fog, often prefers to take dinner in her room.'

'That sounds wonderful to me,' said Harris. 'It would be bliss to be

left alone and not dragged from pillar to post. Perhaps I shall take all meals in my room from now on.'

'You must stop moping, my dear. It's not healthy,' said his mother. She was looking around the room and nodding at acquaintances. She blew a kiss to a frail old colonel with a highly waxed and curled moustache. 'You have no idea how difficult it was to drag him down to dinner this evening—'

'No amount of dragging me to restaurants and dinner parties will make me anything other than crippled,' said Harris, interrupting. 'I think a certain amount of moping ought to be allowed, don't you, Miss Haverhill?'

'I think there is a lot of grief and pain to go around in these times,' said Constance reluctantly. 'I'm sure you're doing your best.'

'Ah, you're one of those women who is always relentlessly cheerful and useful,' said Harris, narrowing his eyes at her. 'Soldiering on to keep the home front going and all that.'

'Harris, don't be a beast,' said Poppy. Constance felt her eyes prick with angry tears to be dismissed with such condescension. It was no less humiliating because of its grain of truth.

She had hoped to attend university, but upon the death of her father, at the beginning of the war, Constance had been persuaded to stay home to look after her widowed mother. Lady Mercer had offered them a small, whitewashed gamekeeper's cottage by the stream, so that Constance's older brother and his new wife could be the master and mistress of the farm. With Lord Mercer at the War Office and the estate manager gone off to the Front, Constance had soon started to help Lady Mercer by keeping the estate's ledgers and working with the tenant farmers to run the estate. She had buried her grief in hard work and been glad to be of use and to be too tired to think at the end of every day. It was the idle times that brought her misery. But the war ended, and Lord Mercer had made it clear she was no longer required in the estate office.

'I hope I did my part,' said Constance, struggling against a tremble in

her voice. She wished, just for once, that a man might praise the 'home front' efforts of women and actually mean it. 'I may not have a home to keep going any more, but I'm certainly not going to lie around all day in despair. I think that's reserved for people wealthier than I.'

'Touché,' said Harris, his face darkening as he turned away to ask his mother, 'When is that man bringing the wine?'

'No home, you say? Isn't that quite unfortunate?' said Mrs Wirrall, raising a discreet eyebrow at Poppy. Poppy smiled widely. Constance felt herself again the waif – an injured pigeon in a hatbox.

'I lost my mother in the autumn,' she said. She was too proud to tell these strangers all that she had lost. Even now she could feel the cold April afternoon in Surrey, with the rain lashing the library windows and melting the cherry blossoms from the trees outside, while Lady Mercer, keeping her face to the crackling fire, had tried to bury the bad news about Constance's future in delicate layers of elliptical language.

'Nothing could be further from my desire . . .' said Lady Mercer.

'Your beloved mother was my dearest friend . . .' she said.

'Nothing need be decided in haste . . .' she added.

Constance had already understood the rambling direction of the monologue to mean she was to be evicted from her home.

'It being almost six months since your poor mother left us, and believing your happiness will be best served, as it were, in the comfort of family . . .' Lady Mercer had blustered on, valiantly attempting to bring her point home without having to say it aloud.

'If it is a question of paying rent?' Constance had interrupted, knowing that it was not. No rent had ever been asked but, on the other hand, no help had ever been offered for the many repairs required to make the cottage livable. Instead, Constance and her mother had scrubbed and whitewashed and spent the war battling the ongoing damp in the north wall.

'Rent? No, no!' To watch Lady Mercer wriggle like a worm on a fishhook had been fascinating. Fascination and bitter amusement were perhaps not the expected emotions in such a scene but there were only so

many blows to the heart one could take before becoming numb. In the country as a whole there had seemed a strange, numb resilience.

'As you know, it was such a pleasure for me to be able to offer your mother a refuge after your father died,' said Lady Mercer. 'By rights she would have stayed on with your brother and his wife, but I insisted she be the mistress of her own cosy establishment.'

'My mother and I were very grateful,' said Constance.

'No one misses her like I do.' A lace handkerchief had appeared and was pressed to the corner of a dry eye. 'When you are girls together . . .' Constance had turned her head away towards the streaming windows, biting her lip against the brief flare of pain. 'A home with your brother is, we think, a better option than to live as a young woman alone and unprotected,' Lady Mercer had said.

Now, seeing the note of pity in Mrs Wirrall's gaze, Constance understood the pressure to maintain a fiction of comfortable respectability.

'I have my brother. When Mrs Fog no longer needs me, I may make my home with him and his family.' She stumbled over the lie and blushed. There had been no way to explain then, as there was no way now, that while a spinster home with her brother and his wife might once have been merely uncomfortable, to live under the haunted hatred of her sister-in-law's grief was impossible. 'Until I find further employment, of course. I am considering all the possibilities.'

'Hotel living is not too bad for a season or two,' said Mrs Wirrall, distracted again. 'My husband and I spent a year on the Italian Riviera when we were young.' She sighed. 'We were different people then. Passionate, carefree, childless.'

'Thank you so much for that, Mother,' said Harris.

'Of course it is so much nicer to have your own cook. Hotel cooking is all theatre and suspicious butter,' she said, as the waiter presented her a bread roll with his silver tongs and a small china pot of butter. She peered at Constance as if seeing her for the first time. 'I don't suppose it would be entirely respectable for a young woman to live in such transient circumstances.'

'Mummy, Miss Haverhill is as respectable as you are,' said Poppy.

'You're not on the stage, are you, Miss Haverhill?' asked Harris. 'Though of course our mother insists the stage was much more dignified a profession in her youth.'

'I am not ashamed of my time on the stage,' said Mrs Wirrall. 'Though I was never, ever without a chaperone; even when the Prince of Wales came backstage after my Covent Garden debut, I refused to dismiss Madame Emily from the room.' She sighed. 'I might have been a princess, you know.' Poppy's laughter, hidden in her napkin, suggested this was an old family tale.

'We are just here for a few weeks' holiday while Mrs Fog convalesces,' said Constance, flustered by the interrogation. 'I nursed her through the influenza. Her family, Lord and Lady Mercer, wished to thank me.'

After her mother's death, Constance had not wanted to nurse anyone else. But the nurses wouldn't stay. Or perhaps they were too expensive or did not appreciate being banned from the servants' hall at Clivehill and their tea left in a Thermos on the back stair. And Lady Mercer was declared too fragile by the doctors, she said, to risk entering even the same wing of the house. Remembering her own mother labouring to breathe and moaning in fear, Constance could not quiet her conscience. She came to the house every day with a stout apron, a cloth mask and a basket of remedies, and took complete charge of the sickroom. Weeks after her fever broke, the old lady was still weak, with bones as fragile as a bird's, and skin so pale it shone blue in certain lights. Constance wondered privately if Mrs Fog would ever recover fully.

'Perhaps we can thank you by sending you and Mother to the seaside as soon as the weather improves,' Lady Mercer had said, just a few days after suggesting eviction. 'My father had a bath chair and a man to push it one summer. I dare say we could manage without the expense of the man as Mummy would be so much lighter to push.' Constance had been too stunned to speak and this had been taken as acquiescence.

Once again, the thanking had not extended to any definite financial

arrangement. Instead, Lady Mercer had made all the hotel arrangements and passed down to Constance a small wardrobe of suitable attire for life in a seaside hotel. Constance had examined her own meagre savings and brought the largest portion with her. And the old lady had surprised her on their journey down by pressing a small purse of money into her hand and telling her a young woman should be able to buy the occasional book and hair ribbon on her holiday.

'Mercer? Surrey, isn't it?' said Mrs Wirrall. 'Near Box Hill. Ancient family fortune married into some interests from the old Barbados sugar trade?'

'Don't mind Mother,' said Poppy. 'She has Burke's Peerage entirely memorised. It's her principal hobby to know who everyone is.'

'Not at all,' said Mrs Wirrall. 'I just have an excellent memory.'

'And she does not remember that it is unseemly to talk about the finances of one's peers,' added Harris.

'Of course I do,' said Mrs Wirrall. 'I never talk money. Though I met an earl once who fancied himself above all men, and it was quite satisfying to tell him how much I admired his saving the family fortune through his early investments in patented shoe polish.'

'And she calls me incorrigible,' said Poppy.

'So how did you come to be employed by Lady Mercer?' asked Mrs Wirrall.

'It was not a paid position, more a family favour,' said Constance, her voice perhaps a little too urgent. 'Lady Mercer is my mother's oldest childhood friend. When the war broke out I was asked to help run the estate.' She paused, unsure how much to reveal. 'I understand now that Lady Mercer and my mother probably plotted together to keep me safe at home.'

'Running an estate is an extraordinary task for a young woman,' said Mrs Wirrall.

'Women worked or volunteered at all kinds of professions in the war, Mother,' said Poppy.

'If this is an attempt to get me to invest more in your little motorcycle company, I decline to engage,' said her mother. 'I'm sure Miss Haverhill would not dream of coming to dinner with oil under her fingernails.'

'My father's family have always been farmers,' said Constance, as Poppy rolled her eyes while surreptitiously examining her hands below the table. 'I grew up learning how things run.'

'So you are a farmer's daughter,' said Mrs Wirrall. 'Well, farming is perfectly respectable these days. Kept us going through the war and all that. I can't think why Harris thought you were an actress.'

'I said no such thing,' said Harris. 'Miss Haverhill is quite obviously more dairymaid than demi-monde.'

'My mother is from a clerical family,' added Constance. Then she shut her lips, for to mention her late grandfather, the Bishop, might suggest some shame of her own father. She blushed at her shabbiness.

'My fingernails are perfectly clean, Mother,' added Poppy.

Constance decided she would not let Harris Wirrall's arrogance ruin her enjoyment of dinner. All around her the restaurant hummed and glittered under the chandeliers. The orchestra played, the small dance floor was already full of spinning couples; the waiters swept in long curves between the tables, their enormous trays held high, white gloves flashing. The tinkling of many spoons against china, the splash of champagne and ruby wine into glasses, the shimmer of evening dresses against the dark of men's dinner jackets. Here and there the brass and braid of uniforms still visible. She knew it was not the most fashionable of seaside towns, nor as grand a hotel as might be found on the French Riviera or even in nearby Brighton, but she was glad to be amid such warmth and gaiety.

There were celery stalks on a long glass dish served with small silver tongs. There were dishes of small green olives, and a plate of the ubiquitous tinned sardines rolled around tiny white onions and stuck through with a cocktail pick. A broth followed, slightly cloudy. Then an indeterminate course of oeufs mayonnaise. Finally, the main course: Mrs Wirrall had ordered Dover sole for the ladies and the pie for Harris. She had

commanded, and was delivered, buttered new potatoes, a dish of tiny spring peas and a carrot mash. There was even a small wedge of lemon in a muslin cloth, which the waiter squeezed over their fish with a silver tool.

'I haven't seen a lemon since before the war,' said Constance. There were one or two frowns from ladies at neighbouring tables, which indicated that not all patrons had been honoured with such an intoxicating spritz.

'My father knew the hotel's owners,' said Poppy. 'I think he invested.'

'It's not ladylike to pay any attention to business,' said Mrs Wirrall, frowning at her daughter. 'But I was offered the utmost consideration when I came here to live and I offer, in return, my loyalty.'

'Mummy won't buy so much as a cup of tea at any other establishment,' said Poppy. 'Sometimes we find ourselves at quite the other end of the promenade and as thirsty as a desert expedition, but she will insist we stagger back here.'

'A commitment must not fall to mere convenience,' said Mrs Wirrall. 'Faint hearts did not win us the war.'

'No, but bloody-mindedness cost us a few lives,' said Harris.

'Harris, you are abominable this evening,' said Mrs Wirrall. She waved a finger as if he were a naughty lapdog. 'I don't know why I allow it.'

'Because he's your favourite child, Mummy,' said Poppy. She turned to Constance. 'I on the other hand am the black sheep of the family.'

'Don't be silly, Poppy,' said her mother. 'I've always said you are beautiful when you make an effort.'

'How is the renovation of the house coming along, Mummy?' said Poppy, winking at Constance as she changed the subject. 'Less of a lost cause than I am, I hope.'

Mrs Wirrall was happy to talk at length about the improvements she was making to their country home now that it had been returned by the army. There was to be a Moorish-style garden room centred on a fountain with mosaic panels and imported orchids. A large divan draped

with shawls and a round carpeted ottoman for a table. Two large palm trees flanking the doors. The architect had been so complimentary about her ideas, wondering if she had trained professionally. Constance was delighted to hear her talk, to watch her daughter spar and tease her for her extravagance and her affection for florid decoration. Even the surly Harris, with his unfocused stare and slumped shoulders, joined in with a few blistering comments, delivered in the voice of affectionate condescension that men sometimes use to convey love. Most of all Constance was relieved not to be interrogated further about her circumstances but to be merely allowed to listen to the conversation wash over her as she relaxed and enjoyed the room.

After the fish, accompanied by a thick yellow wine from Alsace, there came a salad of young lettuce and shaved asparagus brightened with vinegar and flecked with salt. Then thin slices of mild Cheshire cheese, with plain crackers and a spoonful of fig preserve. A dish of gooseberries sweetened with redcurrant jam and swirled with custard was brought to round out the dinner.

The room grew warm and loud with laughter and conversation. The orchestra broke into a waltz and the dance floor itself seemed to whirl under the crowd of dancers. Or perhaps it was just her head, thought Constance, whirling from the mingling of so many perfumes. Even the palm tree above their heads seemed to keep time to the music, nodding in a stray fresh breeze from a transom window as a stream of laughing people flowed in and out from the lobby and the terrace to join the dancing.

'Oh, Poppy, look up, there's Tom Morris and his sisters,' said Mrs Wirrall, waving at a group of young people entering the dining room. 'Lovely girls,' she added to Constance. 'Guinevere lost her fiancé at the Somme.'

'Mother, must you wave like that?' asked Harris. 'It's a little showy.'

'Nonsense! Poppy will wish to introduce her new friend,' said Mrs Wirrall.

The twins and their brother, who was dressed in the blue uniform of the new Royal Air Force, headed over to the table. A second young man, awkward in a stiff black dinner suit, hovered a moment by a potted aspidistra trying to look nonchalant before following them. Harris stood up and bowed over the hands of the two lithe, ash-blonde girls in almost matching dinner dresses of pleated pink and grey silk. The dresses came to just below the knee, with only a fringe about the young women's shapely calves. Constance was shocked but also wished that her own lilac skirt was not so long and full about the ankles. Tom Morris, very blond as well but taller than his sisters, insisted on kissing Mrs Wirrall on both cheeks, continental style, and would have done the same to Poppy had she not sent him a glowering look.

'Ah, Poppy. As lovely but impervious as ever,' said the young man. 'When are you going to sell me your barn and motorcycles and marry me?'

'When are you going to let me fly one of your aeroplanes?' replied Poppy. Tom laughed and shook his head. He shook hands with Harris and slapped him on the back. The spare young man shook hands with Poppy as Tom gave Constance a broad wink. 'May we be presented to your lovely friend, Harris, in hopes she is kinder than your sister to a poor aviator just home from the war.'

'Ignore my brother. He's just back from Russia,' explained the twin introduced as Guinevere. She shook hands with Constance, smiling. 'He doesn't understand times have changed. Evangeline and I love our motorcycle and even Father agrees it can be perfectly feminine.' She touched a hand to her smooth hair, bobbed to the chin and carefully waved.

'He's been bombing the Bolsheviks,' added Evangeline. Her hair was even shorter and tucked, with a fresh camellia, behind one ear. Her handshake was less enthusiastic, and her eyes, looking Constance up and down, seemed to confirm Constance's fear that her skirt was dowdy.

'To no great effect, I'm afraid,' said Tom. 'I'm sure if we still had Har-

ris we'd have beaten them back to Moscow, but as it is they are proving as stubborn as mice in a barn.' An awkward pause ensued as if each were thinking of Harris's misfortune. Evangeline seemed to blush, another small difference between the twins.

'As Captain Morris is too busy talking about himself to introduce Mr Sam Newcombe, may I do the honours?' said Poppy. The spare young man bowed over Constance's hand and murmured some pleasantry – 'Very pleased. A friend of Poppy's . . .' – that was largely lost in general conversation.

'Is Constance a motorcycle fiend as well, I wonder?' asked Tom, raising his eyebrows.

'I am not, Captain Morris,' she replied, raising her eyebrows back to reprove his overfamiliarity.

'She will be as soon as I take her out,' said Poppy. 'We'll go tomorrow and I guarantee, Constance, you'll be a convert in a matter of miles!'

'If I have to hear any more about motorcycles,' said Mrs Wirrall, waving her hands. 'Your sisters must be glad to have you home, Tom?'

'If I were allowed to be home,' he said. 'They have me out dancing every night.'

'Ah, to be young and full of stamina,' said Mrs Wirrall, looking artfully wistful.

'Would you care to dance, Mrs Wirrall?' Tom bowed theatrically. 'I know you dance rings around any girl in the place, and frankly I am tired of dancing with my sisters.'

'Oh no, we don't dance,' said Mrs Wirrall. If her glance at Harris was meant to be discreet, it failed. It was Harris who spoke into the uncomfortable pause.

'My mother doesn't care to dance at the hotel,' he said. 'But if you are at the next charity dance at the Winter Garden, I'm sure she will save you a cakewalk, won't you, Mother?'

'I will save you a tango, young man,' she said. 'I will show you how we did it when it first came from Argentina.'

'We're going dancing after dinner. New club on the pier,' said Sam

Newcombe, his ears turning red at his own abruptness. 'Your party welcome, Wirrall?'

'Oh yes, do come,' added Guinevere with great enthusiasm. 'It's shockingly democratic and one dances ragtime with soldiers and airmen, shopgirls and typists.'

'Are there any farmers?' said Harris, his face neutral. Poppy punched him in the arm.

'One doesn't have to dance with any of them,' Evangeline assured Constance. 'A polite refusal and they leave you alone.' Her pretty bowed mouth made a small moue of distaste.

'Evangeline is such a snob,' said her sister. 'No one cares – we even dance with each other. Since the war, no one thinks twice about two girls dancing together. It's quite liberating not to have to worry about a man.' Mr Newcombe gave a small cough and she giggled. 'Oh, we don't mean you, Sam.'

'You should come with us,' said Newcombe. 'Absolute fun.'

'Or perhaps another time,' said Evangeline, her tone cool, as if slightly bored. 'Don't push so, Gwinny.' She turned to wave at a friend on the dance floor as Gwinny blushed, and Constance thought that, while it might be hard to tell the twins' pretty faces apart, one might know them easily by their manners.

'I trust Mrs Wirrall knows my sisters are only pretending to be entirely disreputable,' said Tom. 'Come, girls, we will remove ourselves to the dance floor and leave these good people before your reputations are quite ruined.'

'Sometimes it seems the world has gone mad for dancing,' said Mrs Wirrall, as the foursome joined the dance floor. 'Last week I found my maid and the hotel housekeeper waving pillowcases around and doing the Lambeth Walk in my rooms. I had to have a strong word.'

'If you don't mind, Mother, I think I would like to withdraw,' said Harris, still looking after the Morris twins as they were swept away in the circling crowd. His brow furrowed and he closed his eyes briefly against the glare of the chandeliers, as if threatened by a headache.

'Is it too loud for you, dear?' said Mrs Wirrall. She gave him a smile but her eyes flickered with worry as she patted his hand. 'Shall we go upstairs directly?' She spoke in a voice familiar to Constance, that of nurse to invalid.

'I think I'll drop by the snug,' said Harris, withdrawing his hand abruptly as if to dispel any such suggestion. 'It's much quieter in there and one or two chaps might be in this evening.'

'Of course,' said Mrs Wirrall. 'I'm sure Miss Haverhill won't mind us being informal and letting you part with us.' With that she rose from the table, the headwaiter making a heroic effort to reach her in time to pull back her chair.

Constance rose hesitantly, while Poppy threw down her napkin in mock disgust and said, 'Suppose I wanted to dance, Mother? Does anyone think to ask me?'

'You never want to dance, dear,' said her mother. 'In fact I would be so delighted if you wished to, I might even wave my napkin and call Tom back over, despite the public nature of the room.'

'I'm sure I can find you a couple of chaps in the bar,' added Harris. 'If you want to really confound Mother.'

'Whatever will Miss Haverhill think of us?' said Mrs Wirrall. 'I'm sure in Surrey young women don't dance with complete strangers in hotels?'

'There was a war, Mummy,' said Poppy. 'We women won't stand to be treated like children any more, you know.'

'Well, I was going to have them bring some candied almonds with our coffee, but since you're no longer a child . . .'

'Don't threaten me, Mother, you know it has no effect,' said Poppy. 'I'm perfectly capable of ordering my own almonds.'

'Yes, but not paying for them, my dear,' said her mother. 'Now that would be very modern.'

After thanking Mrs Wirrall effusively for dinner, and accepting an invitation to go for a ride on Poppy's motorcycle should Mrs Fog

be able to spare her, Constance went to Mrs Fog's room to see if she was still awake. She was sitting on a chaise with her feet up, reading, but she put the book aside to listen with interest to Constance's confession of her evening adventure. Of course, Constance spoke a little more of the glamorous Mrs Wirrall and a little less about Miss Wirrall's enthusiasm for the motor trade and in her shading tried to make the entire episode seem eminently respectable.

'An unorthodox introduction to be sure,' said Mrs Fog. 'But a prominent family and a young man as well. You are a clever girl, Constance Haverhill, and I look forward to seeing this Mrs Wirrall for myself.'

'The young man is not at all pleasant,' said Constance. 'I cannot recommend him as I do the mother and daughter.'

'Pleasantness must certainly be weighed,' said Mrs Fog, and Constance understood she, an unmarried girl, was not expected to weigh it very heavily against such qualities as a good family and solid prospects. It mortified her that still – after a world war, after her own service to the family, after her precious certificates earned via correspondence school – even the most well-meaning of friends and family continued to see marriage, any marriage, as her preferred future. 'Is that the time?' added Mrs Fog, looking weary. 'I shall undress directly.'

Constance was pleased to change the topic. She offered to help Mrs Fog but, as usual, was refused.

'You are not a maid, dear,' said Mrs Fog. 'And I fear to lose the use of my arms through indolence.' Constance could only smile, for there was little she had not done for Mrs Fog, or seen of her emaciated body, during her sickness. Sometimes she wished they could talk of it, for she often felt the weight of those dark days piling up on her as if she were being smothered under a pile of dank, itchy wool blankets. But it was clear that, while her efforts had been appreciated, the distasteful past was to be put away unexamined.

There were two stiff buttons with which some assistance was required, but then Constance waited in the tall room with its silk bed hangings, its suite of French furniture and its balcony hanging above the sea

while Mrs Fog disappeared into the small dressing room. She emerged again in a long flannel nightgown and bedsocks and Constance rang for the hotel maid to come in to pick up her clothes. The maid had been called on their first night in the hotel to draw a bath and assist Mrs Fog in and out of the enormous tub. But the maid was rough with her hair, the old lady said, and so she allowed Constance to brush it at night; one hundred slow gentle strokes through the waist-length grey locks lying spread across the back of a padded chair.

'A woman's hair is part of her dowry, my mother used to say.' Mrs Fog peered closer at the dressing table mirror. 'She used to make me wear it in such a profusion of coils and braids it took my maid an hour a day and that was just for an ordinary weekday, never mind a ball.' For a moment the expression of a younger girl flickered across the soft white face now cross-hatched with fine wrinkles. The grey eyes, perhaps catching the electric lamplight, sparkled with a remembered energy. The old woman raised a long thin hand briefly to her cheekbone.

'There's a tea dance twice a week in the dining room,' said Constance gently. 'I'm not very good with hair but, between us, the maid and I could manage a few elegant coils?'

'Nothing looks worse than an old woman clinging to vanity,' said Mrs Fog. 'My daughter will tell you it is better to project a plain dignity.'

'Oh, but you brought your diamond combs with you,' said Constance. 'Surely we must find an occasion for you to wear them?'

'My husband gave me the combs on our honeymoon at Lake Como. Such a courtly gesture to give them to me privately, on a terrace under the moonlight, without any fanfare as to their cost, or his own hand in the design. I never bragged about them and if anyone asked me I would say they were just an old favourite and so comfortable. Then I would catch his eye and he would nod his approval.'

'That is so romantic,' said Constance.

'One didn't marry for love and romance back then,' she sighed. 'But he was a generous man and I did come to love him very much. Perhaps I

will wear them once more before I cut my hair for good. One should be shorn and shriven to be ready to meet one's maker.'

'You are convalescing far too well to worry about that anytime soon,' said Constance. 'My mother was sure you would outlive us all.'

'Your mother probably said I was a tough old boot,' said the old lady. 'She was never one to mince her words. She often shocked me in her youth, but as I've aged I've sometimes wished I had her stalwart tongue.'

'So you recommend impertinence in the young now?' said Constance. She smiled, and Mrs Fog's reflection blinked twice and twitched her lips. Mrs Fog had changed. Being so ill seemed to have softened the old lady. Both physically, for she sagged at the shoulder and hip and her hands lay in her lap like two small birds, and in her character. She had become more reflective. She stopped and turned in a room as if she saw things from the corner of an eye. She smiled at waiters and spoke to other hotel guests. She had walked the length of the Palm Terrace on Constance's arm and asked other ladies if they played cards until a daily foursome was arranged. It would surely have upset Lady Mercer to know her mother had made no enquiries into who the other ladies might be. She had simply been delighted to find like minds among the potted palms. Constance hoped it was not wrong to take pleasure in what might be the effects of sickness on the brain, but she hoped the effects would be lasting, if only for Mrs Fog's own happiness.

'So you think we should attend a tea dance?' said Mrs Fog, raising an eyebrow. 'Are there any particular young gentlemen you hope will be there, or are you merely eager to help entertain the uniformed officers I see milling about the hotel?'

'I thought you might enjoy the music and the pretty dresses,' said Constance. 'The Saturday night dancing is a little loud and crowded, but the afternoons should be quieter.' She did not blush at the mention of young men, for though she thought Harris Wirrall and Tom Morris were certainly handsome, each in his own arrogant way, and though they and the quieter, plainer Sam Newcombe had brought a certain bouncing en-

ergy to the room, she was not guilty of any particular interest. She wondered if she was also affected by the sickness; if the long hours of caregiving had aged her. 'I am not opposed to dancing if you approve,' she added. 'I suppose I am a little afraid that such pleasures might be hubris. I've forgotten how to enjoy frivolity.'

'It is hard not to look at those young men and see at their shoulders all the boyhood companions who are laid in the ground,' said Mrs Fog. 'But at the same time, should these times not teach us to seize life and live it now, while we can? There is no time left to waste your youth and beauty. You must live life to the full.'

'Why, Mrs Fog, you are talking like a new woman,' said Constance. 'I only suggested a tea dance, not a revolution.'

'And you must get away from us at Clivehill. We will use you up, you know. You should make your own way. If not a husband, then a paid position. Save for a small home of your own. Just a room or two.' Mrs Fog grew animated, as if remembering such rooms. She turned to clasp Constance's hands in her own. 'It's not that we don't mean well, but we are too busy with ourselves to see the lives of others properly. You deserve more than a life of disappointment.'

'Mrs Fog, calm yourself,' said Constance, for tears hung in the old lady's eyes and she shivered. 'I am very happy to be right here with you now. I am very lucky.'

'Oh, don't listen to me,' said the old lady. 'I'm tired and don't know what I'm saying.' Constance finished the last stroke of the hairbrush and began to plait the long hair into a loose braid, which she tied with a silk ribbon and rolled up into a cotton nightcap.

'There, you are all put away for the night,' she said. 'Should I order you some hot milk?'

'We shall attend a tea dance soon,' said Mrs Fog, climbing into the tall four-poster bed and pulling the blankets to her chin as if it were January outside the windows. 'If you could just close all the shutters and curtains,' she added. 'It seems to stay light until midnight and the moon has been as bright as a lighthouse after that.'

Constance closed the balcony's shutters, the windows and the curtains. There were two additional tall windows to shutter. And then there were many electric lamps to turn off, leaving only a small lamp on the dressing table. She folded a dropped shawl and set it on the back of a settee. She straightened some picture magazines and a book of local maps on a side table. Hearing the maid leave the dressing room, she went in to bolt the external door and then returned to pour a glass of water from a carafe and set it at the bedside. As Mrs Fog asked so little help, Constance did this to feel as if she were earning her keep. Mrs Fog was already asleep and softly snoring among the down pillows. As she passed the small writing desk Constance saw, under a sheet of white paper, that Mrs Fog had left a finished letter, sealed, addressed and waiting to be posted. An unfamiliar local address and an unfamiliar name, a Miss de Champney. It was not her place to look at Mrs Fog's letters, but she could make sure that it went to the front desk to catch the earliest post tomorrow morning. Another small way to be a good companion. She gave one last glance around the room and let herself out the heavy door.

Chapter 3

The seaside promenade blazed with colour under a bright blue sky on a day so windy everything seemed to be streaming sideways: flags, hat ribbons, coat-tails, the canvas seats of unoccupied deckchairs. A woman in a billowing white coat, a white hat clutched in one hand and a leashed pair of long-haired white hounds in the other, blew by like a clipper ship under full sail. On the pier, pennants flapped from spikes atop every domed kiosk roof, and at the bandstand across the street from the hotel, the halyard beneath the raised Union Jack slapped and bounced against the flagpole as if drumming out a tune. It was as if the world had been washed with rain and was now being dried on a laundry line, thought Constance as she buttoned her linen jacket at the throat and checked the security of her two long hatpins. It would not do to lose one's navy straw cloche and be forced to run down the promenade like a child chasing a hoop.

It was a day to lift the spirits and admit the future. As she left the shelter of the hotel's portico to join the other people beating upwind on the promenade, she did not flinch when Hazelbourne-on-Sea's newest sightseeing attraction came into view. Leaning on its side against the steep pebbled shore, the stranded German U-boat had attracted a larger than usual crowd. When she first arrived in Hazelbourne, the sight of it, higher than the pier, had been a shock to Constance, as if the war had appeared to menace them again. It seemed incongruous and slightly of-

fensive the way families posed for photographs in its hulking shadow and hardy men paid tuppence to climb its rusting steel flanks and walk about the sloping decks.

The captured submarine had broken its lines months ago while being towed to scrap and this morning it was finally to be towed off the beach again by the Royal Navy. The sightseers were being herded back like recalcitrant sheep by some constables. Out at sea, two tugboats and a small navy cutter rolled and belched smoke into the breeze as they struggled to maintain their positions. At last a whistle sounded, flags were waved and a loud klaxon caused the crowd to scramble backwards towards the promenade. Tow ropes tightened, emerging from the sea in a spray of water, and the belching of smoke and the grinding of engines grew louder. The U-boat let out a slow groan and shifted infinitesimally more upright on the beach. A railing bent, a rope snapped loose and flew out to the sea. More whistles, another howl from the klaxon, and the lines went slack amid a general waving of signal flags and shouting. Constance turned away. As fascinating as it was to watch, it seemed liable to be a long process. Plenty of time to take her daily walk.

At the end of the promenade, where the town tried, but failed, to climb the green flanks of the high chalk Downs, Constance broke her brisk stride to duck into one of the ornate ironwork shelters that dotted the seafront. Her eyes were blurry, her cheeks roughened, and her hair had escaped in tendrils to whip about her face. Through the slightly fogged windows she could see the English Channel throwing lace handkerchiefs of foam up onto the beach. A fishing boat, draped with black nets, sailed towards the other end of town, a huddled low village, where workers and their hard-pressed wives lived in narrow, twisted alleys, and the beach was studded with black-tarred net-drying huts, beached fishing boats and a few market stalls selling the fresh catch.

The town seemed to grow in prosperity from east to west. The Meredith Hotel, the pier and the black interruption of the U-boat marked the centre point, and the houses beyond became larger and more fanciful – several Palladian villas and a redbrick castle with twisted turret and gar-

goyles studded like jewels among the lush ornamental shrubberies. On the beach here, men were adding extra ropes to the red-and-white-striped bathing tents as they flapped in the wind. Further along, a set of railway ties formed a short ramp into the water and a tall ladder contraption lay on its side, bolted to a stanchion. On less windy days, two red seaplanes alternated buzzing in and out from here, taking more affluent visitors on aerial tours of the beachfront. Above the western end of town, the smooth swell of the Downs rose, carpeted in grass and shaggy groupings of gorse, now blazing with yellow flowers. The white chalk edge of the cliff was thick and sharp against the blue sky, like a child's drawing.

'Harrumph.' A loud cough startled Constance. A man had slipped into the shelter and was standing at the far end. Her heart beat from the surprise but, she reminded herself, the promenade was crowded and the day was bright. She was quite safe. She stared hard and the stranger silently raised his hat, a gentleman's signal that he would welcome but not insist upon a conversation. He was young, slightly plump about the waistcoat, and had a thin moustache. He looked nervous and Constance realised she was glaring at the same moment she felt the wheels of her memory slowly click round and fall into place.

'I'm sorry, Mr Newcombe, isn't it?' she said. 'I believe we were introduced last night?'

'Didn't think you remembered,' said the young man in his slight stammer. 'Bit leery of greeting ladies in the street, but not polite to cut them either. Saw you coming up the way. Friend of Poppy's, I thought.'

'Sorry, I was lost in my thoughts,' said Constance. 'I didn't mean to be rude.'

'Not at all,' said Sam. 'Presumptuous on my part.'

'Won't you sit down?' she asked.

'I had hoped to see you at breakfast.' He spread a handkerchief on the painted bench and sat down on it. 'That is, I thought I would see you. Not to accost you, understand . . . I mean just across the room . . . as one does.'

'I breakfast early,' said Constance. Mrs Fog had preferred her breakfast

in bed today and Constance had eaten alone. 'You'll think me silly, but I find it hard to concentrate on my boiled egg with too many eyes looking at me over the rims of teacups.'

'Quite right,' he said. 'Better eating alone. Indigestion is the worry.' And it seemed to Constance that he peered at her with a new degree of interest.

'Are you from Sussex, Mr Newcombe?' This bland question, which disguised an idle but pressing interest to know why he was staying at the Meredith when he had friends in the neighbourhood, made her the very definition of a gossip, thought Constance, but she smiled encouragingly in the hope of a detailed answer.

'From north of London,' he said. She noticed he did not say where exactly, but underneath his educated accent she caught the faintest inflection of somewhere well beyond the home counties. 'Tom Morris and I were at school together.' He stopped, standing up to raise his hat as a woman pushing a perambulator stopped to peer into the shelter. She looked annoyed at the idea of sharing the space with others and went away, frowning.

'You were telling me about Tom?' prompted Constance.

'I used to come down in the holidays. Very kind family,' said Sam. 'But I like to stay in the hotel now. Telephone in my room, you know. No one looking askance if it rings in the middle of tea.'

'You're in business, then?' asked Constance.

'Newcombe Foundries. Started by my grandfather. Motorcycle and aeroplane parts mostly,' he said. 'Spent the war making munitions.'

'I see.' She tried not to see again the newsreel images: yards and yards of pointy shells, the grinning faces of girls poisoned by yellow sulphur, the bombs falling soundlessly from beneath an aeroplane towards tiny rooftops.

'What did you do in the Great War, Daddy?' he said, quoting the recruiting posters that still hung, tattered and faded, on streets across England. There was a note of unexpected bitterness in his voice.

'We all had our part to play,' said Constance.

'Wanted to go, you know,' he added. 'Essential service, they said.'

'They didn't take my brother either,' said Constance. 'He had a large farm to run. I know something of what he suffered, feeling left behind.' Dark days in which she felt the weight of responsibility thrust too early on his shoulders and saw his desire to go to the war thwarted. Yet they did not speak of his conflict or of hers, for she too had dearly wanted to go, if not to university then to a typing pool in London or to train as a nurse. She had retreated from him, the unmarried sister leaving his welfare to his wife and being careful not to meddle. But underneath, she was ashamed to acknowledge, there ran the faint rubbing of a resentment that the farm had been left to her brother alone. Her mother's small life savings were also bequeathed for the farm. Constance, being left no monies, went unmentioned in both her parents' wills and was more hurt by the absence of her name than the absence of funds.

They were quiet for a moment. Outside, the happy shrieks of children running barefoot on the narrow strip of low-tide sand, and the braying of a donkey pulling plump tourists in a small wicker cart, mingled with the sudden roar of an automobile and the faint murmur of strolling pedestrians. A breeze carried the distant carnival sound of an organ-grinder and the smell of cherry ice cream.

'Morris's company, Hazelbourne Aviation, is a big customer,' said Sam. He reddened. 'Not supposed to mention it, I suppose. Being gentlemen, you see.'

'I plan to take up paid employment soon,' said Constance. 'I suppose I shouldn't bring that up either?'

'No, exactly,' said Sam. He seemed relieved and nodded several times. 'Poppy Wirrall doesn't mind,' he added. 'Good head on her shoulders.'

'She's very kind,' said Constance. 'We're going for a ride this afternoon.'

'Stern constitution, I hope? Bags of fun but bit of a jaw rattler.' He chuckled. 'Not one of ours, you see. I told her it needs dampening in the suspension.' He peered closely at her again. 'Wouldn't let her corner that contraption above ten miles an hour, Miss Haverhill.'

'Are you saying it's unsafe?' she said.

'No, no,' he said. 'Just keep your teeth apart and wave your arms like this. Only if she gets out of control.' He made downward waving motions with his hands.

'I'm sure Poppy means to transport me at a decorous pace,' said Constance doubtfully. She had imagined the sidecar like a small carriage and the motorcycle its stalwart pony. She had planned to wear her best hat and perhaps a light shawl. 'You don't think I'll have to wear a cap and goggles, do you?'

'Not one to impose,' said Sam. 'Not my place. But perhaps I should be there. Have a word with Poppy and see you off.'

Sam raised his hat and went away. Constance smiled, for though he was shy and abrupt she liked his earnest manner. As she walked back towards the hotel, she could see that at the pier the towing party seemed to have given up. The navy cutter was gone and the last tugboat was steaming out of view. As she leaned on the seafront railing, Constance wondered why they were in such a rush to have the war towed away and tidied up anyway. Memories faded, scabbed over by the layers of time. Perhaps a lasting peace required some rusting reminders of carnage?

The U-boat remained, as sad as an old beached whale; visitors once more picking their way like ants along its tilted decks and small boys throwing rocks at its black steel underbelly.

THE MOTORCYCLE AND sidecar parked at the front steps of the hotel were shiny with brass and navy paint with details and curlicues pricked out in scarlet. The sidecar, with its double-folding black fabric hood, did resemble a miniature landau carriage. Lettering on its lower body said, WIRRALL'S, and a wooden plaque screwed in with brass-headed screws said:

LADIES
CABRIOLET CONVEYANCE

Such long words necessitated small letters so that the sidecar appeared to say only WIRRALL'S LADIES, and quite a crowd had gathered as if waiting for a procession of miniature ladies to emerge from its small door. The hotel doorman looked away to the promenade as if there was nothing to see in front of his hotel. Poppy Wirrall, in leather flying coat and trousers tucked into her boots, her leather hood and goggles slung around her neck atop a yellow silk scarf, was happily passing out small handbills. She ignored Sam Newcombe, who seemed to be speaking to the back of her head in a low, earnest fashion.

'My lady chauffeurs are all highly experienced and will take you anywhere within twenty miles, ladies. Perfectly safe and discreet. Telephone us from home or ask right here at the hotel,' said Poppy, by which Constance understood that the doorman was a party to the arrangement. 'We guarantee to pick you up within an hour or the ride is free.'

'Do you take small children?' asked a lady, slipping the handbill into her pocket.

'Do you have a husband?' called a man in a broad-striped jacket and straw boater. 'Is he in there?' A laugh gusted through the crowd.

'You should leave it to the men, dear,' said another woman, handing back the paper. 'They need the jobs, poor dears.'

'All our ladies maintain their own machines,' added Poppy, more loudly now. 'Some are war widows with children to support.'

'Fine example for children,' snorted a matron trailing a gaping adolescent son.

'Perhaps you'd be more comfortable in the side alley?' said the doorman in a low voice. 'More private like.'

'No, thank you, we must demonstrate the future if we are to win it.'

Constance did not realise she was actively shrinking away until Poppy caught sight of her and waved. 'Yoo-hoo, Miss Haverhill? Your chariot!' She opened the door with a flourish and Constance had no choice but to step forward and try not to redden under the critical gaze of the crowd.

'Don't be afraid, Miss Haverhill,' said Sam, coming to offer her an arm

to the door. 'Poppy has agreed to be circumspect.' He gave her hand an encouraging squeeze.

'Just hop in and sit down facing front,' said Poppy. Raising her voice, she added: 'Now to really take in the views we just lower the hood.'

'I'm perfectly fine with just the side window,' said Constance, eager to disappear from view.

'Nonsense!' whispered Poppy. 'Just sit down and I'll show you how it works.'

Bending in half to enter, Constance tucked in her skirts and managed to squeeze onto the padded red leather bench in the rear. It was a tight fit and she had to tuck her head to keep her hat from pressing against the cream fabric lining the roof. Her knees reached to a similar bench at the front and she wondered what it was for as there seemed no possibility that two people's knees would fit in the centre. Poppy shut the door, and for a moment Constance was a small child again, tucked into the perambulator with her brother, pulling a blue crocheted blanket over her knees and peering out over the buttoned-up cover at her mother as English rain streamed from the hood. A brief image, but so powerful she had quite forgotten to feel claustrophobic in the tiny dark space when suddenly the sky opened. Poppy Wirrall, still showing off for the crowd, lowered the front hood, snapped down and secured the top half of the door, and then lowered the rear, in one smooth display. Constance, revealed like a jack-in-the-box, blinked under a smattering of applause.

'Hold on to your hat,' said Poppy, climbing astride the motorcycle and pulling on her helmet and goggles. With a flourish of her scarf and an abrupt down kick, she brought the machine to ear-splitting life.

'Good luck!' called Sam. There was a smell of petrol and a rush of smoke from the exhaust, a stepping back of the crowd. Constance clutched her hat in terror . . . and Poppy pulled away in stately fashion, waving goodbye as she piloted the machine as slowly as if there were a glass of water balanced on the handlebars. Constance, undoing the death grip on her poor hat, sat straighter and looked back. Sam waved. He

looked rather sad to be left behind. The doorman lifted his hand to his cap. The onlookers cheered, and Constance risked a small wave and a smile as her chariot moved smoothly away along the promenade.

It was too loud to talk and, even at a slow pace, the wind streamed under her hat brim and threatened to dislodge her hair from its pins, but it was such fun to be whisked along the seafront. Children whooped and cheered as they passed, and all manner of heads turned to look. They surprised a donkey cart, overtaking it in a spurt of smoke and causing the donkey to bray and stop short. They overtook the seafront tram and waved at the holidaymakers on the top deck. At the public gardens, Poppy rode even more slowly, perhaps so the groups of ladies, promenading among the lush flower beds under parasols, might read the sign on the sidecar. Finally, just where the road turned inland and uphill, Poppy pulled to the side and throttled the machine lower until it idled, growling like a dozing bear.

'Are you enjoying it?' she asked. 'If so, I thought there's plenty of time before tea and maybe I'd take us on a run up on the Downs and then circle back to Penneston. Show you my ladies' barn?'

'I'd love it,' said Constance. 'It's a beautiful day to be chauffeured about the countryside.'

'Time to secure your hat and put on your goggles then,' said Poppy. Reaching down, she raised the little front bench and pulled from a hidden compartment a thick muslin shawl and a pair of goggles. 'Put these on, and tie this in a double knot under your chin or you'll lose that hat.'

'But it's been so comfortable this far,' said Constance, draping the shawl over her hat. 'I hardly see the need.' Though loud, the machine felt scarcely more dashing than a pony trap driven at a fast trot and Constance felt quite proud now of her own bravery.

'I'm going to open her up a bit when we get up on the Downs,' said Poppy. 'Best to be prepared.'

The motorcycle slowed as the hill grew steep. Poppy changed gear and the roar of the engine turned lower, the power seeming to coil beneath the springs of the sidecar and vibrate through Constance's heart as

the machine clawed its way to the top. When they emerged from the low trees and gorse, the high banks of the road fell away. The hammered blue sea lay to their left and the full patchwork quilt of the Weald's farmland fell away to their right. In front, nothing but the rolling spine of the Downs, a horizon of grass and intense blue sky. For a moment all seemed to hang still, then the machine burst forward over the crest. Poppy let the motorcycle have its head, like an impatient horse, and they began the blurred, screaming race downhill.

At some point Constance realised her scream was real, torn away by the wind so she could barely hear herself as she clutched the edges of the sidecar. She dared not reach for her hat, which strained away from her head, the muslin shawl pulling at her chin. She could smell the tar and the hot, dry stones of the road that ran inches beneath her toes, waiting to tear her skin from the bones should she bounce out of her seat. The grass ran by like a green river and she could smell that too, the fresh broken ends cropped by rabbits. The wind buzzed hard in her nose, something catching in her throat, her ears singing, and her breath caught at scream's end. That she had thought motorcycling as staid as a carriage ride now seemed hubris. Fainting seemed her inevitable punishment. But then, over the crest of another hill and down, she drew in a breath, a deep breath, and screamed again, this time more easily, and felt the joy of being able to scream unheard.

Two hills, three hills, and Constance felt her body accommodating itself to the up-and-down motion, as if riding a horse or bending into a dance. She screamed some more, and whooped, and thought it strange to be crying for joy. It felt so good to let go of the tired world for a moment, grief and pain flushed from her body by the pummelling air. She unclamped her fingers from the wooden edges and threw her arms in the air like a child to press her palms to the wind. She felt as if she were growing lighter in her body itself, and the motorcycle went on, faster and smoother, until it seemed they must surely have left the ground and be flying several inches above the Downs.

When Poppy finally pulled the machine over and stopped the engine,

on a chalky patch of dirt on the clifftop, the silence was deafening. Constance removed the shawl from her head and pulled down her goggles.

'You're crying,' said Poppy. 'I've done it again. Gone too fast.'

'No, no,' said Constance, blinking hard as she struggled to pull her handkerchief from a crushed pocket. 'I'm not crying. I mean I am, but it feels so good.' She could not explain the release in her body, the sensation like the breaking of a fever.

'Really? Because I've frightened three friends and a housemaid just this month,' said Poppy. 'My record of persuading women to adopt motorcycle transportation is pretty dismal at this point.'

'It was wonderful,' said Constance. 'Truly petrifying at first, of course, but once you let go, something shifts inside.' She flexed her fingers, which were stiff from her initial wild clutching. 'It feels like freedom.'

'Yes, and it's completely worth the awful red rings round the eyes and swallowing so many insects,' said Poppy. 'If you're quite sure you're all right, I promise to motor us down more sedately to Penneston.'

'What?' Constance clamped her lips shut as she put on her goggles. This time she wrapped the shawl across her nose and mouth before knotting it. The taste in the back of her mouth could not possibly be grasshopper, she thought, but she gagged a little anyway.

WHERE THE DOWNLAND tumbled lower, into the comfortable rolling farmland that surrounded Hazelbourne, the manor house of Penneston stood on a low bluff, looking over the town towards the sea. It was a compact Regency villa, though its rectilinear severity and symmetrical façade were compromised by a heavily decorated Victorian addition. The curving bay window, porch outlined in scalloped wrought-iron, and its collection of oddly shaped windows set back in bulging brick surrounds gave the impression that the original house was being devoured by a fat, copper-roofed snail. A long curving driveway gave a partial view of the house's plain side and a walled garden. A glimpse of an open sheep field to the rear suggested there would be the usual terrace

and lawns protected by the sunken wall of a ha-ha. As the motorcycle grew nearer the gravel sweep at the front door, Constance could see scaffolding poking above the edge of the snail. No doubt the Moorish garden room was somewhere there behind the fat yews and neatly trimmed flower borders. The house was closed up, all the windows shuttered, and the front door sanded to bare wood, with shadows for hardware.

'I'd take you inside but Mother's determined no one shall peek until her work is finished.' Poppy kept the machine ticking over; the sound of the engine vibrated gently against the warm yellow stone of the house.

'Did it need a lot of work?' asked Constance.

'I didn't think so,' said Poppy. 'But my mother always needs a project and this way she gets to show off her unrestrained taste and at the same time eliminate my father from every major room.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Oh, my father did the same thing to the London house when my mother had enough and left him. Not a photo or a trinket left in the attic. Dramatic of course. They prided themselves on their passionate natures.' Poppy sighed. 'They couldn't stand each other at the end, but they had loved each other so much. I think competing with him now is her way of keeping him with her.'

'I'm so sorry for you and your brother,' said Constance, who was not used to such frankness and so retreated, somewhat ashamed, into platitude.

'Only a year ago the divorce seemed such a scandal even I worried about us,' said Poppy. 'I was so angry at my father, and then he died and everything became so very unimportant. If necessary, I shan't mind getting divorced a half dozen times now.' She stood astride her machine with a belligerent frown, a smudge of oil and the red marks of goggles on her cheeks, and hair wildly frizzing from her helmet. Constance could not but laugh.

'You have to get married first,' she said. 'And if we want husbands I think we both might have to wash our faces.'

'We'll go to my barn now,' said Poppy. 'It's got quite rudimentary fa-

cilities, but I think you'll find it very cosy. If there's time after, we'll come back and peek at the gardens.'

THE SMELL OF motor oil and fried onions was unexpected. After the brightness of the day, Constance blinked her eyes against the cavernous darkness. The barn, a quarter mile downhill from the main house and set a short distance from a tidy farm, seemed more motor garage than agricultural building. There were several motorcycles under a canvas tarpaulin and two navy-painted sidecars, their frames propped on bricks. One was already trimmed in scarlet, the other was blank, a pot of paint and a brush abandoned by one of its wheels. Along one wall a lengthy plank table was strewn with parts and tools.

In the rear a staircase led to loft rooms under the soaring tile roof. Under the loft, a lumpy old sofa and some equally disreputable easy chairs made a strange parlour, set around an iron stove. A kettle steamed on the stove top. By the table, two women were working on a partly dismantled engine, their faces and gloved hands oil-smeared. One, tall and angular with the hollow-cheeked face of a medieval saint and long red hair escaping from under a mechanic's cap, stood smoking a cigarette in a short holder while attacking some small part in her hand with sandpaper. The other, short and plump, with a round freckled face and fluffy light brown hair, sat on a low stool, peering intently into the engine from behind small wire-rimmed glasses. The tall woman looked up at their arrival and narrowed her green eyes against a trickle of smoke.

'Look out, Tilly, Poppy brought a visitor.' Her tone was cool, amused. The other woman jumped up, flustered, and wiped her hands on the legs of her coveralls.

'You could have warned us, Poppy,' she said, transferring a smudge of oil to her hair as she pushed it back under her cap. She indicated their attire. 'We're hardly dressed to make a good impression.'

'Constance Haverhill, this is Tilly Mulford and Iris Brenner,' said

Poppy. 'We were despatch riders together in the war and now we are trying to keep all our girls riding.'

'How do you do,' said Iris, tipping her head back to blow smoke at the roof.

'I suppose I'd better go and wash my hands and make some tea,' said Tilly.

'Pity you missed Tilly's famous bacon and fried onion sandwiches for lunch,' said Iris.

'Tilly is our quartermaster,' explained Poppy. 'She's a whiz at logistics and supplies. Probably because she's a librarian. Don't ask me how, but she kept us in bacon many a long night in the war.'

'"Don't ask me how" might be the unofficial motto of Poppy's barn,' said Iris. 'We are always scrambling for something.'

'Don't call it that,' said Poppy. 'We are now the Hazelbourne Ladies Motorcycle Club, remember.'

'A fancy name, which Tilly uses as a cudgel to browbeat some poor tradesman into selling us extra tea rations.'

'We offer our repair services, social rides and racing support,' said Poppy. 'It's a way to encourage women riders and to shield them with numbers. Many girls riding together makes each of us seem less odd.'

'We shouldn't need it,' said Iris. 'After all we did in the war.'

'Iris is a racer so she's a bit of a snob about our purely social riders,' said Poppy. 'But it's girls like the Morris sisters who add the social lustre that blunts our critics.'

Iris made a less-than-discreet snorting sound. 'I hardly think the Morrises' wicker basket contraption counts as motorcycling. It's like an overgrown perambulator.'

'Now, now, Iris. Their particular feminine conveyance has already brought us a new respectability and several new converts.'

'I thought you were Wirrall's Conveyance?' said Constance.

'Wirrall's is a separate new concern,' said Poppy.

'Not all the girls are quite so comfortably off,' said Iris and her eyes

flickered to where Tilly had disappeared into a small kitchen under the stairs. 'Since the war ended and the despatch riders were disbanded, Poppy's trying to find a way to keep us all on the road.' She went to the table and picked up two small wooden plaques that said:

DELIVERIES
WITH A WOMAN'S TOUCH

MOTORCYCLE
LESSONS FOR LADIES
THE FREEDOM OF THE ROAD

'Oh, they're interchangeable,' said Constance. 'How clever.'

'Pop out two brass screws and we're ready to do anything,' said Poppy. 'Girls can work when they want. We have a schedule.'

'I'm just volunteering to help with the lessons,' said Iris. 'But Poppy has plans to be a captain of industry. Perhaps one day Wirrall's will sponsor my racing.'

'Iris is the amateur ladies hill-climb champion of the South-east,' said Poppy. 'She'd also be a speed champion but they don't let women in any of those races.'

'If I had a large sponsor they could help me get in,' said Iris. 'But since I can't race I can't attract a sponsor.' She sighed. 'It's a conundrum but I have a few ideas up the sleeve of my motorcycle leathers.'

'Tilly has really spiffed up Iris's engine,' said Poppy. She nodded as Tilly came back bearing a large tea tray. 'She rides but her passion is the mechanics.'

'With a few more pieces of equipment we can really turn this place into a proper full-time repair shop,' said Tilly.

They sat down, Constance settling gingerly into a flower-covered chair that sprouted stuffing from several holes.

'It must be wonderful to have families that support you in such novel

endeavours,' she said. It was more a question than a statement and the hearty laughter of all three women gave her the answer.

'You see, it was all very well and patriotic when we were freeing up men for the services,' said Iris. 'But now we are just behaving oddly and diminishing our chances of snatching up one of the few available husbands.' Constance admired how the young woman sprawled in her chair with the ease of a man, blowing smoke rings and stretching her legs, boot soles tipped up. But she wondered if such a free demeanour might hold Iris back more than her occupation.

'Iris keeps her aunt in a permanent state of livid disapproval,' said Poppy.

'She thinks it shocking now that I live here with Poppy, despite the fact we and the other girls bunked here in the war with no complaints.' Iris chuckled. 'Fortunately she has no control over my trust, and she'd still like to coax me home, so she limits herself to apoplexy only once or twice a week.'

'I'm just here part-time and my mother still doesn't think it becoming to me as a librarian,' said Tilly. 'She worries what the trustees will think, but I tell her I'll do anything to keep riding.'

'I didn't realise one could live in here,' said Constance, looking with some doubt at the dusty brick floor and the rickety stairs to the loft.

'It's as cold as a crypt in the winter,' said Poppy. 'But it's the price of freedom.'

'But as girls alone?' Much as Constance chafed against limits on her own freedom, she found herself slightly shocked at such a lax arrangement. Or perhaps she was just jealous, she acknowledged, and she saw again her mother's whitewashed cottage. How naïve she had been to think she would be allowed to live there on her own.

'My mother has her own eccentricities, so she really can't complain too much about mine.' Poppy sighed. 'We have a nominal chaperone in the farmer's wife next door, but with all the worrying about Harris, Mother is far too busy to really interfere.'

'What your brother needs is an occupation,' said Iris, changing the subject. 'It's all well and good to have money, but there's nothing like hard work to get one's mind off of one's troubles. Even an injury like his.'

Poppy shook her head. 'The leg was an awful blow but my brother is not a coward. He would face up to it,' she said. 'But he can't seem to shake this dreadful melancholy. I think it's the whole thing: the war, the people we've lost.'

'I've asked myself at times, how do we go on,' said Constance. 'For the men who had to see the war itself, it's ten times worse, of course.'

'Or perhaps women are just more resilient,' said Iris. She sat up straight, her jaw a sharp line in which a muscle flickered. 'I was a nurse in France for two years and what I saw would shock the most hardened of men. But I've not taken to my bed.' For a moment a grey shadow turned her face to marble and the cigarette holder trembled in her fingers.

'I'm sorry,' said Constance. Iris shook her head and a grin brought her face to life again.

'They sent me home with pneumonia and despatch riding was the saving grace of my convalescence,' she said. 'But that's all water under the bridge proverbial. Best forgotten.'

'On a beautiful day like this I try to forget the past and the future for a few hours,' added Constance. She looked to the large open doors of the barn and blinked at the dazzling glare of the green countryside beyond the dark frame.

'We tried to get Harris interested in the motorcycles,' said Tilly. 'I rigged the clutch on Poppy's machine. With a sidecar he could ride by himself.'

'But I can't get him to even try it,' said Poppy. 'Men! They are as fixed on their brooding as on their ambitions.'

'It's not easy to find an occupation, of course,' said Tilly. 'I have a cousin who lost his left hand. They won't give him back his old job as a draughtsman even though he's right-handed and perfectly well able to draw. It's not fair.' She frowned and Constance saw in her face a caring

and a warmth of spirit. Tilly might appear the quieter and more biddable of the three women, but Constance suspected her compassion gave her a dogged strength when needed.

'At least Harris is a man,' said Iris. 'They've let go all the women at the bus company, except for the lady in the office, and Hazelbourne Aviation just laid off all the women in the paint and dope shop.'

'You can't mean it?' asked Tilly. 'I can't believe Tom Morris and his father would do that. They can't be that unfair.'

'Yes, I thought business was booming?' said Poppy. 'Hazelbourne Aviation is owned by the Morris family,' she added to Constance. 'You've seen their seaplanes on the beach giving rides.'

'He's hiring the men coming back,' said Iris. 'The government says we should. They're going to pass a law soon; no room for the girls any more.'

'We should do something,' said Tilly. 'I know several of those girls.'

'We can see if any of them want to ride for Wirrall's,' said Poppy, patting her arm. 'I'd have to get some new machines.'

'Couldn't Tom's father give Harris a spot as a pilot?' asked Tilly. 'He and Harris were always friends, weren't they?'

'I think there was some concern about it being hard to get in and out of the seaplanes,' Poppy spoke carefully now, retreating. 'I know they spoke a couple of weeks ago but Harris wouldn't talk about it.'

'They are pretty high off the ground,' said Iris. 'I'd love to go up in one but I'll be damned if I'm going to show off my legs to every Tom, Dick and Harry crowded around that ladder they use.'

'Mostly Tom you mean,' said Poppy. 'We saw him last night. He was on Constance like a wild boar on a truffle.' The women laughed, open-mouthed and rolling in their seats.

'He only kissed my hand,' said Constance, feeling herself blush. 'I didn't encourage him.'

'I would brave Tom's ladder,' said Tilly. 'Wearing my thickest lisle stockings and a pair of plus fours. But I can fill up the motorcycle three times for what they charge for five minutes' flying.'

Over tea, cheese sandwiches and a plate of misshapen scones studded with leathery currants, the three women talked with animation and at a great pace, crumbs spilling unheeded down their blouses. The topics of motorcycles and club business were declared off-limits for Constance's sake, though she protested. So they compared books they were reading – the racier of which, Constance learned, Tilly sneaked out of the library so their names would not be recorded. They talked of life in town and what Constance might think of their limited social opportunities. She held her tongue and did not disclose the vanishingly small nature of her social life. They were not as fond of clothes and dancing as some – here the Morris twins came in for some gentle filleting – but they were looking forward to the prospects for peace and a summer peace celebration, which, in addition to a ball, would include a parade in which a contingent of lady motorcyclists might be allowed. The difficulty of it was persuading the town's Victory Committee of the utter gentility of such a group and persuading Iris and some others of the flowers and white dresses that such gentility might demand. The discussion was loud, frank and punctuated with laughter and spilled tea. It was like being back in school, enjoying a raucous half hour of free time in the common room, and Constance felt herself relax and disappear into the noise. She had forgotten the pleasures of such uninhibited female conversation.

'Since you're here for a while, you really should come out with us on one of our outings,' said Tilly, as the talk edged back around to the club. 'They are a wonderful bunch of girls.'

'You should learn to ride,' said Poppy. 'Iris is the expert on training, but if you like I'll give you a go in the saddle when we leave. See what you think of it.'

'Perhaps you should make a run for it now,' said Iris. 'Poppy and Tilly are absolute zealots in looking for new recruits.'

'I'm not sure I'm looking to learn,' said Constance. She had an inkling that riding motorcycles might be a more expensive hobby than someone in her position could afford. But she also wished to continue the

acquaintance with Poppy, so she temporised. 'But I'd love to come out with you sometime if you'll have me.'

'Twice a month we go and visit the soldiers who are still at the convalescent hospital and take them out for spins,' said Tilly. 'We could use more hands to pass tea.'

'I'd be honoured to join you,' said Constance.

'Better still, the Saturday after next, we've a club outing to the motor racing at Polegate to watch Iris defend her hill climb record. You can ride with me,' said Poppy.

'We're going to declare ourselves a club for the first time and both Poppy and I are going to race as members,' said Iris. 'Which all makes Tilly very unhappy.'

'It will make my mother unhappy too,' said Poppy. 'She doesn't approve of ladies racing.'

'I just think declaring ourselves a club means we have to worry about how we look and what people think of us,' said Tilly. 'As if there weren't enough scrutiny usually.'

'We will drape ourselves in floral garlands to compete in the Rig and Rider Parade of Elegance,' said Poppy. Iris signalled her disgust and Poppy added, 'For Iris, we'll make a swag of hemlock and dead grass.'

'It's all very well to joke about it,' said Tilly. 'But when we appear in the newspaper we may lose as many members as we gain. I know my mother still believes no lady should appear in the newspaper outside of her wedding announcement.'

'I'm not at all sure I would be able to get away for a whole day,' said Constance, searching for a polite way to refuse such an outing. Respectability was the currency in which Constance knew she must trade for the foreseeable future. She understood Tilly's concern and did not have Poppy's wealth and position from which to defend herself against notoriety.

'I'm sure Mrs Fog can spare you a single day,' said Poppy. 'I could ask my mother to look after her.'