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November 11th 1918

On the day the Great War ended, Serena Fleming saw her neighbours running outside, heard them calling to one another, dancing and cheering, and couldn't resist going outside to join in the celebrations. It felt as though everyone from the small town of Tinsley was in the streets, crowded together, sharing their happiness, and she loved being part of it all, even if her contribution to the war effort had been only small. There was such a sense of joy, it was as heady as wine. People were smiling, some groups were singing, strangers hugged one another.

Occasional people simply stood there with tears running down their faces, and you guessed that they'd lost loved ones. Well, she had herself, knew that pain, because her brother Frank had been posted missing presumed dead the previous year.

Everyone in England had paid a high price for this victory.

She didn't want to go home again but her mother was ill and couldn't be left alone for long, so in the end she turned back to Cavendish Terrace, where many of the richest people in the town lived, not far from the main street, in a small enclave of privilege. And even these people kept their distance from the Flemings.

When she slipped into the hall, her father called out from his study, "Where have you

been, Serena?”

She realised he'd come home early from his place of business and her heart sank. “Just out, joining in the celebrations.”

He came into the hall, clad in the usual sombre grey suit that matched his eyes and hair. Not for Ernest Fleming the vulgarity of brighter colours. Not for his womenfolk, either, she thought mutinously.

“Oh?” he asked.

He could put such a wealth of meaning into that word, but she wasn't going to pretend about her feelings, not today. “It was wonderful to see everyone so happy.”

“Common people. Not us.”

“Well, people of all sorts have worked together to defeat the Germans, so why should they not celebrate together? And everyone was perfectly polite.”

“That is not the point.”

She bit back hot words of protest that it was the other way round. People were more likely to keep their distance from her because her father wasn't liked in the town, indeed, was feared by many, especially the tenants of his slum properties. She couldn't help knowing that, though he rarely spoke of his business dealings. As Ernest Fleming's daughter, she received prompt service in shops and regular invitations to social functions, but no one offered her friendship—no one except Frank and he was gone now. She could feel tears rising at the thought of her brother and turned towards the stairs to conceal them. “I'll just go and change my clothes.”

She heard her father go back into his study and wondered what had brought him home at this time of day. It had seemed safe to go out because he usually spent the whole day at his office. She'd learned many years ago that outright defiance always brought retribution sooner or later—to her and to anyone who crossed him.

That was also well known in the town.

As she walked slowly up the stairs she vowed that one day soon she would escape from this unhappy house, and most of all from *him*. She didn't care if he was her father. She hated him.

After breakfast the following morning Serena went back up to her bedroom to tidy up, wondering what would become of the Comforts for the Troops group now and whether she should still attend the following day's meeting.

Suddenly she heard the crash of breaking china and ran along to the bedroom at the other end of the landing. There she found her mother lying on the floor by the bed. In her fall Grace must have knocked her cup off the bedside table and it had smashed on the floorboards near the window.

Serena knelt down and lifted her mother's head to rest against her. Grace's lips were tinged with blue and her face was grey-white.

"Serena?" It was hardly more than a whisper.

"I'm here, dearest."

"Are we alone? It's so dark in here, I can't see. Is it—teatime already?"

The room was filled with the weak sunshine of a fine winter's morning, but her mother's eyes had a blind, blurred look to them and Serena guessed what this meant, had been expecting it for a week or two. She had to swallow hard before she could speak calmly. "Yes, we're quite alone."

"I need to tell you something, should have told you sooner, didn't dare."

Serena watched her mother struggle for breath, the pulse in her neck showing faintly against skin crumpled like yellowing tissue paper. "Tell me what?"

"Ernest is not—your father."

“What?”

Tears trickled down Grace’s cheeks, “Don’t think badly of me—please!”

“I never could. *Never*. Don’t agitate yourself.” But she couldn’t help asking, “Are you sure?”

“Of course I am! James was your real father—James Lang. I loved him so much, but my parents wouldn’t let me marry him.”

She gasped for air before continuing and for a moment Serena thought the end had come, then the confidences resumed.

“When I found I was with child, James wanted to marry me so we arranged to run away. But I waited all night and he didn’t come. I’d no money—had to go back to my parents—and they forced me to marry Ernest. He wanted my dowry, you see. But he’s *not* your father. That’s why—he hasn’t always been kind to you.”

“I’m glad he’s not.” The words were out before Serena could stop them. “What happened to James Lang—my real father?”

“I never found out. His family didn’t know, either. I went to see them before I married Ernest—just to be sure. They said he’d run away rather than marry me, but I knew better. James would never have left me, never—not unless he was dead.”

Serena closed her eyes for a moment, so shocked by what she was hearing that the room seemed to be spinning round her. When she opened them she saw a man’s shadowy reflection in the mirror and realised *he* was standing outside. How much had he heard? But Grace raised her hand to caress her daughter’s face just then so Serena ignored him and looked back at her mother. The glowing smile in Grace’s eyes spoke one last time the love she felt for her daughter, then her head fell back, her hand dropped and the gasping stopped abruptly.

In the silence that seemed to echo round her, Serena bent her head and wept, cradling

the still body in her arms. She was glad the suffering had ended—how could she not be?—but she would miss her mother desperately.

He came in then, the man she had always called father, the man she had feared all her life. Even as a child she had sensed he didn't love her, had never understood why. But now that she knew, it was a burden lifted to realise it wasn't her fault, that she wasn't so unlovable, after all.

He said in his usual quiet voice, "Her mind was rambling, going back to her childhood sweetheart, this James person. You *are* my daughter."

Serena knew it was wiser to nod and act as if she believed him, but she was quite sure her mother hadn't lied to her. Not at such a moment.

"Give her to me. I'll carry her across to the bed." His voice was as calm as ever, his expression showing no sign of grief.

Serena let him take her mother's body but couldn't help weeping for what she had lost.

"You'd better send for Dr Tolson to sign the death certificate. I'll arrange for the funeral." He made no attempt to give his wife a final kiss and stared with his usual disapproval at Serena. "Get yourself some mourning clothes, especially a good silk dress for the funeral. And see if for once you can find something a bit more flattering."

He turned to leave, stopping at the door to add, "Make sure the servants put a black crepe bow on the door knocker. We want people to respect our grief."

Ernest Fleming spent his life giving orders in that chill voice, never doubting they would be obeyed. "Respect our grief", indeed! He would probably be delighted to be rid of his invalid wife.

She couldn't stop what her mother had told her from repeating in her mind: *He wasn't her father!* Oh, the relief of that!

Why had her mother not told her about her real father before? The answer was

obvious. Grace would have been terrified of her daughter betraying what she knew.

Keeping her face expressionless Serena murmured, "Yes, Father" to the departing figure. She had long ago perfected an expression as calm as his and could summon it up at will to keep her feelings hidden. Which was a good thing today, because behind that mask, her thoughts were in turmoil. She straightened her clothes and caught sight of herself in the mirror, grimacing at what she saw.

Ten years before, when she was just growing into womanhood, she'd overheard him discussing with her mother the possibility that their daughter might make a *useful* marriage once she had outgrown the baby-fat stage. The men he'd named as possible husbands were all from families Serena disliked, and some were his own age. Like other girls, she'd dreamed of handsome young men, of love and happiness. Men like those he'd mentioned wouldn't make her happy, she knew that instinctively.

After thinking long and hard, she had decided to make herself so unappealing no one would possibly want her. As her body took on a woman's curves, she experimented to find the most unflattering hair styles and clothes which made her look plump and shapeless. Her mother did nothing to prevent this, though she clearly realised what her daughter was doing. Serena had worked hard to earn a reputation not only as a plain Jane, but as a bore, taking a perverse pleasure in the fact that she did no credit whatsoever to her father's position in society, something he harped on about endlessly. As though everyone didn't know he owed his position as a property owner to his wife's money!

She gazed down in perverse satisfaction at the fussy dress in mustard and black checked wool. The colour and pattern overwhelmed her pale skin and near-auburn hair, hiding the gentle hint of rose in her cheeks, while the style was old-fashioned with a skirt far too long for modern taste. When she joined the groups of women rolling bandages,

knitting socks and scarves, or doing other war work, it hurt sometimes to see how fresh and pretty the younger women could look. She never had and now, at almost thirty, she knew she was past her best anyway. She had wept about that in private but she hadn't changed her mind about the need for it.

And as the years passed, the only men who attracted her were ones her father would never allow her to marry, a young officer seen in the street, a cousin of an acquaintance, a man from the poorer side of the family. She could only dream of what she was missing. So far she'd avoided being trapped like her mother in an unhappy marriage, though it had been a close thing a couple of times when her father had set his mind on her marrying someone.

The only person Ernest Fleming had ever truly cared about was his son, and even that in his own way, without any demonstrations of affection. Serena missed her younger brother desperately—no, he was only her *half-brother*. Well, that didn't matter, not at all. Frank hadn't been at all like his father, either in looks or personality, but had taken after their mother's side of the family, as Serena did herself: slender, not very tall, with the same nearly auburn hair. Brother and sister had been good friends, although there were five years between them. A gentle boy, he'd been harried cruelly at school because he hated fighting, bullied and harangued constantly at home because he didn't do his father credit either on the sports field or academically. He'd often turned to his older sister for comfort and advice.

With a sigh of regret for yet another young life cut short by the war which had just ended, Serena went to send one of the maids for Dr Tolson. Her mother's death would make little practical difference to the household or its head, because she'd been in charge of housekeeping for the last few years, but it would make a huge difference to her because now she would no longer feel obliged to stay under this roof. Joy flooded

through her at the mere thought.

The escape would have to be managed carefully, though. She was certain Ernest wouldn't want her to live on her own in the same town as himself, because people would talk and wonder why. He set a lot of store on keeping up appearances. And if she wanted to stay free of him, she knew that once she'd got hold of her inheritance from her godmother, she'd need to go as far away as she could. America, perhaps, or Australia. You couldn't get much further away than that.

After the funeral, kept simple because of wartime restrictions, their lawyer read Grace's will to them. It was short and contained no surprises. She had left everything she owned to her husband, except for her jewellery, which she had left to her daughter and a small bequest to her maid, Ruby.

When the lawyer had gone, Ernest took out one of his cigars and prepared it carefully for smoking. As he was about to light it, he said casually, without even looking at Serena, "Let me have your mother's jewels and I'll put them in the bank for safekeeping."

She took a deep breath, finding that it was one thing to plan rebellion, another to carry it out. "They're—um—already in the bank, except for her wedding ring and gold locket."

"Oh? Dewison didn't mention anything about a recent deposit."

"No. They're in my own bank. Mother told me about her will and gave her jewellery to me a while back because she knew she'd never wear the things again. I wanted to keep them safe." Which was a lie. She'd wanted to keep them from him. There were a few pieces from her mother's family that she loved and she didn't want him selling them.

He had been bending to light a spill in the fire but straightened up abruptly. His voice grew even quieter but a pulse beat rapidly in his throat, always the first sign of his anger. "I wasn't aware that you even had a bank account. Why did you not consult me about it?"

The spill burnt his fingers and he threw it into the fire, not taking his eyes off her. “How much do you have in it and where did you get the money?”

She’d practised what to say, but couldn’t prevent her voice from wobbling as she answered, “The money came from birthday and Christmas presents mostly. It seemed foolish to leave it lying around when it could gain a little interest, and you made sure I never lacked for anything so what would I have spent it on?” She despised herself for the flattery, but hoped it would soften his anger.

“How much do you have in the account?”

“Just over thirty pounds.”

He stared at her, his eyes gleaming like chips of ice in his pale, neat face. “Which bank?”

“The Yorkshire Penny Bank.”

He made a scornful sound. “That place is for housemaids and mill workers! You had better move your account to my bank so that I can be sure your money’s safe. You can get the jewels out tomorrow and bring them to me at the office.”

He was turning away even as he spoke, so sure was he that she would do as she was told. She didn’t reply but watched him go into his study where he sat most evenings, a habit started once her mother became bed-ridden. He would sip a glass of brandy as he read the newspaper, never seeming to need company. Serena said nothing, just went back up to her room.

When he came home the following evening, he reminded her about the account and the jewels.

“I find the savings bank more convenient for my needs, thank you, Father.”

There was a long silence. He kept his eyes on her face, waiting for her to break, but she didn’t.

“On your own head be it, then, but I’m not leaving your mother’s jewels there. It’s a shabby little place and I don’t trust the people who run it.” His voice became steely. “You will fetch them for me tomorrow.”

“Yes, Father.”

The following morning Serena pretended to come down with the influenza and since the epidemic had already killed many people and had put fear into the hearts of those who were still well, he didn’t come near her for the whole week that followed. It was tedious staying in bed, but she had to gain some time.

Even when she left her bed, she played the invalid for a few days, lying on a sofa in her bedroom, complaining of a headache and eating very little. That was easy enough to do because she wasn’t hungry, hadn’t been since her mother died.

She was not only bored but nervous. Fear skittered down her spine every time he walked up the stairs in case he came into her room and insisted they go and get the jewels. But as the days passed and he still didn’t come near her, she began to hope her ploy would succeed, so that she would gain the time she needed to put her other plans into operation.

The train stopped at Horton’s small branch-line station and Marcus Graye got out slowly, signalling for the porter, who was a female. He was forced to let her take his luggage because he was still too weak to carry both bags himself, but it went against the grain to let a woman do that and he couldn’t help asking, “You’re sure they’re not too heavy for you?”

She gave him a cheeky grin and he couldn’t help smiling back.

“Thank you, sir, but I’m quite used to it now. Do you want a cab? Vic Scott’s waiting outside. His cab’s a bit old but it’s clean.” Then, as they turned to leave the station, she

caught sight of his right cheek and her smile faded. In a softer voice she added, “Copped one, did you? We’re all grateful to those who fought for us.”

He found it touching that she would come straight out with that remark, but then Lancashire folk had always been known for being forthright. “It’s not serious, just annoying.” The wounds had been deep but not life-threatening as long as they didn’t get infected, so he’d had to wait to get them tended, lying on a stretcher in a cold tent, hearing the screams coming from other more seriously wounded men.

He hadn’t thought himself vain, but now hated to see his face in the mirror. That side of his face would always be a mess of scars, though they said it’d look better when it healed properly. He’d had to let a beard grow, since he couldn’t yet shave the injured cheek, so that added to the strangeness of the face that looked back at him every morning. Two weeks before the war ended, it’d happened. Several men closer to the blast than him had been killed by the same shell, poor devils, so he was fortunate really. But the deep wounds on the right side of his body and his right leg were taking a long time to heal and this journey had proved that he wasn’t as well as he’d thought.

But at least he was back in Blighty for good, invalided out early instead of having to wait months for a discharge, sent home to recover in his own time. He still found it hard to believe that he’d survived the horror of four years of killing, unlike most of his friends. But it had left its mark on him, he knew, as it had on all who’d been out there.

Realising that he’d been standing lost in thought while the porter waited patiently, he apologised and limped through the station entrance into the circular turning space outside. But there he had to stop again because seeing it suddenly proved that he really was home. It was two years since he’d been back to Horton and then only to bury his father, but he’d dreamed of it many a time and nearly wept as he woke up to find himself still in the trenches.

The horse cab was driven by another ex-soldier, this one with an artificial leg from the stiff way he set his foot down. You got to recognise those who'd served. Something in the upright posture, perhaps, or the smart way they were turned out, or just the look in the eyes. They exchanged understanding glances then the other asked, "It's Mr Graye, isn't it?"

"Yes. You look familiar. Should I know you? I'm afraid I don't remember you, though."

"You'd not recognise me now, but we played together as lads during the school holidays. Then I went to work in Tinsley when I was a fourteen and didn't come back to Horton all that often. I'm Vic Scott. My brother was one of the gardeners at the Hall, but he was killed in '16."

Marcus offered his hand. "You've changed but I do remember you now."

"We've all changed, haven't we? War does that to you. Mind your greatcoat." Vic closed the door of the shabby but clean vehicle and swung himself nimbly up on to the driving seat.

The gentle gait of the elderly mare was soothing and Marcus leaned his head back thankfully, closing his eyes as the animal trotted the half-mile or so to his home. He must have dozed off because he was woken by cool air on his face and Vic's voice.

"We're here, sir."

"What? Oh, yes. Sorry." Marcus shook his head to clear it and stepped carefully down, grateful that his companion didn't try to help him, because he preferred to manage on his own.

Vic was frowning at the untended garden and shabby cottage, which had no plume of smoke coming from the chimney. "Shouldn't someone have opened up the place for you, sir, lit a fire at least?"

Marcus stared at what had once been the gatehouse and was now called the Lodge. His

mother had been the younger of the two children born to her generation of the Lonnerden family who'd been squires of Horton for more than two centuries. She'd been bookish, had married late in life a man despised by the family because of his studious ways and lack of fortune. And then she'd died within the year in childbirth, leaving his father to look after him. Saul Graye had made it very plain that he hadn't wanted the bother of a child in his old age and would rather have had his wife still, so Marcus had been sent away to boarding school when very young and had come home only for Christmas, Easter and the summer holidays, to run wild in the grounds of the Hall.

He realised he was getting lost in his thoughts again. "Sorry, Vic. I'm more tired than I expected. I didn't have time to let the family know I was coming back. They needed more beds at the convalescent home, so turfed a few of us out early. I'll nip across to pay my respects to my cousin and aunt, and ask Cook to give me enough food to last until tomorrow. It's not far to walk to the big house if you cut through the kitchen garden. I can manage that. And perhaps you could come back tomorrow morning and drive me into Tinsley? I shall have to do some shopping and put an advert in the Tinsley Telegraph for a daily maid."

The other man stared at him, pity in his eyes. "Didn't they tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"About your cousin being dead."

"John? Yes. He was killed in '15."

"Not John, Lawrence. He died last month. Influenza, it was. He never really recovered from being gassed."

Shock made Marcus reach for the gatepost to steady himself. "I didn't know. If anyone wrote to tell me, I didn't receive the letter. I've been moving around a bit, though, from France to England, then from hospital to a convalescent home."

“Well, there’s only old Mrs Lonnerden left now. She hasn’t been well for a while, but I heard she had to be sedated when Mr Lawrence died. They’re all at sixes and sevens at the big house, from the sounds of it. Cook held things together after your uncle passed away, but she died in the spring and there are only two elderly maids left now.”

“Cook’s gone as well? Ah, I’m sorry for that! The place won’t seem the same without her. *Why* didn’t they let me know?” He’d been very fond of Cook, who’d had a lot of time for a lonely, motherless lad when he was growing up. “What about Hill? Is he still running the stables? And Parker—is he still in charge of the gardens?”

“Hill’s looking after the horses though there are only a couple of them now, ones that were too old to go to war. Parker died a few months ago as well, so Hill does a bit of gardening when he can, but he’s half-crippled with rheumatism.”

“Oh, hell!” Marcus rubbed one hand over his beard then stared down at himself. “I’m in no fit state to go calling on a lady, but I think I must pay my respects to my aunt and let her know I’m back.” He turned to walk towards the small house, tripped on the uneven paving and lost his balance.

Vic caught his arm and steadied him. “You look like you need a bit of help.”

Marcus nodded, hating to admit it.

“I could stay. Help you unpack and change, then go with you across to the big house, carry stuff back. Old Dolly here will be happy to be turned loose on that lawn of yours. Only I’ll have to ask for some payment, I’m afraid. I’m still paying off the loan for the cab, you see, and only just scraping through. But I might as well work for you as for anyone else and I’d only charge you three shillings for an afternoon’s work, because that’s what I’d normally make.” He sighed. “It doesn’t bring in as much as I’d hoped, driving a cab, not in a small place like Horton.”

“Thanks. I’d be most grateful for your help.” Leaning on Vic’s arm, he started off again

towards the front door. "You're very steady on that peg leg of yours."

"I was lucky. Got used to it quickly, and since I lost it below the knee, I can still bend my leg. How about you? You're favouring your right leg? Will you always limp?"

"No. But I'm still healing and that whole side hurts when I do too much, as I have today."

"You're one of the lucky ones, though."

Another person telling him that! Marcus didn't feel lucky, just extremely weary.

And if his two cousins were dead, what would happen to the Hall? It wasn't all that big, a pleasant little manor in a few acres. He could see its outline through the bare-branched trees. He hoped it wouldn't be sold to some war profiteer. But whoever inherited the Hall couldn't touch the Lodge and its half-acre, because that had been his mother's dowry and now belonged to him. Not that he'd be able to stay here for long. He'd have to rent the place out because he needed to find himself a job, could go back to his old one in Manchester, though he didn't know if he could settle down to working in a bank again.

Time enough to make decisions and plans when he was feeling better.

After a hasty wash Marcus donned a clean shirt, hoping its crumpled state wasn't too obvious. He limped across to the big house, steadying himself with a walking stick he'd found in the hallstand. Vic walked next to him but didn't offer to help, except to open and close the two gates. It felt comforting not to be on his own. He wasn't looking forward to seeing his aunt again because his being alive would rub salt in the wound of her loss. She'd cared about nothing in life except her two sons, certainly not her husband, a bluff man of few words, who'd died before the war. It was dreadful that she'd lost both John and Lawrence, dreadful.

He stopped for a moment to stare in shock at the vegetable garden, which hadn't been

cleared for the winter, and was a mass of mainly dead vegetation, with a few cabbages and Brussels sprouts standing sentinel in one corner and something green drooping in the middle.

Vic shook his head sadly as they studied the mess. "I'd heard things were bad here, but hadn't realised it had gone so far downhill. What a waste! And there's me without a garden at all, just a poky little bedroom in Granny Diggle's cottage."

When Marcus knocked on the back door of the Hall, the entrance he'd always used, no one answered. He knocked again, waited, then pushed the door open and called, "Hello!" The place was tidy, but it didn't smell like Cook's kitchen. There was nothing simmering on the stove, no trays of cakes and bread cooling, a memory which he'd summoned up sometimes in the trenches to cheer himself up. "Perhaps you'd better wait for me here, Vic? I'll go and see if there's anyone around."

"Right you are, sir."

Marcus went through into the front part of the house, still using the walking stick, hearing its tapping noise echoing up the stairwell. He heard a faint sound of voices from somewhere above and called, "Is anyone there?"

There was silence, then footsteps and his aunt's elderly maid appeared at the top of the stairs looking anxious. "It's me, Marcus," he called.

She clapped one hand to her meagre breast. "Oh, sir, you did give me a shock. I didn't recognise you with that beard. But I'm glad to see you."

As he limped slowly up the stairs, she hesitated, looking over her shoulder, then saying in a low voice as he reached the top, "I'm at my wits' end how to manage here and that's the truth."

He paused to rest the leg and it was only then that she seemed to notice his walking stick.

“You’re injured, sir.”

“Yes. I’ve been invalided out. How’s my aunt?”

“Didn’t you get my letter?”

He looked at her in surprise. “*Your* letter, Ada?”

“Yes, sir. Madam wasn’t in a fit state to write, so I did.”

“I’ve not received any letters for weeks. Yours will have been chasing after me. And I only heard about Lawrence this afternoon. I’m so sorry. My aunt must be very upset.”

“She’s taking it badly.”

“I’d better go in and see her.”

She hesitated, still barring his way. “You’ll not—take offence at what she says?”

“Of course not.” Grief took people in many different ways and he reckoned he’d seen them all after four years of war.

The big front bedroom was hot and stuffy, smelling of some sickly perfume, with other less pleasant smells concealed beneath that. The woman in the bed was so shrunken and old-looking that he stopped in shock.

“It’s Mr Marcus, come back from the wars,” Ada said.

“Why was *he* spared and not my boys.” Pamela Lonnerden began to sob.

Marcus moved closer to the bed, concerned at his aunt’s sallowness and the wild look in her eyes.

She flapped her hands at him. “Get away from me! I don’t want you in here, gloating.”

As he looked questioningly at the maid, his aunt shrieked, “*Get out!*” and began to sob wildly.

“Better leave, sir. Give her time to get used to you being back.”

When they were outside the bedroom, with the noise muted into a thin, despairing sobbing, Ada said, “I’m sorry, Mr Marcus. She’s not in her right mind at the moment, and

that's a fact. She won't see the doctor, won't eat or drink properly, won't even wash herself. I've my hands full trying to look after her, I can tell you."

"That's obvious. I can't leave things like this. Why hasn't the new owner come to take charge?"

"No one knows who that is. I think you'd better go and see the family lawyer about it, sir. Mr Redway will know what to do, if anyone will, and he's a distant cousin so he's family."

Marcus made his way slowly down the stairs, finding Vic in the kitchen talking to an older woman who had been a housemaid before the war. Now she seemed to be in charge of preparing the meals because she was chopping up a single onion and had a very small pile of chopped meat on a plate beside her. They both looked at him expectantly and he could only say, "My aunt doesn't want to see me."

"She's not seen anyone but Ada and the lawyer since the funeral," the woman volunteered. "Won't even see the doctor, says he can't help what ails her."

"I'll go into Tinsley to see Mr Redway tomorrow. For now I wonder—Gladys, isn't it?—if you could let me have something for my tea and breakfast? I've only just arrived and there's nothing to eat at the Lodge."

Gladys looked dubiously at the food on the table. "I'm sorry, sir, but we haven't got much to spare, what with the rationing and all. I can let you have some bread and cheese, though, and an egg. Oh, and there are some apples in the attic, if someone will go up and get them." She looked at Vic, who smiled cheerfully. "Here, take this bag. You might as well fill it right up. They're only going to waste. The orchard did well this year and we managed to pick quite a lot, but there's no one to eat them, so we could have saved ourselves the trouble, because madam doesn't eat more than a bird. Just follow the back stairs up to the very top, you can't miss the smell of apples."

When he had left she looked apologetically at Marcus. “I’m sorry it’s such poor pickings, sir, really sorry. But what with the bills not being paid and all, we’re lucky they’re still letting us have any groceries.”

He looked at her in shock. *“Bills not being paid?”*

She nodded. “Not for a long time. Your uncle hadn’t a head for business, if you’ll excuse me saying so, only everyone knew. And anyway us servants couldn’t help knowing that things were going downhill because they sold off some of the land. Mr John kept things going for a while, but when he and Mr Lawrence were called up there was no one to take things in hand and then—well, things went from bad to worse. After Mr Lawrence was gassed and invalided out, he kept to his bedroom mostly, except to sit with madam in the evenings sometimes or go out to that club in town that the gentlemen use. There’s only me and Ada left indoors now and Hill outside. It’s hard to keep the place going, though we do our best, I promise you.”

“I’m sure you do, Gladys. No one can work miracles.”

The two men walked back to the Lodge in silence, with Vic carrying the food. Marcus couldn’t hide the fact that he was exhausted and allowed himself to be persuaded to rest in front of the sitting room fire while Vic bustled round upstairs, making up a bed and unpacking the suitcase. The larder was completely empty and all the furniture covered in dust, but there was wood in the outhouse still, so he could light fires to chase away the feeling of damp and neglect. There was even enough oil to fill a couple of lamps and a packet of candles.

As it grew fully dark Marcus paid Vic, who had more than earned his modest fee. “I’m grateful for your help. If you can come here tomorrow, take me into Tinsley then stay with me for the whole day, I’ll pay you whatever you think right. It’ll be easier than taking the train, because I can leave parcels in your cab as I buy things. I’m not in a fit state to

manage on my own yet, I'm afraid. And if you know of anyone who wants a job as cook and general maid . . . ”

“I may do, sir. I'll ask her.”

Marcus was sorry to see the other man go because the darkness was so quiet and still around the house that he felt as if it was pressing in on him. He boiled the egg and ate a solitary supper, after which, though it was only eight o'clock, he made his way painfully up the stairs to the front bedroom, where two earthenware hot water bottles had made a cosy nest of the creaking old bed.

He'd expected to lie awake, but exhaustion quickly claimed him and he only had time to wonder what the hell had brought the senior branch of the family so low before he fell into a deep sleep.