

Prologue

November 1918

At two o'clock in the morning of Tuesday, November 12th, when everyone else in the house had gone to bed after celebrating the end of the war, Lady Daphne Bingham sat alone in the library sipping a final glass of brandy and wondering what her life would now become. She wasn't sad that the war was over, never that! But she was sad at the thought of disbanding her "girls" because she'd miss them dreadfully.

Her thoughts inevitably drifted back over the war years. She'd formed her group of aides as a personal contribution to the war effort—and what a splendid bunch they were! They came from all sorts of backgrounds from maidservants to prim, ageing spinsters and privileged daughters of the rich, and were of all ages, with the majority in their mid to late twenties now and the oldest fifty-four.

She'd started with twelve of them, picking women she'd met here and there who seemed to have more gumption than most. Twelve were all she and her husband could afford to support and buy uniforms for, since they were comfortable rather than rich.

She'd had the aides taught to drive and learned with them—such fun!—then borrowed several cars from friends who were also keen to support the war effort. Ready at last, she'd offered her aides to the War Office to replace the soldiers who drove senior officers from the armed forces around London or further afield. Jolly well the girls had done it, too. Later she'd bought a couple of motorcycles, one with a sidecar.

And her original group of aides had been so appreciated that the government had

given her money to employ and train more of them to do special clerical and other work, women prepared to go wherever they were needed. Now the group numbered over fifty.

Later she'd opened a canteen in her London home, a place where men from the armed forces who were recuperating or on leave could spend a few hours at no cost, without the need to buy alcohol.

What would become of her aides now that the war was over, though? Many of the men coming back would be treated as heroes, but what about the unsung heroines who'd also contributed a great deal to winning the war? And once the men reclaimed their jobs, what would happen to the women who'd been doing them? She'd had enough experience of the unfairness of life to be sure that women would not be given the credit they deserved. Would they even be allowed to continue using their new skills in the place of men who'd died, or would they be pushed back into their former narrow lives?

She'd keep in touch with her girls and always be there to help them—well, she would as long as she lived. She was getting on for seventy now, though she didn't feel it.

Raising her glass she drained the last few drops of brandy in a silent toast to "Lady Bingham's Aides" as everyone called them.

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November 1918 – March 1919

Those aides not on duty had just finished breakfast, which was rather late today because of the celebrations of the previous day. Ellen saw Lady Bingham standing in the doorway and nudged the woman next to her. As usual, everything stopped when her ladyship came in and stood waiting for their attention at the head of the table.

“My dears, now that the war is over, I’m afraid we shall have to start thinking about the future. It won’t happen overnight, because there is still the influenza epidemic and we can help there. But when we have no more purpose as a group, we shall have to disband. I’m mentioning it today because I want to give you as long as possible to think about what you’re going to do with your lives from now on. And if any of you needs help, come and see me. Even after you leave, well, you will always know how to contact me if I can do anything for you. Be sure I shan’t forget you . . . ever.”

There was utter silence, then one girl sniffed and pulled out a handkerchief.

“No tears!” her ladyship said sharply. “We shall hold our heads high until the end.”

She gave them a smile and walked briskly out.

Ellen was rostered to clear up and noticed that her companion in the kitchen was quieter than usual.

“I don’t want to go back home, do you?” Tessa said as they washed and wiped the dishes together. “There’s nothing for me there but a dull life looking after Father.”

Ellen looked at her in sympathy. They all knew what a bully Tessa's father was, how angry he'd been when his daughter joined Lady Bingham's Aides and left his care to an elderly cousin. "You don't have to go back to living with him."

"What else can I do? He's nearly eighty now." She sighed. "But you at least are free to find a more interesting job. Have you got any idea yet what you're going to do?"

"I only wish I had. I don't know what I want and that's the truth."

When they'd finished, Ellen hung the tea towel over the drying rack and went outside to clean the motorcycle and sidecar that she had used more than anyone else to deliver important documents and messages all over London. She loved driving round on it, would miss it dreadfully.

She'd always planned to return to Lancashire after the war but didn't intend to live at home. She didn't get on with her stepfather, never had, and though she tried to be polite to him, he didn't pay her the same courtesy, ordering her around as he did her mother and expecting her to "jump to it" and serve him like a lord.

When she was fourteen she'd been glad to leave home and live in at the Hall, and she knew she could return to her old job there, because her mother had said so several times in her letters. "No, I'm *not* going back to being a housemaid!" Ellen didn't realise she'd spoken aloud until she heard a chuckle just behind her.

"First sign of madness, talking to yourself." The cheeky young delivery boy from the grocer's winked at her as he lugged a big basket of provisions down the area steps.

She smiled. He was sixteen and undersized, so hadn't been able to feign being older as some had done in order to volunteer for the Army. Now he wouldn't have to face the horrors of war, he and many lads like him. But her smile soon faded and her thoughts returned to her own problems. She'd go mad stuck indoors, cleaning the same rooms day after day so that a rich family could live in an immaculate house. Surely she'd be

able to find a job where some of her new skills would be used? But try as she might, she couldn't think what that job might be in peacetime.

She'd learned so much since becoming one of Lady Bingham's Aides. She'd arrived in London a quiet, rather shy girl of twenty who had met Daphne when her ladyship came to visit her employer in Lancashire and then had been given a lift in Daphne's motor car when walking back from town on her day off. After her initial shyness she'd enjoyed chatting to her mistress's guest and had told her about the books she borrowed from the library about far-away places.

She could never have guessed where this meeting would lead until a letter arrived from her ladyship inviting Ellen to join her Aides and do important war work. She'd accepted, because by that time she was fed up with working at the Hall.

Her stepfather had been furious, as had her employer, but Ellen knew this was her big chance to see something of the world, possibly the only chance she'd ever have. Before she went to London she knew only about housework and life in a village in Lancashire. Now, she not only knew her way round the nation's capital but could drive both a motor car and a motorcycle, service their engines and do simple repairs too. She was comfortable talking to people from the highest to the lowest, could do paperwork and simple accounts. She'd even worked for a time as a stewardess on a ship bringing Belgian refugees back to England. She liked to think she could turn her hand to just about anything because of these experiences.

As she stood lost in thought, Daphne Bingham strolled out to join her in the mews, looking tired, as if she hadn't slept very well.

"I'll miss this old girl." Ellen indicated the machine, which was now gleaming and ready for use. It was an A.J.S. model 'D' passenger outfit, sturdy and reliable, and she preferred driving it to motor cars, if truth be told, loved to feel the wind on her face.

Daphne studied it. “The cars I borrowed can go back to their owners, but I had to buy the motorcycles. It’d be a waste to leave the two of them standing idle, so I suppose I’ll have to sell them.”

It was then that the idea came to Ellen, such a bright, wonderful idea. “How much would you want for this one?”

That urchin’s grin that they all loved to see lit up Daphne’s face. “Ten pounds if it’s going to a good home.”

“That’s not a fair price. It’s worth much more.”

“I know how you love this machine and I think ten pounds is very fair, given the circumstances.”

Ellen looked at her uncertainly.

“It’d please me very much to see the bike go to you.”

And she couldn’t resist it for a moment longer. “Done! And thank you so much. I can’t tell you how grateful I am.”

Solemnly they shook hands, then Ellen turned and stroked the machine. *Hers*, now. It would cause a sensation in the village and her stepfather would throw a fit, but she didn’t care.

It was a symbol of her new life, owning a machine like this. It seemed to promise that she didn’t need to give everything up, that she could do anything she chose in the bright new world they were promised.

Sergeant Seth Talbot got up very early the morning after the war ended, just wanting to enjoy a few minutes’ peace and quiet. None of the men was awake, so he got his wish and though it was chilly, he went outside the hut where twenty new recruits were still sleeping and sat down on the wooden steps. He was more relieved than words could ever

say that he wouldn't have to turn another group of dewy-eyed, enthusiastic boys into cannon fodder.

He stayed there, enjoying the silence and fresh taste of the morning air, until he heard voices. Then he went inside to begin his day. But for the life of him, he couldn't summon up his usual fierceness. It had been alien to his nature, but the only way he knew to frighten the duller lads into learning enough to perhaps save their young lives when they were out there in the trenches. He knew all too well what conditions were like in that hell on earth, as he had been there himself for two long, weary years until he was injured and then transferred to training duties.

"It's all going to be different now, Sarge, isn't it?" one lad said as he made his morning round, inspecting their beds and kit to make sure all was in order. "We won't have to fight. Will they send us home again, do you think, or keep us in the Army?"

He looked across at the lad and smiled, enjoying the thought that this one wouldn't be killed. "Well, you won't be going to fight, but it'll take a while to demobilise everyone. And it never hurts to learn what you can, so we'll carry on with our lessons until we're told otherwise."

They'd go away with more than fighting skills. In every group of new recruits there were lads who had never had a proper bath in their lives, who accepted being lousy as normal, and who didn't know how to use knives and forks properly, others who couldn't read and write properly. He and the elderly corporal were used to teaching many other things than how to fight and look like a well turned out soldier.

For the next few days Seth kept wondering what his life would be like as a civilian. Did he want to go back into the police force? He'd fought against his family's wishes when he'd joined it in the first place, because they'd wanted him to continue working in his uncle's corner shop, which was considered a step up from being a carter like his

father. His uncle had no children, so getting their eldest son well in with him was regarded as a prudent move by his parents.

He'd gone to work in the shop when he was fourteen, because no one had given him a choice. He'd lived in an attic bedroom there and acted as general dogsbody, both in the house and in the shop. It was better than he'd expected, because his uncle was a kind man, but this wasn't the sort of shop that delivered to customers and he absolutely hated being penned up all day indoors. But his uncle liked his food and fed them both well, so Seth had grown tall and strong while living with him.

The person he'd admired most in his new life was the police sergeant in charge of that part of Manchester, a man who could control naughty lads in the street with no more than a glance, yes and grown men too.

As soon as he was old enough, Seth apologised to his uncle and joined the police force. His next brother took his place in the shop, but poor Ben had been killed in '16 in France at some obscure skirmish. Now Seth's youngest brother was working in the shop, had been due to be called up, but would escape that, thank goodness.

Seth had enjoyed being a policeman. He'd believed in what he was doing—fighting crime and maintaining public order in Manchester. He'd been ambitious, hoping one day to rise to Sergeant or even higher.

He wasn't ambitious in that way now.

It was seeing the scars on his chest and arm as he got washed that did it, brought back pictures of wounded men, dying soldiers, mangled bodies. He doubled up, trying desperately to hold back the agony. But he couldn't and found himself weeping helplessly into his towel. So many good men dead, friends lost, others maimed. Why had he been saved?

When he recovered from the unmanly tears, his brain seemed clearer and he knew exactly what he wanted to do with his life. No more turmoil, if he could help it. No more ambition, either. All he wanted now was the peace and quiet of a small country town or village, preferably somewhere in the north of England, where he'd grown up.

He longed quite desperately to leave this crowded camp and go home.

They asked him to stay on in the Army but he refused. The Captain pressed him hard to reconsider, so he said quite simply, "I need some peace and quiet now, sir. I've had enough. The sooner I can get out of the Army, meaning no offence, the happier I shall be."

The Captain looked at him long and hard, seeming to understand what he was feeling, because he nodded. "Very well. I'll set things in motion. You can be proud of what you've done for your country, though, Talbot, and the regiment is proud of your bravery in rescuing those men in Flanders."

Seth shrugged. "Anyone would have done the same. They gave me a medal, but it should have gone to everyone, because we all stuck together out there."

The Captain held out his hand. "I've been happy to serve with you."

They shook hands solemnly then Seth watched the Captain walk away with that slightly stiff gait. He'd lost a leg at Passchendaele but had talked his way into a desk job, because he came from an army family and had never wanted any other sort of life.

Seth knew it'd take a while for the Army to spit him out again, so he thought about his future for a week or two longer before writing to his former Police Sergeant and doing something that would have been unthinkable to the fiercely independent young man he'd been five years ago: asking a favour.

What did pride matter now? The only thing that mattered was building a world in which war could never, ever happen again. He wanted to be part of keeping the new peace, but only in a minor way. Mostly, he just wanted to enjoy it.

The next day Ellen went to the savings bank to withdraw some money to pay for for the motorcycle. It was a daring thing for a woman to do, own and ride a vehicle like that, and she knew her mother and stepfather wouldn't approve, but she was old enough at twenty-six to make her own choices.

At the bank there was a man behind the counter instead of Miss Phipps and Ellen asked where the usual teller was, worried that the kindly elderly lady she'd chatted to every week for the past few years might have fallen victim to the influenza.

"She's gone back to the office where she belongs," the new man replied in a snappy tone. "This is *my* job and now I'm doing it again. Anyway, women don't understand money like men do."

Ellen wasn't being talked to like that by anyone. "Oh, and who do you think manages the housekeeping money in most homes?"

"I'm talking about real money, the sort we handle in banks, not pennies. Now . . ." He picked up her form and frowned at it. "You're withdrawing rather a lot of money. Ten pounds! Are you sure you haven't made a mistake?"

As he pushed the paper back towards her she saw that his hand was badly scarred, as if it'd been burnt, and guessed he'd been wounded and discharged from the forces recently. But that was no reason for him to speak so slightingly of poor Miss Phipps, who had once said wistfully how much more interesting it was to meet and talk to customers. And his war service was certainly no excuse for speaking to Ellen as if she was stupid.

“Well?” the teller repeated, tapping the piece of paper impatiently with his forefinger. “Are you sure about this withdrawal?”

She shoved the paper right back at him without even glancing at it. “What I do is not your concern and I’ll thank you not to make my business public to the other customers.”

He drew himself up, scowling. “I wouldn’t be doing my job correctly if I didn’t double check. Lady customers can make some foolish mistakes and ten pounds *is* a lot of money for a young woman like you.”

“What do you mean by ‘young woman like me’?”

The Manager came out of his office. “Is there a problem, Johnson?”

“No, sir. Just checking that the young lady’s slip has been filled in properly.”

“Good, good.”

Ellen found her voice. “Well, *I* have a problem. I wish to complain about this new teller of yours, who’s been telling the whole bank my business and talking to me as if I’m five years old. What sort of way is that to treat a customer?”

They both looked at her in shock and two male customers who were waiting their turn rolled their eyes at one another.

Ellen had met this patronising attitude all too often before the war and had been powerless to do anything about it while she was a housemaid except grit her teeth. But she’d hoped that women’s contribution to the recent victory would have earned them more respect. It hadn’t with the men here today, that was obvious. She could feel the hostility of all four of them. “I’ve changed my mind.”

“Ah!” The teller nodded at her. “I knew you’d made a mistake.”

“I hadn’t made a mistake. And I do still need that money because I’m buying a motorcycle.” Oh, the joy of seeing the shock on his face as she said that! “But now I’ve

decided to close my account and draw *all* the money out. I'm not leaving my savings in a bank where people treat me so rudely."

"My dear young lady—"

"Please don't speak to me in that patronising tone." She kept her voice calm, in spite of the anger simmering underneath, trying to achieve the same icy tone she'd heard Lady Bingham use.

Both men behind the counter sucked in their breath in shock, then the manager stepped forward, saying in the same sort of soothing tone people use to small children who have been naughty, "Shall we discuss this in my office . . ." he glanced down at her left hand, "miss?"

"No, thank you. I'll just draw out my money and deposit it in another bank where they treat me with more courtesy."

"You're being too hasty. And you'll be losing some interest if you close the account before the end of the month. Perhaps you could discuss this with a male relative—your father or brother perhaps?—and come back tomorrow? And surely you don't mean it about buying a motorcycle? I should hate to see *my* daughter even riding on one of those things, and as for driving one, well, I'm sure it's unsafe for a woman."

"No one complained when I used a motorcycle to serve my country during the war, carrying messages and documents round London for the War Office," she snapped. "Nor did General Mortenhoe complain when I rushed him across London sitting in my sidecar to get to an emergency meeting." She waited a moment for that to sink in, then said quietly, "Please close my account at once and give me back the money I've earned working for the war effort!"

As the sulky-faced teller began to count out the notes, she added, aiming her words at the manager's back as he walked away, "And you can be sure that I'll write to your Head

Office and tell them exactly why I've withdrawn my money from this bank." She'd learned about that sort of thing too from Lady Bingham. Don't just accept bad treatment. Complain about it to whoever is in charge and do so confidently.

As she walked home, Ellen's anger faded and she admitted to herself that she'd acted hastily. She should have waited to close her account until she'd found another bank. Oh, well, she could easily do that when she had an hour free. She'd only chosen that one because it had a branch near the place where she lived and worked. Banks were all pretty much the same, after all.

But would other returned soldiers be the same as that teller, acting scornfully towards the women who'd worked so hard to keep things going on the home front? Surely not?

That evening Lady Bingham joined the other women at their meal. Her husband was a semi-invalid now and rarely came up to London, so she often ate informally with the aides, refusing to stand on ceremony or even allow them to address her by her title. "I have some news," she said once the pudding had been eaten. "The influenza epidemic is putting a great deal of pressure on hospitals, which are already busy catering for wounded servicemen, and Major Bradley has asked me if I'll turn this house into a temporary nursing home for those with no family to look after them once they start to recover. So I'd appreciate it if those of you who are able to will stay on and help me look after people."

Several of the women cheered and one called, "We didn't want to go home anyway."

Lady Bingham smiled. "I didn't want to lose you, either. But you realise you'll be putting yourselves at risk by doing so? I'm told this particular influenza kills more younger people than old."

"Just let it try!"

Once again they were a team, serving their fellow citizens, and there was great satisfaction and pride in that.

They were so busy the next day reorganising the house that Ellen didn't get a chance to go out and find a new bank. So she asked her ladyship to put the money in her safe and knowing it would be all right there, promptly forgot about it, because almost immediately they were working day and night to care for the sick.

The influenza epidemic got worse and worse. Many people in the streets were wearing gauze masks, some smaller shops had closed "Due to illness" and two of the aides had to rush home to nurse family members. One aide's young brother died.

There had never been an influenza epidemic as bad, people were saying, and certainly Ellen and the others saw for themselves how it seemed to turn quickly into a severe form of pneumonia for some sufferers. Even when it didn't, many of those who'd been sick were weak and took a long time to recover.

Christmas passed in a blur. The aides were too busy to celebrate, though Lady Bingham bought each of them a dress length as a present, in beautiful fine wool, each piece the exact colour needed to bring out the best in its recipient. How she'd found such material in wartime was a mystery, but then she always had been good at finding things when no one else could. "I've engaged a seamstress to make them up and I'm choosing the styles for you," she said with one of her mischievous smiles. "Mrs Clarence needs the work now that she's not helping to make uniforms, so you can't refuse."

In February one of the aides caught the influenza and died so quickly they were all shocked rigid. Ellen and Mary Ann were chosen to go with Lady Bingham to the funeral. They stood in the bitterly cold church during the short service, which was limited to a brief ten minutes because there were so many being buried each day.

Her ladyship drove the car herself and was unusually quiet. "I think we've all had enough of death," she said as they stopped in the mews behind her house.

Both young women nodded.

When Ellen woke the next morning, her head was thumping with pain and she felt weak and achy. She called out to the girl in the next bed, "Jenny, I've got the flu." Her voice was little more than a croak and Jenny didn't stir, so she leaned across and pulled the covers off her friend. "I've got the influenza."

She was so dizzy the other girls had to help her down to the makeshift ward and put her in a bed there. It felt strange to be so helpless and she wondered vaguely if she was going to die, but couldn't even raise the energy to worry about it, because her whole body was aching.

Seth was woken a few mornings later by the elderly corporal coming into his room.

"What's the matter?"

"Jim's not well, Sarge."

It took only one look for Seth to realise that it was the influenza. He'd had a mild dose a few months ago and had thought nothing of it. There was usually some sort of influenza going round most winters. But this one had turned into an epidemic, then into something worse: a pandemic, which was a new word to him. The influenza was sweeping the country, killing hundreds of people, disrupting the normal life they'd all been longing for.

He got up and tied a handkerchief round his face then went to look at Jim. The poor lad had it badly, with dark marks on the skin of his cheeks and a sunken look to his eyes. Seth raised his voice. "Don't come near him. Get dressed as quickly as you can and assemble outside."

“But Sarge—”

“*Do as I say!* And on the double! Don’t even think of making your beds.” A doctor had told him once that influenza was passed on by aerial droplets that were inhaled, so he felt it urgent to get the others out of reach.

When he was dressed, Seth went to the door and bellowed. “Fetch the Medical Officer. Wake him if necessary and tell him it’s urgent. And no one is to come in here without my express permission. Corporal, a bit of marching will soon warm them up.”

He waited by the door, knowing he could do nothing to help the poor lad. A friend of his worked in a military hospital and had written him a horror story describing the outbreak, the full details of which were being kept quiet for fear of alarming the rank and file.

And now the scourge had come to their camp.

The MO came hurrying across the parade ground and Seth explained the situation.

As they looked at Jim, the MO shook his head. “We’ve got two men down with it in C Squad as well. But he’s worse than they are.” He gazed round. “I think we’ll turn this hut into a temporary hospital, because it’s well away from the others. Will you run it for me, Talbot? I’ll not hide from you that it’s a dangerous job, so I’m only taking volunteers.”

“Yes, of course I’ll do it, sir. I had the influenza a few months ago, so I may have some resistance to it.”

“Good man. I’ll get the gear sent across for nursing them and assign orderlies and nurses as necessary.” He hurried off, looking as if he had the cares of the world on his shoulders.

During the next few weeks, Seth found himself in charge of an ever-changing set of nurses and orderlies, some of whom became patients themselves, in spite of the masks

they all wore over mouth and nose in an attempt to avoid transmission of the disease. Day blurred into night and he slept when he could.

All too many times he sat by the bedside of boys, for most of the lads in this camp were very young, and watched helplessly as they died struggling in vain for breath or drowning in bloody froth.

One day they sent him no new patients, the next day one, then gradually no more, so that the temporary ward emptied. When the last lad had been discharged to finish recovering at home, Seth sat numbly in his office, too exhausted to think what to do next.

A hand on his shoulder made him suddenly aware that the Captain was standing beside him, but he couldn't even find the strength to stand up and salute.

"It really is over now, Talbot. No, don't bother to get up."

They were both silent for a moment or two.

"Nearly as bad as the trenches," the Captain said gruffly.

"Yes. I can't believe it's over."

"As far as you're concerned, it is. Any new cases can go to the regular hospital. I'm going to arrange an immediate discharge for you. You've earned it, if anyone has. I want to offer you the Regiment's thanks for all you've done."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Seven days later he was on his way home to Manchester, wearing civilian clothing.

The Captain had hinted that his name had been put forward for another medal for his "selfless work caring for the sick". As if he wanted it!