

MYSELF A PHOENIX



John C. Nash

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“You only live once” is a well-worn phrase, and usually true. Except a few souls, out of a mix of desperation and courage, and willing to take risks in a time of chaos, sometimes get to live more than one life. The difficulty, of course, is that the transformation is built on secrets and lies, and finding the resources to do the reconstruction is fraught with problems. Doing so in wartime gives a means to destroy the old life, but the new one is then complicated by regulations, rationing and even romance.

Myself a Phoenix is a work of fiction. While certain historical persons may appear, the main characters and their speech and actions are fictitious.

The work was inspired by consideration of a character in the book *Christmas with the Railway Girls* by Maisie Thomas. Colette, like Mary Smith, escapes an abusive husband by means of hostile bombings in World War II. I wondered, in particular, about the details of how one could create and, more importantly, sustain a new identity in a period of heightened security against foreign agents, of government operated rationing, and centralized registration for National Service.

It is certain I have got some details wrong, and I would very much like to know of such cases. Please contact me at the email below if you have information that would be pertinent. I welcome any and all exchanges as long as they are courteous. In my digging, I found one mention that the national identity card did not usually contain a photo unless the holder had some official position. Ms. Thomas suggests a photo was needed, and I would have expected that also. It may be that a photo was required for registration but not attached to the identity card. That I could not determine. Such are the details that are the concern when trying to fabricate a plausible means for someone to become a new person.

Because the main thrust of this effort is dealing with such details, the usual preoccupation of a novel in the form of plot and character may be less pronounced. A future rewrite may be in order, depending on how this work is received.

John Nash, Ottawa, 2022
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May 10 - 11, 1941

You could say I was reborn with a bang. That bang was the explosion of a parachute mine in a street not too far from the British Museum, which also got hit that night. I was on the roof of a modest office building firewatching with another woman named Sheila. We had a jury-rigged fire-watchers' hut on the street side of the roof, which faced more or less East, and that was the direction from which we could see the German aeroplanes were coming in. Some had already passed over before letting loose their horrid loads, but others we could see still coming in the bright moonlight.

In the middle of everything, I needed to pee.

“Oooh. Got to go. Be right back,” I said.

There wasn't a lavatory on the roof, of course. We just had a bucket, which we'd put between two large metal boxes that had some sort of equipment for something or other like ventilation or a dumb-waiter. The boxes were about three feet high and wide and six long, with a couple of feet between. so provided a bit of modesty. I suppose we could have put the bucket in the brick box that was the top of the stairwell. If we had, I wouldn't be here probably.

I'd just relieved myself and was pulling up my knickers and two pairs of pants – for the warmth I always had double when firewatching – when I heard Sheila yell “Parachute mine!”

Looking towards the front of the building, I could see the parachute drifting down towards us, a few hundred feet up. I saw Sheila duck below the parapet of the roof. I knelt down between the metal boxes. My foot nudged the bucket, and I moved it out onto the roof so I wouldn't kick it over and get piss on myself. Silly thoughts in the circumstances.

There was an almighty bang, and I think I blacked out for a few seconds. When I came to, I was squashed between the metal boxes. I pushed and they moved enough that I could scramble up. When I looked towards the

front of the building, it wasn't there. The front half of the building was gone. In fact, in front of the metal box nearest that side of the building was about two feet of roof then a gaping hole. The pee bucket had disappeared, as had a lot of the parapet, even at the back.

How was I going to get down? Maybe the fire escape was still there. It ran down the back of the building, with a swing-down ladder for the last storey. I eased myself to the edge of the roof on hands and knees. There was broken brick everywhere. The parapet had been damaged.

As I peeked over the edge, I saw the fire escape was still there. Hopefully strong enough to take my weight.

There was something I needed to think about. What? Oh yes. Check that I had my gas mask and my raincoat and my handbag. I had been wearing my coat and had my handbag on a long strap over my shoulder. The coat I'd set next to me by one of the metal boxes and I'd been on it when the mine went off. My gas mask had been in the make-do shelter. Have to arrange to get another.

I looked out to the West. There were several fires. A big explosion – another parachute mine, about a mile away. The Germans had a surplus of naval mines now that the Admiralty had apparently found a way to stop them exploding under ships. Hush-hush, apparently, but William claimed he knew all about it. My husband. A pompous ass who'd fooled me into thinking he would look after me. Well, not any more.

I put on the coat and buttoned it so it wouldn't get in the way if I had to climb down. Made sure my handbag – fortunately a small, rather flat one – was in a good position a bit to the rear of one hip, then gingerly tested the fire escape. It seemed solid enough and I started down. Noises on the other side of the building suggested bits were falling or that there was a fire, or both.

When I got down to the first floor, I saw that the steps were on a hinge. I'd have to move onto them to have them swing down.

Stepping out two steps, nothing happened. I went further. Nothing. When I got out about half way, it was still horizontal. Had it jammed? I went two more steps. Now I was three quarters of the way out. I tried a little hop and there was a grinding noise and the steps moved a few inches. I tried again, and suddenly the steps swung down quite quickly. I gripped the railing for dear life. There must have been some sort of rope or cable that meant the steps did not swing down totally freely, but I still got thrown to the ground, which took the wind out of me.

I was in an alleyway behind the building. Better get out of here fast. There was rubble everywhere and I had to climb over some piles to get round to the street. As I climbed one, I realized I still had my tin hat on. I took it off, found a brick and made a big dent in the crown of the tin helmet, then threw it hard at the second storey of the building on the side of the alley opposite the building I'd been on. The helmet had my name in it.

When I got to the end of the alley and round to the street, some rescue workers were coming to investigate the building I'd been on top of. I pressed myself into a doorway – a broken down doorway because of the blast, but I was in the shadows of the light of a couple of fires, and the rescuers didn't seem to notice me.

“The firewatchers' shelter must've had a direct hit from that land-mine,” one of them said.

“Yes. More likely we can help someone back at number 22,” said another, and they moved away from me up the street.

Keeping to the shadows, I made my way westward. I wanted to find a wrecked building I could claim I was bombed out of. Then I could be Mary Smith rather than the name I'd had from birth.

* * * * *

The mine had exploded around midnight. It was near 1 a.m. when I got to the site of the second parachute mine I'd seen explode. There were some ARP and other workers looking at the crater and ruins of a whole row of buildings.

“It’s a bad one,” someone said. “Jones’ Ironmongers and that newsagent and the greengrocers. Each of them had living quarters above.”

I’d noticed the street name – Hollyhock Road – and there were the numbers of the houses painted on the pavement. That was in case the buildings were down, along with their number plates. Number 39 had a spilled bucket of nails. Must have been Jones’ Ironmongers. I made a note. Two rescue workers were laying out a body and covering it.

“Two more dead still there,” one said to an ARP man.

“Try next door in case someone survived,” was the reply.

Good – well, good for me – as I now had my story. I approached the ARP man and asked “Is there a rest center near hear?”

“Miss, you shouldn’t be out. And you’re cut on the face.”

I hadn’t noticed. Must have been some flying debris. When I looked at my left hand, there were a number of small cuts there too.

“Sorry, I went in a shelter down the road, but that place took a hit, though somehow I got out. Supposed to start working here in the ironmongers tomorrow, and the people running it said I could sleep here for a few nights while I tried to find somewhere to live. I was nearly killed by a bomb just after Christmas. Then a mine went off and I must have been knocked out for a bit, then I came looking for the shop, and it’s gone too.”

These were lies, but plausible ones. And I made my voice slightly hysterical.

“There’s a rest center, if it’s still there, up at the church. About half a mile. Turn right at the end of this road. Good luck. I know you’re probably in shock, but we can’t spare anyone just now to take you.”

As I followed the directions the ARP man had given, I realized I still had my proper identity card in my handbag. I slipped behind the wall of a garden and sat on the ground and got it out. In the moonlight I could see my

name, my real name. I slipped the identity card in my pocket. I took out my Swiss army knife, a valued and useful present from a young admirer when I was in my last year of school, and gently cut the lining of the handbag and got out the new identity card. The address was Lavinia's.

Wedding and engagement rings! I eased them off – good job I could. I slipped them in the lining of my handbag.

Now to get rid of my own card. There was a hut for the ARP up the road, but it looked like the occupants were attending to a damaged house a hundred yards away.

“Anybody here?” I asked loudly. No answer. I poked my head into the doorway. There was a small brazier under a kettle that was steaming gently, with a crude metal chimney to allow smoke to exhaust. I looked over my shoulder, then pushed my identity card into the coals and watched it burn while keeping a weather eye for anyone returning.

Someone saw me and started to come.

“Am I going the right way for the rest center?” I yelled.

“Yes. Just up the road about three hundred yards,” came the reply.

“Thanks! Shall I take your kettle off the fire so it doesn't boil dry?”

“Please. We're rather busy here.”

This gave me an opportunity to check my identity card was fully consumed. I was careful to find a rag to use to pick up the kettle and put it on the ground. Then I quietly left and walked up to the rest center.

* * * * *

There were a lot of people in the church crypt where the rest center had been set up by the WVS. My story of being in a bombing in December and again tonight, and apparently the demise of my new employers, was accepted with a kind but familiar disinterest.

“I’m afraid we’re a bit pressed for accommodation. There may be some bits and pieces of clothing over there with Mrs. Hodges, and do get a cup of tea and a sandwich. Oh. We’d better take a look at your cuts. Mrs. Appleby used to be a nurse and is now in the First Aid.”

I got my cuts cleaned and bandaged. My left cheek had sticky plaster holding a gauze dressing that almost obscured half my face. Good. I would be less recognizable as my old self. They gave me another gas mask when I said mine had been blown away somehow, but they did note the serial number and that it was given to Mary Smith. Gas masks could be used to identify people killed. Probably my old one would serve to declare me dead.

Tea and a sandwich were definitely a boost to my morale. And Mrs. Hodges found me a head scarf and some unmatched but serviceable gloves, which would protect my left hand. Also a pillow case I could use to carry what few things I might acquire. I saw a rather torn men’s shirt without a collar. The cloth was decent quality and the rips were fixable.

“Might I have that?” I asked. “I have a needle and thread in my handbag.”

I didn’t mention a pair of scissors. Small, not much bigger than nail scissors. Designed for fine sewing. Very useful, as was the Swiss army knife.

Mrs. Hodges said “Why not? It needs some work anyway.”

I realized my torch was gone. Must’ve lost it in the blast. After finishing my tea I went to the lavatory where I checked that there were 30 pounds in the lining of the handbag. I had another 20 sewn into my raincoat. All the money was in 1 pound or 10 shilling notes. And I had quite a lot of coin in my small purse and a couple of pockets, about 25 shillings in all. It would last a little while, but I’d need to find a job and a place to live.

I carefully checked what possessions I had. The lining of my small handbag was still open, but wouldn’t show when the flap top was closed. I took a couple of pennies out of my small purse and put them in my trouser pocket – the outer trousers. Ooh. I’d be hot. I thought of taking off the inner

trousers and putting them and the shirt in the pillow case before I left the toilet cubicle. Then I figured I might be waiting a while in a draught and decided to leave them on for now. I had a small notepad and pencil too, and noted 39 Hollyhock Rd. and Jones Ironmongers. I might need to give that information, and getting things right would avoid queries.

I had my needle and thread and scissors. And my Swiss Army knife. Oh. A pair of clean knickers. Always kept a spare pair in my handbag. I had a fairly sturdy blouse and a good pullover, and a raincoat, though the latter was quite disreputable at the moment.

It was now half past three. Not much I could do for a while, or was there? I went back to the lady who seemed to be in charge.

“It’s Miss Smith, isn’t it? Joan I recall.” She had a good memory. Was that a good or bad thing for me.

“Yes, except I’m called Mary, my middle name. Rather common I’m afraid.”

“What can I do for you?”

“You said things were difficult here. I’ve got a little money that somehow stayed with me, enough that I could try to get somewhere that has a better chance of accommodation. And hopefully a new job. Maybe in Oxfordshire or Gloucestershire. I’ve even thought of joining the Land Army. Do you think I should just go there and see?”

“With all this mess from the bombs, what you suggest might be as good as anything. But don’t you have any family?”

I already knew that Joan Smith, as she’d been known, had no known family, and gave this information to the lady as if it were my own. It wasn’t far from the truth. Then I asked how far it was to Paddington Station. I decided to take the first train. Not, however, to the destinations I’d mentioned, but to Taunton in Somerset. I don’t know why that was my choice.

The lady said “It’s a couple of miles. I’ll draw you a map on the back of this label.”

The label was one that had been tied to a bomb victim. There was a smear – probably blood – on the front where there was an "I". Internal injury. Probably didn’t make it.

It was a slow walk to Paddington. I had to detour once or twice and got off track, but luckily stumbled onto Praed Street and found my way, getting there about 5 in the morning. There would apparently be a train at around six. I bought a ticket. Nothing was open. I’d be hungry when I got to Taunton.

* * * * *

Perhaps I should enlighten you on why I’m now Mary Smith. I won’t tell you my real name, but I will say I was born on the day of the Armistice. November 11, 1918. Joan Mary Smith was born December 10, 1917. Her father was already dead, killed at Cambrai that November. In early 1919 her mother and grandmother succumbed to influenza and Joan was looked after by nuns in a Catholic convent of some sort. As far as I know, it wasn’t a formal orphanage. A loose end in my new story, and I didn’t know the name or address of it.

My parents also died in the flu, but my grandmother looked after me until 1930, when she died and I was taken in by a neighbour who had several children under five. Work for bed and board. I stayed there for a year or so until I was 14, then got out and went to work in an office, adding up the wages for workers in a factory. When I was 18, I got to know William. He was a bank clerk, though he made it seem he was the assistant manager. He was 30 then, and convinced me he could look after me, and we got married. Only his mother and an acquaintance of mine from work at the registry office.

More fool me. Before we married, he was very sweet. Trouble was, afterwards he wanted total control of my life, my behaviour, even my thinking. If I didn’t play along, he got nasty. Said I was just a girl and didn’t

understand life. Only a few times violent, but one of those was heard by our neighbour Lavinia Carter. The walls between the houses were thin.

William didn't like me working, but it turned out his tastes outran his wages. He wasn't really a very good bank clerk. I noticed his mental arithmetic was sloppy. After all, I had to do lots of calculations for the wages. Working turned out to be my salvation, because my employers were obliged to provide firewatchers. That's how I came to be on the roof with Sheila. Nice woman. Pity. She had two kiddies. I'd like to be able to send my condolences.

Lavinia and I liked to garden, and we'd converted every bit of space we could to vegetables. Our Victory Garden. William was temporarily excused military service, as he'd spent two years in a sanatorium for TB starting when he was 19. Apparently he might have to serve eventually in the UK in some non-combat role, but for now his status was deferred. Still, his manager – the one he wasn't assistant to – hinted strongly that everyone must do their bit, and he joined the ARP. It suited him to be able to boss people around, but he didn't get to boss any of the other ARP men and women, which vexed him.

In January when I was clearing up the garden for the coming year, Lavinia said "I don't think much of a man who hits his wife."

"How did you know?" I asked.

"Heard you the other night. And it's not just the smacks, is it?"

"No. He wants everything just so, and always how he wants things."

"Have you thought of leaving?"

"He controls all the money, though I've managed to put about 10 pounds aside and hide it. But I think he'd come after me, and if I leave, I want nothing to do with him."

"You could change your name," Lavinia suggested.

“How could I do that? I’d have to get a solicitor and all that, and William would find out.”

“No chance you’re in the family way, is there?”

“William’s mother told me he had mumps when he was about 14. He wants kids, but I don’t think he can.”

“Well, I’ll tell you something, but I’ll only say it once, because this week the doctor told me I’ve a cancer and won’t be long for this world.”

“Oh no! That’s terrible, Lavinia.”

“Don’t fret yourself. I’ve had a good 60 years. Had a good husband, but lost our boy in the Great War. But there’s something I can do for you, and if you’re game, I will.”

I said nothing, but nodded for her to continue. Truthfully, tears were running down my cheeks. I liked Lavinia. She was a good friend.

“You may remember Joan. Came here as a lodger in 1937. Like you, she was an orphan and had been in an orphanage, well, some nuns in a convent looked after her. I don’t think it was really an orphanage. Anyway, you know she came a cropper in that raid December 29. Visiting a friend and took a direct hit. Only a few rags of her clothing, but one bit had a name label.”

“Yes. I remember how ghastly that was.”

“Well, it happens I’ve her birth certificate and a letter of recommendation from a Mrs. Chatterton who had owned a laundry where she’d worked and a couple of other bits and bobs. Even her ration book, but best I don’t mess with that.

Still, you and I could go together and get you a new identity card. Then you can wait for a nice big bomb and arrange to disappear. I looked up the place Joan was killed and found out the name of the girl she was with, Jane Willis. Told neighbours I wanted to know where they were buried so I could

pay my respects. People are less suspicious of old ladies. They're in Brookwood. You know. London Necropolis. Apparently together because the few bits that were found weren't distinguishable."

* * * * *

That's what we did. Told a local National Registration Officer my handbag had been lost in the bomb and two girls killed. I'd decided there'd be a third girl with us. Doris. Imaginary of course.

Lavinia gave me 40 pounds. She said she wasn't going to need it, and indeed by last week, she was looking pretty ill. The doctors said it would be a miracle if she saw the summer this year. That made me terribly sad, but she insisted I told William nothing. We hid the documents and money as I've described above.

As I sat on a bench near the Taunton platform at Paddington, I realized I should let her know I'd escaped. I had a couple of blank postcards pre-stamped in my handbag. The post office had been advertising to use them to let people know you were all right after a raid or other things like that. Or, since there were several deliveries a day, you could post one in the morning if you knew you'd be late for tea.

I only had a pencil. It would have to do. And I didn't want to use my handwriting, so I printed Lavinia's name and address with my left hand. It looked like a child had written it. The message was simple.

THANK YOU

MARY

I saw a pillar box and posted it.

* * * * *

I was lucky enough to get a seat on the Taunton train. And an end seat, though on the corridor rather than the window. Still, I was able to sleep. I kept my coat on, with my handbag under it. Getting robbed now would be the last straw.

There were delays, of course, and I didn't get to Taunton until noon. I was going to go straight to the Labour Exchange and see if I could get a job of some sort. The Land Army wasn't a bad idea, but I doubted I could get in right away. But maybe there were farms needing help who would take me on. It was Spring, and no doubt lots of work needed doing. There'd been some newspaper stories about farm workers joining up and the farmers having trouble finding help. Hence the Womens Land Army, like in the Great War.

For a few minutes I reviewed what I knew, and would have to remember, about Mary Smith – well Joan Smith as was. She'd left the convent at age 15 in early 1933 and had gone to work in Mrs. Chatterton's laundry somewhere in the East End. If anyone asked, I'd say it closed down, which it may have done.

In 1937, Joan took a job in a British Home Stores as a sales assistant. That's when she moved to Mrs. Carter's as a lodger. From what Lavinia told me, she'd apparently had a boyfriend who was missing, believed dead, after Dunkirk. Lavinia told me his name was Leonard, but she wasn't sure of his last name, but might have been Curtiss. I decided he would be Leonard Curtis, and if there were queries, I could say it was often mis-spelled, because it was originally Cortez after a Spanish great-grandfather, or perhaps Curtiss with 2 S's. But I hoped there'd be no questions. I would have to be ready with a flood of tears and "please don't ask ...". In any event, Joan had been rather plain looking and wore spectacles. Fortunately not ugly, since I was considered to be somewhat pretty. But both of us were largely unremarkable, and probably either could pass as the other to a casual onlooker if we were dressed alike and had similar hairdos. Still, I could find some low power glasses to provide a bit of a cover if ever I needed it. However, I was planning to use Mary, not Joan, as the name I'd be called by.

As I got off the train, I realized that I'd forgotten it was Sunday morning. Damn! That would mean I'd have to find a place to stay. And I had no ration book. Being bombed out would explain that. Well, I could perhaps use that story to learn what was available here.

First, however, I needed something to eat, so I went in the railway buffet. I was able to get a cup of tea, beans on toast and a piece of apple pudding with custard. Not very good, but good enough, and I ate it all.

After I'd eaten, it was half past twelve. I came out of the station to try to see where I might go, and spotted a policeman. Someone doing a bunk might normally avoid the police, but I thought that I might as well live out the story I was telling. If I got caught, so be it, but somehow I figured my chances were at least even money. I had real documents, not fake ones, and the identity card application had Lavinia as a witness who claimed to know me.

"Excuse me, but I need to find out where I can get information on somewhere to stay and where to find a job. I was in a bombing in December and again last night, where my room and my employer's place was destroyed. Things were so bad in London with lots of people needing help, I thought I'd get away and try my luck somewhere else."

The policeman's eyes widened. "And you're hurt, Miss."

"Bits of debris from a parachute mine. Mainly grazed, like my hand." I held it up, as it didn't have a bandage, and probably my cheek didn't actually need one either, but it did help disguise me.

"Well, Miss, my guess is that either the WVS or St. James' Women's Institute are your best bets." He lowered his voice, then said, "If you ask me, the Institute women are a lot more friendly. Not all uniforms and protocol if you know what I mean."

"Am I wrong, or is that all you have?" He nodded to my pillowcase.

"Yes, and some of this is from the odds and ends pile at a rest center last night. But I was lucky enough to have my documents and some money with me, but my ration book was with the people who I was just going to start working for and who offered me a bed until I could find something, so it's been blown to kingdom come. Unfortunately, so were they."

I took out a handkerchief from my trouser pocket and pretended to wipe my eyes.

“I heard it was bad last night in London. Anyway, why not get down the church now. There’s a shortcut, but the easiest way is Kingston Road to the crossroads with Staplegrove Rd and North Street. Then North Street to St. James Street.”

“Thank you constable.”

“Not a all, Miss. Good luck to you. And worst case, don’t sleep rough, but come to the police station and we’ll help you find somewhere to doss and give you a cuppa. Someone should be able to direct you there.”

It was about a mile to St. James. I thought of going in the church, then saw the church hall and found the door unlocked. I rather timidly put my head round the door, but there was a sort of vestibule, so I went in then and put my head round the next door and saw a few women sorting some clothes and other household items.

“Can we help you?” said a large middle-aged woman.

“The policeman outside the train station said I might be able to get some information here so I could find accommodation and possibly work. I was almost killed by a bomb in late December, then last night my new place of employment where I was supposed to start Monday – an ironmongery – was bombed too, and they were putting me up for a few days. So my employers and my place to stay both went up. The shelter I was in took some damage too. Things were so frantic at the rest center in London, I thought I’d try starting over somewhere else and I was told that some distant family lived here, though I only know their last name is the same as mine – Smith – which isn’t really that helpful.”

I was babbling a bit, but I thought that was appropriate to my story.

“An’ you’re injured too. Better come in and sit down. We’re still trying to figure out what we can do to help folk, but you’ll at least be safe here, and

we can probably find a place you can kip for the night, and the Labour Exchange will be open tomorrow.”

“I just hope they don’t insist I stay as a salesgirl. I’m hoping to do something outdoors. Even join the Land Army. My neighbour and I had a Victory Garden until”

The large lady who had greeted me said. “My word. Sometimes things work in funny ways. My sister has a smallholding. Grows vegetables and does some hens for eggs and a few rabbits. Her husband joined up and she’s going spare trying to keep things together, and because her place isn’t considered a full farm, she’s probably been put low down the list for a Land Girl. But I think she could hire you, and you’d likely be exempt from the call up.”

“I was supposed to register last month, but things have been pretty chaotic for me since the New Year. I hope I don’t get into trouble for that, but I’m eager to do my bit.”

Perhaps I was laying on the icing a bit thick here, but I thought my character would say something like that.

“Why don’t you come with me after we finish here and we’ll go see Mabel and find out if the two of you might be able to help each other out? I’m Maud Brown by the way.”

“Wonderful,” I said. “And I’m Mary Smith. But can I help you ladies here. My injuries aren’t that bad. You can see my hand. Debris from a parachute mine blast, I think. And perhaps I should take off the sticky plaster they put on at the rest center. It’ll heal faster. I think they thought it looked bad, but it’s more grazed than cut.”

“Jackie – Mrs. Hazelton here – used to be a nurse in the Great War. Let her take a look.”

Mrs. Hazelton said, “Come down the lav, dear. We’ll be able to make sure it’s clean there and wash hands before touching the wound.”

As I suspected, my cheek had been peppered with some debris, probably broken brick or masonry. Jackie, as she insisted I call her, used a wet handkerchief to gently remove a few bits of dirt that remained, and my cheek looked like it had had a fight with a tarmac road, but otherwise wasn't too bad.

I used the toilet before rejoining the ladies and helping them to sort what turned out to be donated things. Maud grabbed one item – a skirt – and asked if I had any skirts.

“No. I don't. When the air-raid siren went, I put on two pairs of trousers. Mens' actually.”

“Then go try this on, smart like.”

I returned to the lavatory and found the skirt plain but serviceable, but I put my outer trousers back on for now, as the buttons on the waistband of the skirt could use a bit of adjustment for my measurements. Returning to the hall, I said “It fits, but I'll need to move the buttons a little. One thing I did have with me was my needle and thread. I keep it in my handbag.”

“Smart girl,” said one of the other women. I could feel a gentle warmth of sisterhood in this group. Maybe I'd join them if I got settled here.

* * * * *

Maud took me to her home, which was on the outskirts of the town. She introduced me to her husband, George, who was working in the garden – a very nice garden too, but being turned to vegetables now. However, we didn't stop. The call at Maud's house was to inform George that Maud was taking me to Mabel's farm. Actually, "farm" was a bit of an exaggeration, since she had only 15 acres, but as we came to the house, it was clear that all the land was being used to produce food.

Maud knocked and the door was answered by a woman whose build was very different from that of her sister. Maud was a large, bosomy woman of middle years. Mabel was thin and wiry, and probably still in her thirties.

“Maud. Didn’t expect to see you today. Thought the knock was someone begging for some eggs or such.”

“Mabel, this is Mary Smith. She’s twice been bombed out in London, including last night, as you can see from her injuries. So she thought she’d try here in Taunton and she’s looking for a job, preferably doing something outdoors. I thought of you, since you’ve been struggling to cope with the farm since Peter left for the Army.”

“Well, Mary Smith, you’d better come in and we’ll see if we suit each other. In case Maud didn’t tell you, the family name is Gaffney.”

We entered into a low-ceilinged kitchen, quite large, and Mabel motioned us to chairs around a generously sized table and set out some teacups. Ah. Another cuppa. There was a big cast-iron range but also a gas stove, and it was the latter that was used for the tea kettle.

“Perhaps tell your story again, Mary,” Maud suggested.

I was getting good at it now, and made sure I didn’t get any contradictions. After I finished my short exposition concerning Mary Smith and her predicament, Mabel said

“I could certainly use help. I’ve asked for a Land Girl, but the Ministry people aren’t quite sure how to categorize my operation, though we produce quite a lot of food, and have done for some years. With Peter gone – he fortunately missed Dunkirk, but they’ve got him training or serving somewhere – I really can’t cope. Oliver is just 12 and he’s quite helpful, but he’s not big enough for some jobs. Delia is only 10. She’s good with collecting the eggs and feeding the chickens. In fact, she does all of that. And Oliver handles all the rabbits and quite a bit of the general chores, so I can’t complain about them. But they did those things when Peter was here. We tried to get a local man to help, but he ... left. So I’m actually quite glad to give you a try.”

“Would you pay at least what the Land Army pays?” I knew that the official rate had been 28 shillings per week, of which half would be deducted for room and board. This was low, and 10 shillings less than for men. On

March 1, the rate had gone up to 32 shillings, and there was overtime after 48 hours per week.

Mabel said, “I can certainly pay the official 16 shillings plus room and board. And assuming we get on and you work the same hours I do, which varies a bit because of what we do, then I could probably suggest a pound if we ignored the fiddle with working out the overtime. To be honest, some weeks it’s a lot more than 48 hours, especially when we have product to harvest, but a lot of the year we’re mainly watching things grow and trying to keep the birds off.”

“Why don’t we try four weeks and make sure we work well together?” I suggested. “I think I could like it here very much, but I’ve not had much sleep for a couple of nights, so my mind isn’t very sharp just now.”

“All right. That’s sensible. Is that all you have?” Mabel asked, nodding at the pillow case.

“Yes. I’ll need a bit of time tomorrow to get a new ration card – mine went up with the ironmongers. And I’ve really only the clothes on my back. Fortunately, I was wearing two pairs of trousers to keep warm.”

As I said this, I realized I was starting to believe my own fabricated story. Well, it seemed to be believed by those to whom I’d told it so far, and I knew that my telling it with confidence was a big part of being believed.

* * * * *

Maud took her leave to attend to Sunday tea. It was now about half-past four.

Mabel said “We’d better figure out where to put you. There’s a box room in addition to the three bedrooms, so we should be able to fit you in.”

“For now I just need a place to sleep.”

Mabel and I moved things around in the boxroom, stacking some old cardboard boxes in a corner and uncovering a cot.

“I’ll get some linen and blankets,” Mabel said. While she was gone, I realized that there was a small window and it looked out over the plots of different crops Mabel had seeded. Two children were walking up a path. As Mabel came back into the room, I said “Are these your two?”

“Indeed they are. They went out foraging for Sorrel and Mallow, but I think really to look for birds’ nests. I’ve told Oliver he mustn’t disturb the birds. Some boys collect the eggs. We need the birds that eat insects. I suppose those who eat the crops he could annoy, but birds like crows are pretty hard to get at.”

We went down and I was introduced. “Call me Mary,” I said. I didn’t want to be Miss Smith. Besides, using Mary would focus on that name, not Joan.

Mabel added a couple of spuds and some bits and pieces to the pot on the stove. “Hope you like rabbit stew. We eat quite a lot of rabbit, as well as some chicken, but the latter is the tired-out hens, so also stewed. Not much good meat on them by the time they’re no longer laying.”

“Daddy used to kill the rabbits,” Delia said, “but now Mommy does it, and she always makes a face.”

“It’s not my favourite job, I’ll agree,” Mabel said. “And I’ll strongly advise against letting any of the beasts become pets. We do have a couple of cats, if they’ll deign to favour us with their presence. And there’s Reggie, a labrador- setter mix. Oliver where is Reggie? Didn’t he go with you?”

Oliver said “Yes, but he turned back after twenty minutes. I’ll whistle for him.” This he did, and there was a bark and a rather motley looking dog came in and trotted up to sniff me, then went and curled up on a rough piece of sacking near the range.

Mabel said “Looks like he thinks you’re OK. Where was he, Ollie?”

“Lying down watching the hens. He does that. Considers them his hens. That’s why he got upset the other night when a fox came sniffing round.”

“Yes. Now it’s getting warmer, maybe we’ll leave him out in his kennel at night. We don’t want the fox getting fat and ruining our egg production.”

I asked “Perhaps Delia can show me where the lavatory is. I’m afraid tea leads to ...”

“Pee!” said Oliver.

“That’s not nice, Oliver,” his mother said, “even if it is technically correct. Delia, show Mary where the lav is, please. By the way, we take baths in the kitchen here.” Indeed, I saw a tin tub on the wall. The range clearly ran on coal. Good. I could see a tap on the side, so it had a way to heat water. But the sink had just a cold tap. In winter, we’d probably stay a bit less clean.

* * * * *

I enjoyed the rabbit stew. There was plenty of it, and wedges of bread to sop up the gravy. Then a pudding with preserved plums and custard. Not very sweet – sugar was starting to get scarce, but tasty and filling. After tea, I pleaded lack of sleep and asked to be forgiven if I just went to bed.

Mabel said “I’ve an old pair of Peter’s pyjamas. He’s not likely to need them soon, if ever. I was saving them just in case, and would turn them to rags if I ran out of those.”

“Oh. Thank you. That is kind. I’ve just about nothing.”

“There’s not enough hot water for a bath, but I can give you a good-sized jug or bucket. If I’m not mistaken, you probably have all sorts of grit in your hair. Perhaps it would be good to at least give a try at washing it so the pillow doesn’t get too dusty.”

“Oh. My apologies. That’s true, and I’d probably wake up all scratchy too. Yes. That would be wonderful.”

Mabel said, “Children, I’m going to ask you to go to bed a bit early so Mary can have some privacy here to wash. You can have the light on to read for

half an hour in bed as a bit of compensation, but you MUST have the blackout drawn if you do.”

“All right, Mommy. Goodnight Mary,” Delia said, and went off to the lavatory, which was outside the back door.

When Delia came back and went upstairs, Oliver followed her lead and went out to the lavatory. They were very well-behaved.

After they’d gone, Mabel asked “Do you want me to pour water over your hair, or can you manage?”

“It’d be easier if you assist. I’m not bashful. Grew up an orphan.”

So I stripped to my bra and panties and Mabel got ready to wash my hair. I’d not undressed since before the firewatching. I was bruised around my ribs. While the parachute mine had undoubtedly caused some of the bruises, I knew a couple were down to William. It was a good reminder of why I was here.

Mabel said “You took a bit of a beating with that bomb.”

“I’ve not undressed since, and somehow hadn’t noticed. Perhaps the shock of it all. Mabel, I’m so grateful for the chance to work with you, and I truly hope I can live up to your needs.”

“I hope so too, Mary. It’s been lonely without Peter. And worrying that he might be in the path of danger. That, and the responsibility for the children and the farm. That’s been more exhausting than the physical work. And that work isn’t trivial, as you’re going to find out, starting in the morning.”

“Well, I’ll be more than ready for my bed tonight, and I’ll give my best to the work.”

“Ooh! You’ve something like tar in your hair.”

I reached up and Mabel was right. I said “Must’ve been melted and thrown about by the bomb, maybe some roof tar, or even from the road. You’ll have

to cut it off. Well, I won't mind. If you cut it short it'll be easier to wash and won't need rollers, which I don't have, anyway."

"Oh. Are you sure? It looks like you have nice hair."

"But I did have to put it up each night. Worst case I have to wait for it to grow out again."

So Mabel cut my hair down to a short bob. It made me look different. Good!

* * * * *

Monday, May 12.

I woke to the sound of birds and for a moment didn't remember where I was. Then I heard the voices of Oliver and Delia. I looked at my watch. I'd taken it off last night, not having bothered to look at it at all since the parachute mine. I'd forgotten to wind it. It was stopped now. Had it been damaged in the blast?

I gently wound the watch and, marvellously, it was still working. I wondered what time it was. I heard a clock sound the three quarters. Was it a quarter to seven? Eight?

A telephone rang and Mabel answered it after a couple of rings.

"Taunton 297 ... Yes Mr. Scranton, I've some radishes and just a few young lettuces.... I agree, not really enough to be worth a trip in the van.... Yes. I'll send them to one of the Taunton greengrocers. They won't go to waste....Yes, I'll call next week with what I have then. Goodbye."

There was a jug of water – cold of course – and a bowl, and a flannel and towel, so I washed my face and underarms. I quickly dressed, putting on my fresh knickers, and one pair of trousers along with the blouse I'd been wearing. I really would have to find some more clothes, and quickly. Still, I felt optimistic. I'd slept well. I didn't have fresh socks. Another item to find. Clothes weren't rationed – yet!

It had taken me only five minutes or so to wash and dress, and I skipped down the stairs and said good morning to the Gaffneys.

“Sleep well?”

“I did. Thank you. Can you tell me what time it is? I forgot to wind my watch, and was worried it was damaged in the blast, but it seems to be working, but I need to set it and check over the next day or two.”

“The clock on the mantle is pretty good. Just coming up on seven. We could put on the wireless if you want a more precise setting at seven.”

“For starters, your clock will serve.”

I set my watch. The children were finishing their porridge, and Mabel passed me a steaming bowl. “There’s some stewed fruit for sweetness, and some milk – we don’t have a cow, so I’ll ask you to be sparing until we get you a ration book. Sometimes I trade some produce for milk with my neighbour, Mrs. Jackson. Thought of getting a cow, but they’re big and milking’s a heavy job. And one that needs doing every day at a regular time, come rain or shine, with no rest for saints nor sinners.”

“I’ll be careful.

Tell me what you want me to do today.”

“Do you know how to weed?”

“I can do that.”

“Then I’ll send you out to the spinach and cabbages. Watch to see if there are any caterpillars or maggots and let me know immediately.”

I’d finished my porridge, and asked Mabel where the cabbage and spinach plots were located. She led me out the door and pointed toward some rectangles of plants. “You’ll find a hoe in the tool closet beyond the lavatory. I’ll come find you when I’m going into town and we can see about a ration book and maybe some clothes for you. Probably just before ten

o'clock. If you get thirsty or need the lav before then, just come back. Otherwise I'll shout a few minutes ahead of when I want to leave."

"Thanks. I'll get to work. Do you want the weeds stacked somewhere?"

"Oh. I should have told you. Take a sack and then empty it into that bin over there. We'll try to persuade the rabbits to eat them, else compost what they won't consume."

I was glad I had a scarf. I tied it round my head. It would keep my hair tidy and out the way, and provide some shelter against the sun or wind. I think I'll look for a hat of some sort.

I managed to fill and empty the sack three times before Mabel yelled "Five minutes!"

* * * * *

Mabel took me to the Municipal Buildings, where it took only a few minutes for me to get a ration book sorted out. There was some fuss about the shilling fee for lost ration book and whether bombed out people had to pay it. I told them not to fuss – they might need to check records if I did – I'd pay the shilling to save the time and bother. Relief showed on the face of the woman helping me.

Mary Smith's identity card gave Lavinia's address. I mentioned to the Registration Officer that I'd just moved to the ironmongers on Saturday so it wasn't yet on my identity card. Mabel's farm address was added. The fuss of bothering with the Hollyhock Road address was a nuisance to avoid. I asked about whether I needed to register for national service, apologizing for not doing so in April due to my trials of being bombed out.

It turned out there was a desk in the same buildings where I could fill in a form for National Service, but the woman clerk there had me note that I was working in agricultural production, and said that I'd be very unlikely to be called up. If I were sent a notice, I could file an appeal here on the grounds my occupation was a listed one.

By a quarter past eleven, we proceeded to clothing shops, particularly second hand ones.

“Mabel, I’ve some savings, and I’ve heard rumours clothing will be rationed, so I think I should get as much as I can now. Particularly, I need to have some smalls, some socks, another pullover, a couple of dresses and another pair of shoes. Possibly a hat to keep rain and sun off.”

“Some Wellingtons would be especially useful,” Mabel added.

Given that Wellies were rubber, and generally worn by men, we didn’t find any available that fitted me, but by one o’clock I had spent about 7 pounds 10 on a range of items that filled the pillow case. I’d had the foresight to bring it with me. I also got a toothbrush, a hair brush and some toothpaste in Boots.

I also found some knitting needles in a second hand store, and a couple of assorted big balls of wool that were apparently from unravelled clothing. All colours and mixed types of wool. But they would do for rough socks.

Mabel said “Are you thinking of heavy socks?”

“You guessed? Yes. And I saw a couple of pairs of Wellingtons in the tool closet that I assume were Peter’s.”

“Of course! Yes, with thick socks you could get away with wearing those if it comes on very mucky. Our land isn’t badly drained. And we might find you some clogs for when it isn’t too bad.”

“Perhaps some ankle boots, though I’ll need to keep them well dubbined.”

“There’s a shoe shop in the next street,” Mabel suggested, and I was able to get a pair of boots. Good job too – as things soon became scarcer, and were rationed after June 1. Later in the year, the points system started, but everything was still hard to find. And expensive.

* * * * *

We walked back to the farm – that was what Mabel called it, so I would too. Along the way, Mabel said “I usually cycle into town. Maybe we can find a bike for you somewhere. It’d save a lot of time.”

I agreed with her in a noncommittal way. A bicycle would be helpful, but I’d need to learn how to ride one, and didn’t feel like admitting that right now. So I said “What do you want me to do this afternoon?”

“Well, I’ve got to finish the washing, hopefully before the kids get home from school. I should probably wash some of those second hand clothes before you wear them, too, even if they won’t be dry before morning.”

“Thanks. That would be appreciated greatly, but it’ll keep you busy. I think that there’s about an hour more on the weeding of the spinach and cabbages. That’ll give you some time to think what you want me to work on after.”

“Yes. Good idea. But we’d better have a bite and a cup of tea first.”

* * * * *

After we’d eaten some bread and cheese and downed our tea, I headed back to the leafy vegetable patch. I was getting more efficient and filled another three sacks with weeds. When I finished, I found Mabel and asked her to come and check my work, which she did.

“You’ve done a great job. Really looks clean. And no slugs or caterpillars?”

“I didn’t see any, and I didn’t notice any slime trails, nor any chewed leaves. But they’re probably about, if my limited gardening experience is any guide, there are always some lurking somewhere.

So what should I do next?”

Mabel said “Since you are here, we might expand the egg and rabbit production. There’s the old cow byre, and we’ve never really used as such it because cows, as I told you, are a lot of work, and work that has to be done on a schedule. But perhaps you could clear out the byre to see what space

we might use. There should easily be room for more chickens. Or more rabbits. Or both or even something else. We sort of just put stuff there now, like our bicycles and all the flats and baskets for shipping product and to hold things we've picked overnight until the cart or van come.

You know, there's Peter's bike, but it's probably too big for you."

"Have you got all the planting done that you plan to do?" I asked, changing the subject.

"There'll be the late crop of runner beans to do. Probably a few other things. And we'll need to replant out the leeks I seeded a while ago."

"I'll go make a start on the byre," I said.

In response, Mabel said "And I'll keep on with the washing and preparing something for our tea. Before dark I should give you a tour around the property, which should give us a better idea of what to do next. I'm afraid I've been more or less reacting to things. Your coming will force me to be more organized."

"I hope I'll be a help and not a nuisance."

I left the kitchen and went to the tool closet first, as I figured I'd need a good broom, a shovel, and a rake. I found these in the closet, but noticed the closet was an untidy pile of different tools. I made a mental note to tidy up. If we put some nails or hooks in the walls of the closet, we could have everything organized so the tools would be easier to find and also to keep them clean and in good shape. No doubt tools would become more difficult to obtain as the War went on. We'd need to look after those we had, and look for some spares if we could find them.

With broom, shovel and rake, I made my way to the byre. It had a double door, with a simple latch on the right hand one that engaged the other. That one had bolts into the floor and the top of the frame. I opened both. Mabel had mentioned there was no electricity, and I hadn't asked about a lamp, so the only light in the byre came through the open main door.

There were a half dozen stalls that occupied one side of the building. On the other side was a wide platform maybe eight feet deep at a height I could stand below. No doubt hay would have been stored above. Below was clearly for storage of whatever else was needed for looking after feeding the animals. There was a channel in the floor in front of the stalls. I'd need to be careful not to trip over it. This was clearly intended for the muck the cows were expected to excrete, and they would be facing into the stalls. I noticed that there were square doors in the wall at the end of each stall at chest height. No doubt they could be opened to let the cows have light and air. It was pretty dark in the byre. I looked for, but did not find, any evidence that electric light might have been there in the past, or even planned. However, there were a number of hooks, my guess for oil lamps. Electric light would likely save a lot of time fiddling about trying to light lamps if we were to be in here at night. On top of the fiddle, we'd have to be careful about the blackout.

That reminded me that I had no torch any more. I made a note in my small notebook to get one, if I could. I was carrying the notebook in my pocket with a pencil stub. Should get another notebook and some pencils, and a pen would be nice. Lots of things were going to be needed to rebuild my life.

Now my eyes were getting accustomed to the gloom, I could see that the square doors in the walls had hinges at the top and bolts in the bottom. There were several on the non-stall side of the byre too. I undid the bolt on one of them and pushed and it swung outward. I went outside and found that I could swing it right up and the bolt would then engage a hole in a block of wood, thereby keeping it open. Having discovered this, I opened all of them. Shall I call them windows?

I had to clamber over some piles of things of all sorts to do this, but having everything open, I could see what I was doing. Now it was clear that the floor was concrete, and seemed in pretty good shape, but now covered in dried mud, straw, sawdust and other bits and pieces.

Noting a set of steep steps at one end of the platform, I decided to work up there first, even though it was fairly dark. Oh, but there was a dormer on this side of the byre, and it had a door, which I also opened. Clearly the

platform was intended for hay and straw, and the door was to allow it to be delivered. With the door open, I could sweep out the platform, which had a solid plank floor. There were piles of rough baskets. Were they bushel baskets?

Somewhere from my school days came back the chant about measures. How did it go? “4 gills is 1 pint, 2 pints is 1 quart, 4 quarts is 1 gallon”. But wasn’t that for liquids. Yes. For dry measure it was “2 pints is 1 quart, 8 quarts is 1 peck, 4 pecks is 1 bushel.” There was something about barrels. Oh, yes, 10 pecks made up a barrel. But that was two and a half bushels. The half would be a nuisance. Better get my mind back to the present.

There were several piles of rough wooden flats, probably for shipping fruits and vegetables. There was also some assorted old lumber up here, all in several messy heaps. Some of it could be useful for building animal cages or chicken runs, but a lot might only be good for kindling.

Before doing more, I returned to the tool closet, as I remembered seeing some heavy work gloves. I didn’t want splinters from the wood. Wearing the gloves I tossed the wood outside, moved the flats and baskets to one side, then swept the other. There was a lot of dust. I moved the flats and baskets to the cleaner area and swept the other half of the loft, as I decided to call it. Before I did the main level, I’d put my scarf around my face. Maybe get some water to damp down the floor, but that could regenerate the mud.

Before I swept the floor, I carried everything that was loose and that I could manage outside into the yard. The weather was fine. I’d need to put the bicycles – which had been in one of the stalls – back inside when I was done, but a lot of things would not come to much harm outside. There were a couple of modest stacks of roof slates. They were heavy! As they were already against the wall, I essentially left them where they were and simply brushed off loose dust, though I did tidy the piles. The slates were stacked on end. Hmm. That would make it easier to take one or two off.

Looking back at the house, I could see at least one place that could use a slate or two. Have to talk to Mabel about that.

There were several ladders along one wall of the non-stall side of the byre. I took them outside and checked their condition. Not bad. But a couple of rungs were a bit loose. A wedge or two, plus a coat of paint or varnish would not be amiss. And it would be sensible to hang them on the wall. It shouldn't be too hard to make some sort of hooks for them.

Why was I thinking about these things? In my whole life, I'd either done domestic work – servant to the woman who took me in after Granny died or at home for William – or else clerical work. Of course I did sew and sometimes knit. But not mechanical things. Perhaps it was the new Mary Smith's inclination.

I saw a small workbench below the 'window' under the platform. It was only 4 feet by 2 and very dusty and piled with odds and ends of flower pots and other things. I'd get the worst of the dirt off it and see later how it might serve us.

There was one wheelbarrow with a tub and one with a flat deck. I put them outside and gave them a quick swish of the broom to get the worst of the dirt off them.

There were some ropes hanging on hooks. I left them there, but wanted to check their condition at some point. If we were going to tackle any roof repairs, I wanted to tie one to the top of a ladder and throw it over the roof so the ladder could be secured. Had I learned about that with the firewatchers?

There was also a platform scale. At the time I didn't know the proper name. This had steel wheels that supported a heavy metal plate about 6 inches above the floor. The plate was probably two feet by three. At one end was a post with a balance at the top that had sliding weights. I wasn't about to try to move this, as it probably weighed at least twice as much as I did. It would, of course, be useful to measure our production. I'd need to ask Mabel about it.

I heard the children's voices. They came from the house and were obviously going to do their chores. The chicken coop was between the house and the byre, and the rabbits were actually in a two storey set of cages on the back

end of the byre. Between the house and the byre was a wide area about two road-widths that constituted a sort of yard, probably 70 yards long. Underneath some dust and dried mud it seemed to have a paved surface. Probably at one time it was busy with farm vehicles and maybe a car.

“Mummy said you were cleaning the byre,” Delia said. “Oh. You have all the doors open.”

“Yes. I thought I’d call the square ones ‘windows’ to avoid confusion with the main door and the one upstairs.”

“Can we help you?” Oliver asked. “There’s lots of things I’ve not seen for ages.”

“Don’t you have to look after chickens and rabbits?” I asked.

“Yes,” came two disappointed voices.

“I’m sure I’ll need some help later, when you’ve finished your chores,” I said as brightly as I could.

I managed to finish the sweeping by the time the children were ready to help. The pile of dirt and debris was a foot and a half high and about five feet long in a long, low pile I’d made at the side of the lane from the house.

“What can we do to help?” Oliver asked.

“I need to put that wood back upstairs,” I said, “but it is pretty splintery. Delia, can you see if there are some more work gloves in the tool closet, or else ask your mother if there are some. I don’t want anyone getting splinters. Oliver. Perhaps you can put the bicycles away in the stalls nearest the door. If possible, see if you can get them propped up so each can be taken out without the others having to be moved. We might want to see about some hooks or other means to keep them organized. Then we can perhaps get them in just one stall and have more space for storage.”

“Dad was always going to try to do that, but then he had to go off to the Army. But I’ll do my best.”

“Call me when you’ve had a little try and we can talk about what might work.”

While Oliver was moving the bikes into the stalls, I sorted some of the lumber, matching up the dimensions so it could be stacked more neatly. Delia came back with two more pairs of gloves.

“Mom says to make sure to bring them back to the house, as these are all we have.”

Delia and I went to look how Oliver was getting on. There were four bicycles, clearly one for each of the Gaffneys. The male pattern largest one would possibly be a challenge for me, though I thought I could make it work if I lowered the saddle to its minimal height and found some bicycle clips. Then I noticed a pair round the crossbar. Good. But I’d have to learn how to ride!

“Mary. It’s easy to put the two big bikes one each side, and my bike could fit in the middle if we put a wooden bar across the stall with a notch for the handlebars. But Delia’s would be in the way.”

“There’s lots of space for now, so just use two stalls. I think we’ll find a way to put all of them in one stall using an idea like that you’ve just suggested. But for now I think we’d better put the other things away in case it rains.”

There was an old door that I’d found and pushed out, and a pair of saw horses. We set these up outside below the door to the "loft", as we had started to call it. Delia passed pieces of wood to Oliver, who stood on the door and passed the wood up to me. It wasn’t very fast, but we established a rhythm and soon had all the decent wood very tidily arranged in a compact portion of the loft. Then we carried the door and saw horses inside and set them up as a form of table.

“That’ll be a help when we have to sort the produce,” Oliver said.

We didn’t have to carry the roofing slates since they were already inside, but we found we could stack them in a corner to use less space. Other

things we put in as tightly as we could so the free space was maximized.

Mabel appeared and expressed satisfaction. “My word! I’d never realized that there’s such a lot of useful space here. We could keep the chicken meal here.”

“But you’d want a metal bin,” I said. “I noticed some rat droppings when I swept.”

“Yes. Dirty things are a menace. And we’d want two bins so we use the meal in the right order and don’t let it go rotten, else one of those nice bins that you load at the top and empty at the bottom. Maybe George – Maud’s husband – can help. He runs an ironmongery.”

“Should you have a lock on the byre? Someone might nick your bikes.”

“I think we have a padlock somewhere. I’ll need to get more keys, though, because each of us will need one, and probably a spare to put on a hook in the house.”

“What should we do with my dirt pile?” I asked.

“Probably we can use it for fill to level out some of the plots, as long as we mix in some manure if we plan to plant. For tonight, leave it there and we’ll think of where to put it later. But I came to say that tea is ready. I made a shepherd’s pie with some mince I got from a neighbour down the road in trade for a couple of rabbits.”

“Shall we quickly put away the ladders and the wheelbarrows and close up?” I asked.

“Children. Take one end of each ladder and take them inside the byre and put them along the wall,” Mabel said.

As they did this – there were three to do – Mabel and I took in the wheelbarrows and put them in a stall, then started to close the windows. Then we closed the main door and all walked back to the house to wash up for tea.

* * * * *

After we'd washed up the dishes, Mabel let the children listen to the wireless while she and I did a tour of the property. It was a bit more than 300 yards by 200 yards, and the house was about 5 yards from the road and about 15 yards from the town edge of the property. It had a good hedgerow at the front, back and town sides, and barbed wire on the remaining one. There was a meadow beyond the wire, but dwellings on the town side. The chickens and the byre were back from the road and away from town, so the "yard" as I thought of it ran at an angle from the house, with the lane-way joining it on the side of the house away from town.

The land was divided up into plots with paths between, some of which had gravel and informal edging to keep them from becoming too muddy. These paths were just wide enough for a wheelbarrow. It was clear that as much of the land was to be used as possible.

"Do you have a plan of the property to manage the crops?" I asked.

"We should have, but we've always just managed – Peter and I – by look and feel. But the Ministry will probably want something more formal. More work for me, and it won't grow any more vegetables. Peter and Oliver did do a sort of map before Peter joined up."

"Maybe I can give it a try. I'm used to fiddly stuff. I ... quite like detail work. At least as long as it's not all the time and that alone."

I almost said I worked with wages there. Joan Smith had worked as a shop girl. I don't know if she was a clerk at all. I'd have to watch myself.

Mabel said "I'll see what paper we have. Should get some for the children anyway before it gets too scarce."

"Yes. I was thinking I need a new notepad. My current one is getting full. And it would be really nice to get a new pen and some ink, as well as a few pencils. Oh. Being bombed out is a lot of work!"

* * * * *

That night, May 12, Taunton had a bomb fall about a couple of miles away. It was apparently from a fleeing German bomber jettisoning its load to escape a night fighter. At least that was the story as we later heard it. How could anyone be sure even though it was a clear moonlit night? Actually, it turned out to be one of the few bombs that fell in the area during the whole War, though at the time, I assumed from my London experience that everywhere was used to regular raids.

Nevertheless, the bang woke all of us up, and we looked out to see if we could see any fire or activity, but despite a full moon, everything was then quiet and after half an hour we went back to bed. I must have been tired from weeding and the work on the byre, because I fell asleep again and was late down to breakfast.

“I didn’t wake you as I figured the bomb had disrupted us,” Mabel said. “As much as I can, I avoid the clock. Our work fills the day, and we might as well get our sleep and not be struggling to wake up as long as we can get everything done.”

“That’ll be a new experience for me. I’ve always had to show up on time for work. But now I’ve no alarm clock, and the idea of sleeping when I need to is attractive. Though don’t think I won’t put in the work.”

“From what I saw yesterday, you’ll not disappoint,” Mabel reassured. At that moment, I realized that I’d been very content in what I’d been doing yesterday. And the organizing and tidying seemed ... natural to me.

Mabel continued “One of my neighbours came by and said the bomb last night was dropped by a German trying to get away from a fighter. Apparently with the moon, people saw it happen. Nobody hurt, but some houses a couple of miles away damaged, and one had a post office so the manager had to stay up to make sure nobody stole stamps or money. Fortunately he lived in above the shop.”

“You’ll forgive me if I consider that rather tame. I’m afraid we got rather hardened to damage in London.”

“Yes. It’s been quiet here. You wouldn’t know there’s a war on most of the time except for the news and the regulations.”

“What do you want done today?” I asked, to get back to the present.

“I think work the plots along the hedgerow behind the house to the back, then come up the next column of plots back again, weeding as you see fit. If you see anything that needs attention, just do it. For instance tying up bean poles. I’ll trust your judgement on how strictly to weed. It’s not worth getting them all. If I think you’re going too much one way or the other I’ll let you know, but if we can, I’d prefer to let you get on with things and not be poking my nose in all the time. But do feel free to ask lots of questions. That’ll probably help me to become more organized. With Peter away, I find there’s too much to think about.”

“I’ve had to work for bosses who hover, so I hope that works out for us.”

“Hmm. A hover-boss. Like a hover-fly. No, I don’t want to be that!”

We both laughed, and made our way outside to work. Mabel headed along the road side of the property. I realized she was going to weed and tidy from the other side of the farm.

* * * * *

Around one o’clock, we found ourselves in adjacent plots and decided to stop for something to eat. As we ate some bread and dripping, Mabel said “You might cycle into town to see about some of the things you mentioned you wanted. I’ll add a list myself.”

“Oh. I should have told you I’d love to cycle, but I never learnt how.”

“Well, I won’t have time to teach you, but the yard here is a pretty safe place to try. The idea is to steer towards the way the bike is falling, though talking about it isn’t really any good. It’s instinctive once you get the hang of it.”

“Can I start with the women’s bike? The cross bar could do an injury.”

“Yes. Do. But pump the tires first. When Oliver gets home, get him to help you. Probably a few short sessions and hopefully you’ll manage all right.”

It turned out that I was up and cycling the yard that very day, but I didn’t have good control of the bicycle and I couldn’t start or stop smoothly. That took me another week of half- to three-quarter-hour sessions. Then I took another couple of days to master the "swing your leg over the saddle" mount for the men’s bicycle, which actually was all right for size for me once we had the saddle down.

Oliver was a great help. He showed me how to pump tires and we had to fix a puncture in the men’s bike, so I learned that skill too. Later, as I was settling down to sleep, I realized I enjoyed working on the bicycles, even though I got dirty hands and had to scrub them afterwards.

But that was in the future. After we’d had our lunch, Mabel said she had some mending to do. I asked if she wanted help, but she said there wasn’t much, so I suggested I’d try to tidy the tool closet.

“Oh. I hadn’t given that much thought, but with two of us, it would make sense to be able to find things quickly. Yes. That’s a good idea.”

“Are there carpentry and other tools about? I thought I’d try to put up some hooks so we could make better use of the walls in the tool closet.”

“Under the stairs, but ... Oh, that’s an even worse disaster. You must think me terribly disorganized.”

“It’s easier for me – nothing much to organize!” I laughed.

Mabel looked serious. “I’m glad you can laugh a bit about it, but really it isn’t all that funny. You might not be here if the bomb you were near had been a bit closer.”

“True, but I’m glad I am here, despite the cause.”

* * * * *

“Mum. You better come look at this. Mary’s done a terrific job of the tools.”

Oliver's excitement gave me a good feeling, and when Mabel came to look, she seemed genuinely shocked. "Oh my! That's wonderful. You've managed to get everything off the floor. That'll keep the metal tools from rusting. And you've oiled them! Where did you get the oil?"

"There was an old turpentine can, but someone had painted "oil" on it. I think it was used motor oil. There was an oil can too, with a pump, but I was fairly certain that was for the bicycles."

"Yes. That's for the bikes and for the sharpening stone. But Peter got the motor oil some years ago for just the purpose you suggest of protecting the tools, then he put it away somewhere and couldn't find it."

"It was in a corner under the stairs. I'll have a go tidying there if you like, but it would be helpful if we could get an electric light rigged so we don't need a lamp. I saw some electrical flex and a fixture and a switch in a box."

"Peter was going to fix up something. I don't suppose you know how to do it?"

"I've seen it done once, but not done it myself. Perhaps I can set it up, but not connect up until we get someone to take a look."

William had got shirty about the lack of light under our own stairs and, despite the fact we rented the house, had had an electrician put in a light. I'd taken time off from work – lied about having a doctor's appointment which got lots of knowing looks from my colleagues who thought I was expecting. I only got to see what the electrician was doing because it was convenient for him to have me hold his electric torch while he did the work.

"George should be capable, or at least he'll know someone who is. Which reminds me. Did you notice if we need any tools? I think we'd better start to look for some before they aren't available."

"I think we can definitely use a new shovel, spade, rake and hoe, and some trowels and small tools if we can get them. The ones you have are serviceable, but new handles, or at least spare handles, would be a good idea. There's room now in the closet for such things. Also some shears for

the hedges – the ones you have need new handles and a good sharpening. You’ve a couple of pairs of secateurs, but I think I’d like to have a pair of my own, which I’ll be happy to pay for so they’re mine no matter if I get called up and can’t stay here. And I think a couple of pruning knives. I think you’re using old kitchen knives.”

“Yes. That’s true. Well, make a list and we’ll see what George can get. We may need to get creative and make or fix. If you see something second-hand you think might work and won’t break the bank, just go ahead and buy it. When there was just Peter and I, we could make do, but having you run back and forth to get tools is clearly wasteful. And I’m pretty sure Joe Short – the man who was working for us – took one or two of the better things. Damned thief!”

I sensed some history, but stuck to the present.

“I noticed there’s a couple of sickles and a scythe. They could use some clean-up, but as far as I recall, there’s practically no mowing to do. You’ve converted just about everything to crops.”

“Yes. Peter said mowing wasn’t something he enjoyed, and grass gave a poor return unless you had livestock. Of course, we do have livestock, just small.”

* * * * *

Later that evening when the children were in bed, I asked Mabel “How do you know how much product you’ve sent to market?”

“Well, for the heavy crops like potatoes and turnips, there’s the platform scale in the byre. We probably should check that it’s working properly.”

“It might be worth finding an old tarpaulin to keep dust and dirt out of it, or even an old sheet or blanket,” I suggested.

“Yes. Keep an eye out.”

“What about things like soft fruit?”

“I’ve a hanging scale with a pan, and there’s also a set of balance scales and weights in one of the kitchen cupboards. But some things are measured by count, like the lettuces, though you’ve got to try to make sure they’re all a reasonable size or you get deductions or returns.”

“Do you measure your production?”

“We should, but truthfully haven’t, except for our receipt book, but I think we’re going to have to now there’s the War Ag Committees. Apparently they can order you what to grow, and if you don’t do well, they can take over your land and give it to someone else.”

“Then we’d better do our sums and show them how productive the farm is. From what I see, there’s hardly a square inch that isn’t growing something.”

“That’s true, but they might say it’s not what’s needed for the War.”

“You don’t seem to be growing anything frivolous. There must be plenty of golf courses and cricket grounds wasting space.”

Mabel laughed, then said “Those have to do with balls, don’t they?”

Then she was quiet. I sensed she wanted to say something, so I kept quiet too.

“Mary, when Peter went away about a year ago to the Army, he arranged that there’d be a farm worker to help with the labour. Unfortunately, at the end of the harvest, when I looked at my sales book, I realized that it was about a third short of the previous year. Turned out Joe Short – a good name for what he did – was sending stuff, and the best of it at that, to some black marketer. When I figured it out, I talked to Maud and George and they talked to the police. It was tough to figure out exactly what Joe was doing, but some of our flats had been marked and turned up in an investigation elsewhere. For a bit of time, I was a suspect, but the local bobbies knew us and put two and two together, but by then Joe had disappeared.”

“So now you’re on your own trying to work the place?”

“Well, I’m hoping you’ll make a difference.”

“So do I. It’ll be a new start for me.” In more ways than one, I thought.

* * * * *

The next Sunday Mabel joined me in going to the Women’s Institute meeting. I got to know the names of some of the ladies, and one of them lent me a pair of knitting needles so I could knit while we discussed other projects. I should have brought mine!

There was going to be a jam making effort at the appropriate time, but sugar and jars had to be organized in advance, and there were forms and regulations. I avoided offering to do anything major, but did volunteer to be a helper for several of the projects. I mentioned I was learning to cycle. Mabel noted how I was very organized, and gave a glowing report of my accomplishments so far.

Tea that day was at Maud’s house, and Oliver and Delia had gone there after Sunday School. We were able to ask George whether there was any success in finding the tools we wanted. On the Wednesday previous, we’d sent Oliver on his bicycle to deliver the list of things we wanted. I’d added a request for an assortment of nails and screws.

George said “We could probably find the items you want, but it occurs to me that I’ve a pile of stuff that has everything you want and maybe more, but got rusted when we had a roof leak back in ’37. We wrote off the stock, but I had it put in a corner and forgot about it until last week, just before you asked. It’ll take some work, and maybe some fiddling about to put on new handles if they’re broken or rotted, but you’re welcome to ’em.”

Mabel said “That’s wonderful, George. Are you sure you don’t want anything for them?”

“Perhaps some ripe tomatoes in due course, or one of your rhubarb crumbles. But you’ll need to work with a wire brush and sand to clean them up, and then likely use a rasp or file to make handles to fit, then rivet the handles. I can show Oliver how to do that if you want.”

“Can I watch too?” I asked. “I’d like to learn, and if the War goes on, women are going to have to do some of those things.”

“S’pose you’re right, Miss Smith – Mary. I’m going to have to start looking for likely girls to help in the shop, as Joe and Billy have both said they’re going to join up.”

“Is Billy old enough?” Mabel asked.

“If ’is Mum consents. I don’t know as she will, but he’s awfully eager to join the Navy. And our Alfred and James are both fitters in the RAF. At least they’re not up in the ’planes, but they had a fairly hot time last year with the Battle of Britain. They were both over 21, though not by too much, and given they were both pretty well trained on engines of all sorts, it was a proper use of their talents.”

“To change the subject to electricity, do you know anyone who could check if we’ve set up a light under the stairs properly?” I said. “We’ve not connected anything, just got things lined up.”

“I’ll come back with you today. If it’s simple, then I can probably say so. If it needs a fancy connection, I’ll see if Burgess can come for a couple of bob and hook things up for you.”

When George came back with us, he said we’d got things in good shape. This was probably down to Peter, who’d got a two pin socket and plug, a switch and a bayonet lamp socket. Mabel remembered he’d said he would wire the socket to the fuse box, which was already under the stairs, then set up the plug to feed the switch and socket. We’d got everything done except the connection to the fuse box. George said the only tricky bit was making sure that there were no loose bits of wire, and one way to do that was to tin the ends of the wire with solder. Oliver said there was a soldering iron, but it was really not for electricals, so we just twisted the multi-strand wire. We got an oil lamp and turned off the main switch, then connected the wire from the socket.

“Dad had some insulated staples,” Oliver said.

“Do you mean these things in this paper packet,” Mabel asked him, but George answered instead.

“Perfect!”

We fastened the socket to the wall, which was wood panelled here, and stapled the wire. Then we fastened the switch and hung the bulb socket from a hook Mabel had already put in place.

“Moment of truth,” George said, and threw the main switch. Nothing happened.

“Try the light switch,” I suggested. Suddenly there was light here.

We turned it off and withdrew from the workspace and extinguished the lantern.

“Thanks George,” Mabel said.

“Well, you did most of the work, I just kept a weather eye out for trouble.”

“That’s still worth a lot.”

“I’ll be off then. Maud likes a bit of a sit with the wireless of a Sunday night, and I must say it’s something I’m getting to appreciate too. Gets me settled for the week unless old Jerry is up to his tricks.”

“Goodnight Uncle George,” Delia said as we saw him off.

“To bed now, you little scoundrels,” Mabel said laughingly and they obliged.

After they’d sorted themselves out, Mabel and I sat by the fireplace – it was warm enough that we hadn’t lit it – and had the Light Program on the wireless. At 9 we tuned in the news.

There wasn’t a lot that caught my attention. There’d been some bombing in the Midlands, but the BBC never gave precise locations. There was some reaction, possibly misleading, about Rudolph Hess’ parachuting into Britain

on May 10. His real mission was likely being kept hush-hush. Somehow it seemed far away.

* * * * *

Monday was much like the previous one. Mabel did laundry and I worked on the plots. There were onions to split and replant. Some tomato plants to take from seeding pots and plant out. For the tomatoes I was impressed how Mabel, or maybe it was Peter or even someone earlier, had chosen a plot with some raspberry and blackcurrants around it which would provide some shelter, and there was even a bit of old dry-stone wall. I wondered how we'd support the plants once the fruit started to come. Strange, I'd never been an outdoor person before. Somehow, I was beginning to feel I didn't want to work indoors again. That might, of course, change if the weather were bad.

At lunch, I asked Mabel directly "How will we support the tomatoes? I've seen people use wire cages, but I'm sure they're too expensive and hard to get now."

"We'll try to get some sticks when trees are pruned, or else from the clump of bamboo, but I try to be sparing with that because it's so useful. And we've some left over from last year. We tie them up with some sisal twine, or sometimes use some twisted straw or bits of wire."

"Oh, yes. I saw some old wooden boxes in the byre with odds and ends. Good job I didn't toss them."

"We should bring the boxes in and try to tidy things so we can find the things we want. Never enough time, of course."

"Perhaps while listening to the wireless of an evening," I suggested.

"Your knitting'll suffer," Mabel laughed.

There was, of course, plenty to keep me busy.

Tuesday we took the wheelbarrows and some rope and got the rusty and broken tools from George's shop. He put in a pair of wire brushes and asked if Mabel had some sand, which she did in a big bin beside the one where I put the weeds for the rabbits. He also asked about oil, and I mentioned the motor oil.

"Good. And I presume you know how to use it?"

"Yes. I think so. When we've got a tool cleaned up, we rub on the oil."

"And don't forget to leave the oily rag spread out and away from anywhere where spontaneous combustion will start a fire."

I didn't know about that, and asked what he meant. Somehow oily rags could oxidize slowly, and if there wasn't good ventilation and cooling, eventually get hot enough to ignite. Worth keeping an eye out for that. We had enough fires at the moment. Apparently the same thing could happen to haystacks if they got wet inside.

We got back to the farm and put the tools on the make-shift table that I'd set up from the old door and the saw horses. As and when I had some time I'd start working on the tools. There was, however, a new pair of secateurs which we put on a hook in the tool closet. And I'd made Mabel smile when I got a pair of leather work gloves and a new pruning knife that I had paid for and said I wanted for myself.

Actually, We didn't do much with the "new" tools, as we called them, except lay them out and agree we'd work on them when we could, likely in the byre on days when the weather told us it wasn't worth getting soaked on the plots. I did move the turpentine can of oil and an old paint tin full of sand out to the byre just in case. But today we were working outside. A bit of weeding. Some replanting. Checking the radishes – a few were ready to try for tea, along with some young lettuces, but not much yet set for harvesting. We decided to pick our sample tomorrow rather than today. We could see some cucumbers were going to set. Root vegetables were showing their tops, but we daren't yet check under the surface in the new plots, but there were some planted late last year that possibly could be pulled.

In the afternoon, I was planting some beans while Mabel sprayed some fruit trees to stop some pest or other. She had a tank with a pump that led to a hose with a long wand at the end. She came by where I was planting and said “You’re doing a nice job there, Mary.”

My plot was by a pond that was near the road. I recalled Mabel saying she and Peter had arranged to have this pond dug in 1939. I asked “Why did you have the pond dug, and why here?”

“After Munich, Peter figured there’d be a war, and out here there’s no fire hydrants. We’ve also had a couple of years where things got a bit dry later in the season, so a pond made sense. We had it dug with a mechanical digger, then got some clay to line it so the water wouldn’t seep away. And we’ve got some of the pathways with tiles underneath, though just a few near the pond. That way rain goes into the pond. If it gets full, you see there’s an overflow into the ditch by the road. And we put it near the road so the firemen could get at it easily if we or our neighbours have a fire. But it’s useful to be able to dip a bucket or the watering can in the pond and not have to go back to the house or the tap in the yard when you need some water for the plants.”

“No ducks?” I asked.

“We’d talked about them, but not got around to it. I’ve seen a few wild ones swim on the pond. Since the plots are close, there’s not good cover for nests.”

I don’t know what mischievous demon pushed me to think of having duck houses, but the idea came into my head, and I said “What if I tried to build a nest house or two for them and we got a few?”

“The pond is there. So why not give it a try. I think the Jenkins have ducks down the road. Might take a look at their arrangements.”

* * * * *

When Mabel went back to spraying – she’d come past me on her way to refill the tank – I thought about how nice it was to be told I was doing a

good job. At my wage clerk's job, I got occasional "thank yous" but rarely a compliment. Mabel, however, made me feel competent and welcome. Not like William. But I was beginning to realize that I was competent at lots of things. And I might be still a danger to myself and others on a bicycle just yet, but soon I'd be able to ride, and ride well. I could feel it in my bones. William's sneers and demeaning comments were unjustified and intended to diminish me, to make me bend to his will. Well, that was over, Mister!

When I finished the beans, I went back to the house and washed up. Tonight I was going to be cook. Mabel said she'd never cooked fish, so I'd said I could do it. I'd got some haddock fillets at a fishmonger. They weren't rationed, though you usually had to queue up and hope for decent fish. With seafarers going into the navy and boats being requisitioned for Dunkirk or patrol use – some trawlers were being used as convoy rescue boats – the fish supply was uncertain. I'd heard talk that the government only rationed things they could ensure would be delivered, and the rest was catch as catch can.

Since fats were on rations, I decided to bake the fillets with a coat of breadcrumbs and herbs. I also put some potatoes in the oven with a bit of milk in a fashion that I'd seen in a magazine recently described as American scalloped potatoes. Not much known in England, but it meant the heat of the oven got used efficiently. I also put in some apples with some porridge oats and a spoon of honey to make a sort of apple crisp. For vegetable, we had some turnip and carrots. Not terribly exciting, but hopefully it would do. Moreover, I packed everything into the oven to cook.

As it turned out, everyone ate all that I put in front of them. There wasn't a huge wave of enthusiasm, but the comments of Mabel and the children were that it was "fine", especially the baked apple crisp. Delia liked the potatoes. Oliver asked why they'd never had fish done this way before, which I took to mean he liked it. I counted that as another vote for the fish.

"It's nice to be able to get something with protein that isn't on rations," Mabel said. "And we're far enough from the center of town that fish and chips aren't really an option for us. I think we can add fish – well haddock anyway – to our meal rota."

“From my perspective, the turnip and carrots were a bit dull,” I said.

Oliver nodded, as did Delia. We’d want to think of livelier vegetables to complement the fish. Pimentoes – would they grow here, and were they even known to the Gaffneys?

* * * * *

The following weekend was a very dismal one as the news of the loss of HMS Hood was announced. So many young men lost. Just three survivors out of a thousand and a half sailors. A few days later, we learned that Bismarck was sunk too. A brutal revenge.

Also on the Sunday, we had a telephone call from Mabel’s parents. Well, the call actually went to Maud, who then telephoned the farm. Just after midnight, a Dornier had dropped a stick of bombs on Mudford Avenue in Yeovil, which apparently was where the parents of the sisters lived. Bombing information was generally hushed up so the Germans wouldn’t know if they’d hit their targets or not, but the gossip mill would share the news locally, even as far away as Taunton was from Yeovil. The Taylors – that was the maiden name of the sisters – were all right, except their house was one of 115 damaged. However, eight houses were completely destroyed in the raid, five people killed and seven injured. Henry Taylor was going to stay in Yeovil to arrange repairs as best he could, but Matilda was going to come to Taunton. Maud said she had room.

The War news affected our mood, but not the pattern of work. Some of the spring produce was coming on now, and we harvested some radishes and lettuces, a bit of early spinach, and dug up some of the "old" swedes. From a lean-to shed behind the chicken coop, Mabel produced some wooden flats of the same type I’d found in the byre and we packed these up. Mr. Jessop, a neighbour with a donkey and cart came by and took these to town. His fee: half a dozen eggs. Jessop apparently had a number of arrangements like this and ate well on zero cash income. He did, of course, get cash for transporting other goods for people all over the Taunton area, and was a local institution. He always had a wave for me, and I always waved back, if I hadn’t waved first.

Produce from the farm apparently went to three Taunton greengrocers and two in Ilminster. One of the Ilminster shops had a van and picked up things in Taunton to take for several Ilminster merchants besides himself. There was not apparently enough business for each to fetch their orders, and it made sense to avoid unnecessary costs. Moreover, the Ministry of Food pushed hard to minimize how far food was transported. Bakers were going to have to get their flour from the nearest mill, for example.

I'd done my first cycle ride off the farm to the Jenkins and had roughly measured the duck houses. From some of the odds and ends of lumber in the byre I fashioned a pair of rather odd-looking but workable huts, which Oliver and I mounted on short posts so their floors would be dry. I made sure there was good drainage of the floors. Ducks would no doubt leave their droppings. Mabel apparently found someone to sell us a pair of Muscovy ducks and a couple of pairs of Call ducks. The latter were apparently good at getting slugs. We wondered if foxes would be a problem, but decided to leave our ducks to range. Once they'd got themselves installed, they seemed to be happy to guard their domain, sometimes noisily. Eventually they had ducklings and increased our livestock and I built a couple more duck houses.

The days came and went. I realized that I'd found a contentment. My muscles might ache sometimes, but my days were peaceful and I found them rewarding, even when it was raining. Quite often Reggie would come near where I was working and lie down and watch me, but not in a suspicious way. I think he liked my company, and I must say, I liked him there. Every so often, I'd give him a pat and his tail would wag. I'd never had any pets, so this interaction with an animal was new to me.

By the end of May, I was riding a bicycle competently, and could swing my leg over the saddle with aplomb. My legs were long enough that I could stand on the balls of my feet and not have the cross bar threatening to sexually molest me. The bicycle gave me an opportunity to explore the area more widely, and I grasped this chance enthusiastically.

On May 31st, Mabel and the children went to see one of Mabel's friends who lived with her family in Ilminster. I decided to go out on my bike – I thought of it as mine now anyway – and explore the area. I locked up the

house and got out my bike from the byre and shut the door. We hadn't done anything yet about getting it a lock too.

Reggie looked at me in a way that suggested he wanted to come with me. Perhaps another time. I didn't want to have him get lost.

“Stay, Reggie. Look after the chickens.”

I didn't really have a destination, and first rode into Taunton and past the station, then out the other side and round some lanes back to the east of town. About half past twelve I found myself outside a very old church – it turned out to be 13th century – in Stoke St. Mary. And round the corner was the Half Moon Inn. Just what I needed, first for a lavatory, then for some refreshment.

Inside it wasn't crowded, as a number of patrons were sitting outside. Though it wasn't that warm, it was dry and the sun was intermittently shining, and that had got me outside on the bike. However, I now wanted to be warm, and I wanted a comfortable chair. I ordered a half pint of cider and a Cornish pasty and found a nice chair that was near a window. There was a bench and table under the window, and the chair was a seeming afterthought, but had a cushioned seat and back on a generous wooden frame.

A voice said “So you found a place to sleep, and perhaps a job.”

The owner of the voice was a sandy-haired man of about my own age, wearing a nice home-knitted pullover.

“I ... don't ...”

“The policeman at the station when you arrived after being bombed out in London. The cheek seems better.”

“Oh. Yes. I didn't recognize you ... ”

“without my uniform. An occupational hazard of the bobby on the beat. A doctor friend of mine made the mistake of saying he didn't recognize a

patient with her clothes on, meaning with her street clothes on. He'd only known her in hospital in her nightdress."

I laughed, then asked "But how did you recognize me?"

"I saw you ride in, then I noticed the repair to your trousers, which somehow I'd put to memory when I saw you at the station. By the way, my name is Jack Morrison."

"Mary. Mary Smith."

"I was talking to the landlord, but he has other customers now. Mind if I join you?"

I nodded. He continued "Let me retrieve my pint. I've been out for a walk to get some air. Had a late shift last night, but did get in six hours of sleep."

It occurred to me that chatting with a policeman could be a risk, given my false identity. On the other hand, getting to know a constable as well as other people in the community would be what Mary Smith should do as someone who planned to be here.

"Tell me how you got on with the WI that Sunday," Jack prompted.

I related my story. I didn't have to tell any lies, and I could enthuse over my work and the dog Reggie and the children and the food. I realized that the details I was including – all of them real – provided substance to the hollow shell that had been me. The gradually filling shell that was now Mary Smith.

Jack said "Mabel Gaffney's had a tough year. There was a fellow named Joe Short supposed to do the heavy work when Peter joined up. George Brown came and had a quiet word that Mabel thought stuff was going missing, and practically the next day we had a message from Bournemouth that some wooden flats for produce were found at a hotel where some wealthy Londoners were doing a bunk from the Blitz, and they were marked as from Gaffneys' farm. Wasn't too hard to put two and two together, but Short had scarpered."

“Yes. Mabel told me. Guess it helped that you’re local, Jack? You didn’t rush in and accuse Mabel, like might happen where people don’t know each other.”

“I’m from Somerset, but my family actually lives over near Wells. Not right in Wells, but sort of like Stoke St. Mary here is to Taunton. It’d be a good deal easier if I was assigned there, but I think the Constabulary likes to avoid having us working where our families live. Even if everything is on the up and up, there can be gossip about the copper letting his nearest and dearest get away with something.”

“So you have lodgings near here?”

“Yes. A Mrs. Green up the road. Widow with grown daughters, so she had a couple of rooms, and two of us bobbies live there. Be nice if she was a better cook. I imagine things aren’t bad with Mrs. Gaffney. They’ve a nice little place there, and should have plenty of fresh veg., and you mentioned chickens and rabbits.”

“Yes. The food is good. But I like Mabel and the children a lot. They’ve made me feel very welcome and a part of the place. I find that more important than the food. But I suppose good food helps.”

“Did you leave anyone behind in London?”

Oops! Did Jack guess about William? No. It was Oh. He’s wondering if there’s a boyfriend. I was about to smile, but realized I should use Joan Smith’s history in case anyone checked. The use of her middle name could be explained away as wanting a new start, but better to keep straight the bits of her history that I could use.

Jack was beginning to look awkward with my silence. I said simply “He didn’t come back from Dunkirk. Missing, believed dead.” My delay in responding was explicable by the what I said.

“Sorry. Rather put my foot in my mouth.”

“No. Don’t be sorry about asking. I’ll accept condolences, but I’m flattered that you asked. And, truthfully, if he’d come back I doubt we’d have continued going out together. I was starting to feel really awkward, because ... well, you know ... I didn’t want to write one of those awful letters when he was at the front. But I did want him as a friend – a long-term friend – even if I wasn’t thinking of a wedding.”

“Yes. It’s not easy to write things like that when someone’s out serving.”

There was a bit of silence, then I said “How about you?”

“Had a couple of girlfriends. Oh. No. Not at the same time.... over in Wells, but nothing serious. I’ve been working to get ahead in the force, and not sure yet where I’m headed. At the moment, I’m registered to get called up, but there’s nobody able to come out of retirement to replace me, so I’m in limbo. Police are needed these days to keep order, especially when there’s damage and scavengers about, trying to loot peoples’ stuff. Feel a bit like a coward here in Taunton, but the bomb the other night at least showed we’re part of the war.”

“Were you there?”

“A few minutes after. There was fortunately nobody hurt though we had to get a kiddie out of a second story bedroom that was all opened up like a doll’s house, with the stairs gone. I was about to go up a ladder when the Fire Brigade arrived, so I was mostly trying to get people who were just gawking to go home and let the poor people whose property was damaged get things a bit organized.”

“That’s the policeman’s job these days, I’d guess. More so than chasing villains.”

“True. Though we know there’s quite a bit of crime – black market, burglaries, some assaults, and the blackout makes a lot of that easier. Even murders are up. You’d think there was enough going on, wouldn’t you?”

“Hadn’t thought about that much.”

“And there’s apparently a lot more domestics, what with the disruption to regular life. Very awkward, as generally the law considers all that private, but some men are savages.”

I bit my tongue. Much as I’d love to dive in, that topic would be off-limits for me.

“I should probably get back. Reggie – the dog – will be wondering where we all are, and we don’t tie him up so he can chase off foxes or other vermin.”

Jack looked flustered. He said “Pity you have to go. I was enjoying our conversation.”

“So was I.” I said. Jack smiled broadly.

“You know there’s Castle Neroche near here – well, easy bike ride though uphill to the site – that was Iron Age then a Norman castle. Perhaps you’d like to ride there one day.”

“That would be nice,” I replied, and genuinely meant it.

“I’ll drop by Gaffneys’ smallholding when I’ve confirmed my work rota and see when we might give it a try, assuming the weather cooperates. And Mr. Hitler.”

I put on my bicycle clips and Jack waved me off. He seemed nice, but then William had seemed nice too. On the other hand, Jack didn’t seem to talk down to me.

It occurred to me that I could enjoy Jack’s company, but what would happen if he got serious? On the one hand, William’s wife was presumed dead. I was a bit curious as to whether a death certificate had been issued. And Mary Smith was, in the technical parlance, a spinster. Perhaps take things slowly. Today was just a chance conversation in a pub. A nice conversation. A nice man. A nice man who might get called up when there was a replacement policeman. Better be careful.

By the time I'd reached the farm, I'd decided that "Leonard" would be a good excuse to accept casual friendship with Jack but avoid getting serious in any hurry. I could give myself time to decide what options were open to me.

* * * * *

It turned out that it wasn't until Midsummer's day – a Saturday – that Jack and I were able to cycle to Castle Neroche. In the meantime, I was busy with both my regular work on the farm and other small adventures.

June 1, as you may know, the government put in rationing of clothes. When we heard that on the wireless, Mabel said "Good thing you bought what you did, Mary. It'll be tricky to get much now without a lot of fuss."

"Yes. I'm very glad I got what I did. And, as you know, I went and got quite a bit of extra from different second hand shops. Mostly boys' or mens' stuff to use for work clothes. In fact, in the way of women's clothing, I've got only my skirt and blouse and that one dress that needs altering. And just one pair of lisle stockings. Don't suppose we'll see any silk or nylon for a bit. And I've got just two brassieres."

"You and I can do without those, given we're not over-buxom," Mabel noted. "And you remember I made you get those boys' vests? Well, besides adding a bit of warmth on a cold day, you can get away with one of those to ... you know ... avoid bouncing around too much."

I laughed. "Yes, good idea. And I'm well set for trousers, with four pairs now. Five if I can get that ripped pair sorted out. And I've a half dozen shirts once I get them fixed and sized. And two good jumpers. That sailing jacket you found all smelly in the back of that jumble shop has cleaned up all right. A bit big on me, but with the tear fixed using the puncture kit, I should be able to be out in the rain and keep myself dry. Though I do need a hat that won't drain down my neck."

"May be worth buying a hat like they're giving the Land Girls. Sort of a cowboy hat with a wide brim. We'll look for one when we go into town. Or you might look for an old men's hat."

* * * * *

There was a bit of rain one night later in the week. In the morning, Mabel said “We’ve got a leak in the roof. Delia’s pointed out a spot on the ceiling.”

After breakfast we went up into the attic. There was a hatch in the ceiling, with a ladder I hadn’t noticed lying along the wall of the upstairs landing that hooked over the sill. There was a partial floor in the attic and we could walk around carefully. Some things were stored up there. Before Mabel brought up the lamp, I poked my head into the space and could see a gap in the slates.

“There are one or two slates over there that have come loose,” I said.

“Bother. While someone can work inside to fasten the wire, the slates need to be pushed into place on the outside, which means going up on a ladder.”

“Let’s take a look about first. No sense in having to get up there more than once,” I said.

As we looked around, I spotted a three foot by four foot frame. It had a backboard, but no picture or glass. I said “Mabel. If we put cardboard in this frame it could be used as a pin-board to put up lists of things we need to do.”

“You’re right, Mary. Let’s bring it down.”

We did, raising clouds of dust in the process. We should have wiped it off first. When we had it in the kitchen, Mabel pointed to a space on a wall away from the range. “I think it’ll go there. We’ll talk over tea how to use it. I’ve an idea that we should ask the children about.”

We’d found just one place where the slates were not in place properly, so I went to the byre and took out the ladders and brought them over to the house.

“Mabel. Several of the rungs in the ladders are a bit loose. I think we need to make them secure.”

“Peter said he meant to put in new wedges. He’d spent some time making some wedges. Oh yes. They’re under the stairs.”

She found a box with some wedges and a can that claimed to be wood glue. I cleaned out the loose rung ends as well as I could and we put some glue in the space where the wedge would go.

“Mabel. I suspect that putting in the wedge too heavily could split the uprights.”

“Yes. Better just tap in the wedge until the rung is solid.”

I tapped very, very gently and got the wedges mostly in. When the glue was truly set, I should file and sand off the extra bits of the wedges. Where did I hear someone talk about doing that? Around the farm it almost seemed like there was a ghost talking in my ear about how to do things.

I remembered the ropes in the byre and went and got the longest one. I asked Mabel to get some twine and an old sock.

“What do you want them for?” she asked.

“If we put some sand in the sock and tie it to the twine we can throw it over the roof, then pull a rope over. One end of the rope can be tied to the top of the ladder and the other secured somewhere on the far side of the house. Then that ladder can lie on the roof more securely.”

“That makes sense, but you’ll also notice that one ladder has a sort of hook arrangement at one end. Like an L with the top rung at the vertex of the L and the arms too long to go beyond the second rung. You push the ladder up with one arm of the L under the ladder. When you get it beyond the top of the roof it drops and the ladder gets hooked on the roof. When you’re done, you push the ladder up, and haul on that string to bring the arm of the L back. Notice the sort of wedge ends of the arm to help it back over the ridge of the roof.

Still, it will be a good idea to secure the ladder up to the roof. And it may help to get the second ladder up there. Peter just carried it up with one hand, but I doubt either of us are strong enough and I'm well, I'm terrified of heights."

It took us three tries to get the sock over the rooftop, but we were soon in business. From somewhere Mabel produced a wooden yoke that fastened across the top of the ladder at a point just above the roofline and would rest on the tiles to spread the weight and avoid pressing on the gutters.

Interesting. Peter must have had to do this before. As I thought this, Mabel said "Peter didn't like having to wait for the builder to come and fix the slates. We've had to do this before, but not in this location."

We laid both ladders down with the bottom ends in position near the house, then one of us kept that end from moving as the other walked the ladder up to the vertical and set it against the house. I'd tied the loose end of a rope to the top of the ladder that was going to lead up to the roof. The other end of the rope was tied to the string we'd tossed over top of the roof. When the ladder was where we wanted it, I gradually pulled the string, then the rope and when it was taught enough, I tied the end of the rope to a metal pipe Mabel drove into the ground at an angle.

Mabel was, as she said, scared of heights, so going up the ladder would be my job. I'm no daredevil, but I made my way up the ladder to roof level, while Mabel steadied the ladder, though the yoke at the top was a big help. We'd positioned the second ladder against the roof beside the ladder to get up to the roof. But once I was up at roof height, how was I going to haul up to ladder to be laid against the slates? I didn't want to let go both hands from the ladder I was on.

Mabel realized the difficulty at the same moment I did.

From my position at the top of the ladder I asked "How did Peter get the other ladder up?"

"I think he just carried it up in one arm, then hooked his other arm round the ladder he was on to slide the roof ladder up one rung at a time."

“I’m sure I’m not strong enough to do that, but I’ve an idea.”

I descended and retrieved the sock and string. Mabel got the sand-filled sock over the roof in one try. She had a good throwing arm.

We tied a rope to the top of the ladder and then walked it to vertical. I was about to send Mabel to the other side of the house to pull to help get the ladder up the roof, when I realized a problem.

“If you are pulling as I lift, it’s going to pull the ladder hard against the gutter and we won’t make progress.”

“Bother! But without some assistance, how are you going to lift the ladder and position it?”

“If we attach the rope to the middle of the ladder, you can pull while I lift it up. We should do about a foot at a time on my shout. When we get the middle of the ladder to the edge of the roof will be a bit tricky as it could come over too fast, so I’ll yell "Easy" and you can just take the weight and I’ll do the manoeuvring. Then when it’s flat on the roof more or less, we can haul and push it up.”

That description probably minimizes the push and shove needed to get the ladder up, but we managed, and I was able to carefully transfer to the roof ladder once it was secure. We made sure both ladders were tied off. I gained a lot of respect for the Auxiliary Fire Service that day.

The actual repair of the slate – one had come adrift and smashed on the yard and had to be replaced with one from the pile in the byre – wasn’t that difficult. We had had the foresight to lean a slate against the roof in the gutter, and I had some copper wire in my pocket. Lying on the roof ladder I pushed the slate into position after looping wire through the holes, and Mabel, who had gone inside the attic, pulled the wire tight and somehow fastened it to slats supporting the tiles. I checked adjacent slates and they seemed all right.

Now I had to get down. I won’t hide the fact that this really terrified me. I eased down to the gutter. I shifted as far as I could on the roof ladder

towards the ladder which would get me down. By now Mabel was at the bottom of that ladder, steadying it and watching me, and telling me where my foot was relative to a rung. Then I very, very carefully moved one hand to the top of the main ladder and then one foot to the highest rung below the gutter. Gently I transferred my weight from one ladder to the other. My foot on the main ladder was, unfortunately, too close to the side to fit my other foot, so I eased the free foot onto the next rung down. It was a bit of a stretch, but then I could adjust my position so I was chest height to the gutter.

I untied the string that was fastened to the L and moved it close to me, in fact, hanging over the edge of the gutter. I didn't want it disappearing out of reach when we shifted the roof ladder.

"Go round and take hold of the rope for the roof ladder," I called out to Mabel, and she disappeared round the side of the house. In a while I heard her call "Ready!"

"I'm going to push up now if you can pull gently."

The roof ladder slid up the roof a foot or so.

Mabel called "I think it's clear. You can try the string now."

"Have you got the weight of the ladder?" I shouted.

"Yes!" came the reply.

I pulled on the string and there was some resistance then I saw the top arm of the L come up.

"Ease off slowly" I yelled.

Mabel eased off rather quicker than I expected. I had to keep tension on the string so the mechanism at the top of the roof would not catch again. However, about three rungs of the ladder went by me quite quickly. Good job I didn't try to grab onto them.

"Sorry!" came the cry from the other side of the house.

“No harm done, but go much slower now please, and stop when I say so.”

Gradually the ladder slipped down. When the midpoint went over the edge I yelled “Stop!”

Then I said “Very slowly please, so I can rotate the ladder.”

An inch or so each second the ladder came further. I grabbed a rung above where the rope was tied and gently pulled it so the ladder was more or less vertical.

“OK, keep going,” I said, keeping a hand now on the nearest side rail of the ladder. It had only about eight feet more to go and touched down smoothly.

“Down!” I yelled. A few seconds later Mabel appeared and pulled the base of the roof ladder out a bit so it was more stable. Then she steadied my ladder and I descended.

“Whooo!” I said. “I hope we don’t have to do that too often.”

“I couldn’t have gone up there,” Mabel said. “I feel a bit of a rotter letting you do it.”

Mabel and I suddenly realized Matilda Taylor was sitting on her raincoat on the grass at the edge of the yard.

“Mother, how long have you been there?”

“About a quarter of an hour, but it’s not a good idea to distract people working on ladders, and Mary was doing well. I know how you hate heights, even at a remove, so I figured I’d best keep quiet.”

“Why don’t you put on the kettle for us?” Mabel suggested and Matilda nodded and went in the house.

I said, “Well, we’re done now. Let’s put things away. By the way, we should put some paint or linseed oil on the ladders. I was afraid I might get some splinters there as we slid the roof ladder down.”

Clearing away didn't take too long. The worst job was pulling out the metal stake. We had to tap it down and side to side to loosen it, then pull it straight out of the hole it was in.

"I'll see if Mother has the tea ready," Mabel said, while I was heading to the byre with the last rope. However, when I got in the kitchen and had washed my hands, I found that there was a glass each as well as a cup on the table.

"Some Scotch. I think you might need it after that. I know I would," Matilda said.

"Thank you Mrs. Taylor, but get a glass yourself and we'll share this."

And that's what we did. The first and only time I've had whisky before noon.

It turned out Matilda had come round to suggest that if it were feasible, she'd prefer to stay at the farm where she could be useful. She didn't know a lot about hardware and paint and tools, so she felt surplus to requirements at the ironmongery. On the other hand, she thought she might be able to cook, wash, clean and generally look after things at the farm. I sensed Maud's hand in this, and not with any ulterior motive to get rid of her mother.

Mabel said, "The bedrooms are now all spoken for unless I move Delia in with me, but I know she is so proud of her room. Perhaps we can ask her."

Matilda said "What about your front room? It's not as if you ever entertain people. The kitchen is where everything happens in this house, and truthfully it's the right place."

Indeed, there were a couple of not-quite-armchair chairs that had cushions, as well as a half-dozen chairs around the large table. It was a very large kitchen, with a good tile floor. Unfortunately, it was also the room where we put the tin tub for our baths, which could be a nuisance. There were some lines strung along the ceiling for drying laundry on a wet day. We should use them to hang some sheets for when we took a bath.

The toilet for the house was outside next to the tool closet. I guessed that not too long ago, there was just a privy and the kitchen didn't have running water, nor gas.

Mabel had been thinking. Then she said "Why don't we give the front room a try. Possibly move an armchair in here and bring in a cot from Maud's place. The kitchen will be a bit more crowded, but we should be able to manage. And you're right that I'd have more time for the farm work. I was near despair before Mary came."

That was news to me, though it made sense now I saw how much work there was. Not that I'd complain. I'd been rather enjoying myself, despite sore muscles.

Matilda said she'd talk to Maud and they'd work out getting her moved over here sometime tomorrow.

* * * * *

At tea, Mabel asked "Oliver, do you remember how you and Daddy measured the farm and drew a map of it on brown wrapping paper."

"Yes. That was two winters ago. Daddy said that he wanted to have all the places we grew things labelled in case we wanted to record production."

I said "That's a good idea." We'd already mentioned this, but I realized Mabel wanted to involve the children.

Mabel responded "Peter thought – thinks – the Ministry will start to judge farms on their productivity. Since he left, I've been too busy to do much about it, but now you're here, we should try. If we don't know how much we produce, it won't look good and we could be told what to do, even if the orders make no sense for our soil and capabilities. For example, on our own we've no way to plough land. We do everything with just spades and sore backs, though sometimes we do get a bit of help from Mr. Jessop's donkey, but just for a few patches."

“Is the map usable?” I asked, but Oliver was already going upstairs. He came back very soon with some folded wrapping paper, much like that the shops used to pack large purchases. When he unfolded it, I realized what Mabel had in mind for the frame we’d brought down.

“See how it’ll fit in that frame, Oliver,” she said.

It would fit nicely, leaving just over a foot to spare on one side.

Mabel continued, “If we put the plan on one side, there’s space to list our planting on sheets pinned to the right, and probably we can record output there too, at least in summary form.”

“That would also be a good way to think about what we should do each day,” I said. “If I got up early, or you were out, I’d have an idea what to work on next, though I think I’m starting to feel my way.”

“Yes. We can do that. Oliver. Do you know if Daddy calculated the area of the different plots that he’s numbered?”

“We did calculate the area in square yards for a few of them. I know how to do it, because Daddy drew the plan at 10 yards to the inch. He said there are ... 4 thousand 8 hundred and 40 square yards per acre.”

“You’ve a good memory,” I said.

“Daddy said a good farmer knows his acres.”

In my mind was the chant about length measure from school. “3 feet make 1 yard, 5 and a half yards make one rod, pole or perch, 4 rods make a chain, 10 chains make a furlong, 8 furlongs make a mile.” Then we had to do the mental arithmetic to get 16 and a half feet in a rod, 66 feet in a chain, 660 feet or 220 yards in a furlong, and 1760 yards or 5280 feet in a mile. Or we’d get a ruler across our knuckles for getting the numbers wrong. And there were the area measures. Later. Later.

“Do you know how much produce to expect from your plots?” I asked.

“Peter probably would,” Mabel replied. “I sort of know the size of the pile of sacks, but that won’t be good enough, though it was what started my suspicions about Joe Short. And we should see if the library can give us averages of hundredweight of crops per acre of different types so we can show – or even know – if we’re efficient.”

“Can I go to the library for you, Mommy?” Delia asked.

“I think that would be a very good idea, Delia. Thank you. I’ll write down some of the ways the yield might be expressed. I think you’ll have to ask the librarian to help.”

In that Delia was not yet 10, I was surprised that within a couple of weeks she had managed to get several pages of figures for how much of different crops an acre of land might be expected to produce. There seemed to be several sources, and they did not always agree, nor did they always use the same units of measure. Still, we now had some sense of what to expect for the majority of the things the farm was growing.

I took a few hours off a few days before Midsummer’s Day and cycled into town to look for a hat. I found a men’s trilby that fitted me. The brim wasn’t perhaps as wide as would be ideal, but the hat fitted and looked rather sporting on me. I later found a colourful chicken feather to tuck in the ribbon. It became part of my daily uniform and kept the sun off my head and partly off my neck.

While I was out, I went in W H Smith and asked if they had any school exercise books. Fortunately they did, and I bought four that had ruled lines and a margin. If clothing had got scarce, so would paper. When I got home, I found a piece of string and tied a pencil to one of them. I made a hole with the tin opener of my Swiss Army knife in the spine of the exercise book so I could tie on the pencil. I labelled the book "Log Book" in ink. There was a set of cupboards in the kitchen near where we had hung the plan of the farm, and it had a sort of counter on the bottom part, then the upper, narrower cupboards and shelves above were for crockery. I put the book on the edge of this counter.

When Mabel came in, she said “What’s this?”

“I thought we should keep a log of what we do each day, how much we pick, sales, and so on. It might be a little untidy, but if we note the plots we work on, we should be able to figure out their productivity. And we’ll be able to check when we last weeded or watered, sprayed and so on.”

Matilda had seen me put the log book on the shelf and nodded her approval.

“It’ll take some discipline,” Mabel said.

“Do you think Delia and Oliver would take charge of checking it daily and getting after us to fill things in?”

“They’d probably love doing that and bossing us around a bit, on top of which Delia seems very enthusiastic about the yields, and Oliver has a lot invested in the plan, since he did it with Peter. I think he’s missing his Dad pretty badly, but doesn’t want to show how upsetting that is for him.” She probably was hiding her own cares too.

Indeed the children were enthusiastic about the log. I cautioned that we should be careful to write as tightly as we could as long as things were complete and readable. After tea, Oliver and I went to the byre and cleaned up the platform scale and the hanging scale. For the latter, Oliver showed me how to use the knob behind the clock-like face to move the pointer to zero before weighing.

“Dad says that’s called taring the scale. It sounds like you’re breaking it apart, but it’s spelled without an E. T A R I N G.”

We tried measuring a few things. The hanging scale would weigh up to 20 lbs. The platform scale went up to 1120 lbs. 10 hundredweight. I stood on it, and found I weighed 9 stone 2 lbs. 128 lbs. That was a half stone more than I did when I lived in London. I was working a lot harder, but I suppose the good food meant I was eating more. Oh. And I did have work clothes and boots on.

Oliver said “You know there’s a set of scales in the kitchen for up to 10 lbs. Mom uses them for cooking sometimes when she needs to follow a recipe, which isn’t very often.”

“I’ve not seen those yet. They must be in a cupboard.”

“Under where we put the log book.”

* * * * *

A few days after our roof adventure – well, my roof adventure – there was a knock on the door just as we were having our tea. With Matilda, I’d made a sort of vegetable pie with a couple of eggs in it to bind the potato, carrot, onion and mushroom together. I’d felt like a half-hour of domesticity was in order after I’d worked since dawn picking and weeding.

We’d just sat down to eat when the knock came.

A woman I recognized as a neighbour, though we’d not yet been introduced, said “I’m afraid Mrs. Ainsworth’s been found dead. Doctor’s there now to fill out the forms with the policeman. Thought you should know.”

Mabel said “Thank you Mrs. Foreman. Let us know if anything has to be done.”

However, Mabel didn’t really get to finish the sentence, as Mrs. Foreman seemed intent on serving the role of the BBC in informing everyone nearby of the news, and had vanished almost like she’d evaporated into the air.

Mabel returned to the table and we finished our pie, then some stewed rhubarb with a bit of suet pudding and custard. While we were eating, Mabel explained that Josephine Ainsworth was well into her eighties and lived in a modest cottage a few doors towards town. There was a daughter somewhere, but she was not a youngster of course.

As we finished the pudding, there was another knock, and I went. It turned out to be Jack, in his uniform. Of course! He was on duty and got the call to Mrs. Ainsworth.

“Hello Mary. Sorry to be a bother, but you’d likely heard courtesy of Mrs. Foreman that Mrs. Ainsworth passed away. It seems of natural causes.

We're going to inform her next of kin, but there's a loose end in that she had a dog, in fact, this fellow here, whose name is Toby."

There was a modest sized terrier at the other end of a leash Jack was holding. In the same hand, he had a paper bag. When he saw me looking, Jack said "Dog biscuits. Toby's barking alerted someone passing by. Mrs. Ainsworth had been dead some hours, and Toby needed some water and food, which I've given him. Well, water and a couple of the dog biscuits. I don't know what he's normally fed."

Mabel had followed me to the door, and said, "Do you want us to look after him until Mrs. Ainsworth's daughter can come?"

"That's what I was about to ask," Jack said.

"It should be all right. Reggie and Toby are familiar with each other. In any event, we'll take him for a couple of days."

"Thank you. I'd better get back and secure the house. Don't want any villains taking stuff. See you next Saturday Mary. Ten o'clock suit?"

"Yes, fine. See you then. Bye."

* * * * *

Mrs. Ainsworth's daughter came by two mornings later. Whether from grief or general nature, she had a sour expression and manner. Before we'd managed to say hello, she launched into "I can't take care of a dog. Can I pay you to take him to a vet and have him put down?"

Mabel gave me a glance, then said "Yes, we can do that. With the vet's fee and getting Toby there and losing time here, shall we say two pounds?"

I stifled a gasp. I liked the little terrier. And he was quite a hunter. I'd gone to get my bike – well, Peter's bike – yesterday, and when I opened the byre door he'd dashed in first. By the time I had the door open and could see inside, he had three rats killed and was lining them up for me to inspect. Now we were going to have him put to sleep. And for money.

Mrs. Ainsworth's daughter – I never got her name – said "A bit steep, but saves me the bother," and pulled two pounds out of her handbag and quickly departed.

As soon as the door was closed, Mabel said "How about a pound each and Toby is your dog?"

"You mean you aren't going to have him put down?"

"Course not. He's a great little fellow, and we can probably find enough bits and bobs of rabbit along with some veg to feed both him and Reggie and the cats. Besides, he can easily earn his keep the way he gets rats. And he's hardly left your side since he got here, so I think no matter what we do, he's decided he belongs to you."

"Thank you Mabel. You had me going there. I never took you to have such a mercenary streak."

"Well, I didn't like her manner. Never a bit of thanks for taking in a lost animal. No mention of her mother. So I figured we might as well get a bit of cash to help look after the little fellow. But between you, me and the bedpost, I'd have put up a bit of a fuss before letting her do away with him."

Matilda was out shopping while this occurred. She'd taken that over, and had managed to sort out her ration book with the shops. Because we had chickens, there was a special allowance for feed, but you didn't get eggs. All very tedious to record, but the rationing did ensure everyone got their share. There were lots of things not on rations, but they often weren't available. The rationed things were pretty well guaranteed unless the shop took a bomb this week, and even then a mobile canteen would usually be sent.

* * * * *

Saturday June 21, 1941

My outing with Jack to Castle Neroche took place on a gorgeous day. Truly it was Midsummer's Day. Warm and no rain. It took us a bit more than half an hour to get to the base of the "castle".

"But where's the castle?" I asked.

"Oh. You mean the walls and battlements. There aren't any. Just the pattern of the structure in the ground. The Iron Age hill fort was a series of concentric ditches on the hill, and trees cover a good bit of that now. We'll climb up there. Let's lock up our bikes and climb up."

"Afraid I don't have a lock. I should get one. In fact, this is Peter's bike. I suspect the Gaffneys never ride anywhere where they leave the bicycle around where someone is likely to nick it."

"I'll watch for a lock for you too. But I've a good chain, so we'll put them either side of this tree and pass the chain through both frames."

We did this. I'd packed some sandwiches and a bottle of lemonade in my trusty pillowcase, which I brought along. There was a fairly large square basket in front of the handlebars. A bit odd on a men's bike, but useful. Probably used for delivering small quantities of produce.

"But what about the Norman castle?" I asked when we started walking up a woodland path.

"It was rather early Norman, and a motte and bailey castle. That means they built a steep little hill and put a fortified wooden structure on top. That's the motte. The bailey was an enclosed and somewhat fortified enclosure at the bottom of that small hill. However, here I think the whole thing was on top of this quite substantial hill, which has these interesting ditches like the one going off either side of us now."

"So there's nothing to see much of a castle, then?" I asked, rather ignorantly, since the massive ditches and mounds were causing us to be out of breath.

“No, nothing of the structures, just the earthworks. And, of course, we’ll get a great view from the top, and there’s these wonderful woods.”

“And the bluebells,” I added. “Where I grew up, we didn’t have anything like that.”

“Where did you grow up?” Jack asked, and I’m sure it was asked innocently, but alarm bells rang in my head.

I knew I had to fall back on my story, so said. “After my mother and grandmother died, as I understand of the ’flu, some Catholic nuns took me in. It wasn’t a regular orphanage, just me and another girl in a similar situation. I think the wave of deaths in 1919 had the authorities in a muddle, and the nuns, as far as I can make out, developed an affection for the two of us and never pushed for anything formal to be done. Perhaps they hoped we’d join their order, but I’m rather pleased that they didn’t try to pull us in that direction.”

“It must’ve been an odd childhood.”

“I suppose, but the nuns were motherly to us. Just that there weren’t many chances to see things outside the neighbourhood, and even there we were kept quite protected in the convent, which was really just a large house.”

Here I was inventing a bit, but I had seen such a house where some Ursuline’s lived near where I lived with my real Granny.

“No walks in the woods, then?”

I laughed. “What woods? Maybe a few trees in a park, and parks were a bit rare in the neighbourhood too.”

“So bluebells are a novelty?” Jack asked.

“Yes. I probably have only seen them once before except in pictures, and I can’t remember where that was, but it was after I went out to work.”

Mercifully, Jack changed the subject. “You seem to be enjoying the farm. That’s good. The War means lots of people doing things that aren’t much to

their liking.”

“I’ve been as happy with the Gaffneys as I’ve ever been. I just hope the call-up that we had to register for doesn’t send me somewhere I don’t like. I’d rather stay put.”

“Doesn’t the farm need your labour?”

“Yes. But I think Mabel is worried that the War Ag Committee will try to let someone take over and make big fields for some crop or other.”

“They’d be idiots to do that. That place is generating a lot of food, and for a while with just a woman and two kiddies. With you there, it should do better, and the way it’s laid out, they’d have to do quite a lot of work. The Gaffneys laid out lots of paths and ditches. The ditches mean they’d have to fill in ground, and the paths that I’ve seen are gravel – they’d have to be dug out and they aren’t wide enough to be useful for a tractor.”

“You seem to know a lot about things like that, Jack.”

“Couple of my uncles farm, and I used to help out – or maybe get in the way having fun – when I was younger. My parents have a greengrocery, so I know good produce when I see it.”

“Until I started a Victory Garden with my landlady a lot of things were just something in the shops.”

As I said this, I realized Joan Smith had only been with Lavinia from 1937, and I’d no idea where she’d lived before that. Better not say too much, but start thinking of what she might have done for accommodation.

“What a wonderful view!” I said, seeing an opportunity to change the subject.

Indeed there was a splendid panorama from the top of the hill. We spent some time bumbling around the bumps and dips in the ground that were the vestiges of the old forts. Several times we’d come out of the trees to a new landscape laid out below us. We found a log that had been flattened on one

side to serve as a bench and I pulled out the sandwiches I'd made. Jack had a couple of bottles of cider and had some currant buns for afters. It was a nice picnic. I'd not had such a pleasant time with a man since ... well, ever.

We met several groups of people walking. Most had dogs. We exchanged pleasantries and talked about the dogs and the weather.

"I should have brought Toby," I said.

"Are you going to keep him?"

I related how Mabel had extracted two pounds from Mrs. Ainsworth's daughter, at the end realizing it would reflect badly on Mabel, and might even be fraudulent.

"Oh! I shouldn't have told a policeman how we got two pounds under false pretences."

"Don't worry. I had a session with that lady. Don't blame Mabel at all, and Toby's a nice fellow. Good for you and Mabel, I say. You didn't take the money at knife point, and I'll bet Toby costs you a lot more than two pounds over his lifetime."

"True. But he may earn his keep by the way he catches rats."

This led to relating how I'd learned about Toby's abilities. Jack said there were probably people who'd pay to have Toby brought round to reduce the vermin population. Possibly not pay in money, but some form of exchange of services or goods.

"We could've done with someone good at fixing roof slates," I said.

This led to telling about the roofing adventure, and included lots of details of how we'd done things and how I'd been the one up the ladder. Jack seemed impressed, almost worried about me. Anyway, I didn't have to talk about my past. My fictional past.

And I got to talk about Matilda staying in the front room.

* * * * *

We came back about three in the afternoon and I gave Jack a cup of tea and some rhubarb cake Mabel, Matilda and I had made the other night. Mabel joined us, and the children wolfed down a piece of cake and some orange squash then rushed off outside. Matilda was over at Maud's.

Somehow I felt awkward, because it felt like I should ask Jack to stay for tea. However, there wasn't going to be enough to fill all our plates. I needn't have worried, as Jack got up and said "I'd better get home to my digs. Mrs. Green feeds us pretty well given the rationing, and I've been asked to come in for a shift this evening from six to midnight."

I walked Jack outside.

"Thanks for today," I said. "It's been one of the nicest outings I've ever had."

"It was a pretty simple outing, but I'll agree it was very enjoyable. I hope we get to do others like it, assuming you'll put up with me."

"Go on with you! And take care of yourself."

Jack yelled goodbye as he mounted his bicycle and pedalled away.

* * * * *

After Jack left, I decided I could do some light work in the plots. Nothing remarkable, just picking out a few weeds, straightening up some crooked stems, adding a string or a stick to support some plants, watering a few newly transplanted tomatoes. Mostly, I suppose, it was surveying what was there. I returned just as Mabel was dishing up some rabbit stew with dumplings. We had that quite frequently, given that it didn't require rationed meat, but I didn't mind. Mabel was careful that we got some variety day by day. Matilda was still out.

Mabel said "You and Jack seem to have hit it off."

“Yes, I like him. But I’m not sure I’m ready for a boyfriend. Last year at this time was Dunkirk and”

I deliberately trailed off. Didn’t put on the waterworks or anything, just let the sentence stop in mid stream.

Mabel filled in “Sorry. Yes. Takes a while. And the fellow you knew was declared missing.”

“I’m pretty sure he’s dead, unfortunately. Don’t have any particular reason to believe that. Just a feeling, but a solid feeling. So I could take up with Jack if I felt like it, but I’m not sure I do. Jack probably deserves better than that. Well, he’s not asked for more than a bit of an outing and a picnic, and I’d like to do that, but perhaps not too frequently while I work out what’s flying around in my head.”

“Better to be slow than get all involved then have to break it off. But if I’m any judge of things, you’ll do best to tell Jack straight how you feel. Then he can make up his own mind if he’s willing to hang around or go elsewhere, though you may regret the latter.”

“Possibly. Though I’d rather I had to grind my teeth in regret than that I did Jack a disservice because I led him on then tossed a bucket of cold water on everything.”

“Good for you, Mary. A lot of girls are selfish and don’t give a toss how a man cares about them. If my Peter’s any guide, men are a lot softer than they make out. Just can’t seem to talk about it, of course. Silly buggers. Make life a lot easier if they’d just say how they feel.”

I answered “Jack also said he’s probably going to be called up when they find someone to be one of the local bobbies. So circumstances may change anyway.”

“It seems they do that a lot in wartime.”

* * * * *

After tea, I went up to my room. Said I was going to have a lie down and maybe an early night. Toby came too. We'd found a bit of old rag carpet that was his bed in the corner when he decided to sleep indoors. About half the time he'd lie down next to the kennel Reggie had that allowed the dogs to watch the chicken coop. I'd fixed a bit of an extension to the kennel made from a scrap of torn tarpaulin that gave a bit of shelter. Really just a roof and side tacked onto the kennel. The dogs then could both lie down and not get wet, but still look out.

It occurred to me how much William hated dogs. That made me smile, and Toby must have noticed, because he gave a quiet woof and his tail wagged furiously.

I didn't actually lie down. I'd realized today that I needed to get my story as tight as I could. I'd managed to get a new notepad, as well as a cheap fountain pen and some ink, along with a few pencils. That was even before I bought the exercise books to keep our log. What I wanted to do was write down "my" history, that is, how I would relate the life of Mary Smith. However, having it all written down might seem a bit strange if someone found my notes.

This was a dilemma. I really wanted a set of notes to keep me on track. Could I put them in some sort of code? Yes. But then discovery might have me under suspicion as an enemy agent. Well, it wouldn't be out of line for Mary Smith to have a collection of documents like her birth certificate and other things.

Mabel had a drawer where she kept used envelopes and other paper, and I'd begged a few sheets of paper and a couple of envelopes. An envelope from an old Christmas card was big enough for my birth certificate and other things. I decided to add some notes. The first I wrote was Lavinia's name and address. Below I added June 1937 - May '41, then tore this off the sheet so I could organize it separately. I could explain such a slip of paper as an aide-memoire in case I had to get a new identity card. After all, I'd had two encounters with Mr. Hitler's bombs.

I added a slip for the address of the friend with whom the real Joan Mary Smith had been blown to pieces. Then there was the address of Jones'

Ironmongers, but I'd not got around to putting that on the identity card. I wondered if Lavinia was still alive. Now my identity card used the address here at Gaffneys' farm. I prepared slips for each, and put in the names. Again, I could say this was in case of another bomb blast.

The rest centre? I didn't remember the address, but it wasn't far from 39 Hollyhock Road. Mrs. Hodges had been the lady who ran the odds and sods collection, and Mrs. Appleby had tended to my injuries. I made a slip for the rest centre.

The more difficult bits were earlier. I had an address in Walthamstow on my birth certificate. I didn't know my grandmother's name. Hmm. I was now thinking "my", which I suppose was to be desired. I'd make fewer mistakes if I acted like my story was real. If I believed my own mix of the external truths and fictional inventions I would be less likely to get caught out.

I took the rest of the piece of paper – it was already written on one side – and in pencil wrote 'Draft list of key dates and people in case of bomb'. Given that I was supposed to be a double victim of bombing, I could justify wanting such a list in case of another one.

From the birth certificate, I wrote down my birth date – December 10, 1917 – along with the name of my mother, Beryl Smith, nee Corwen, and my father, listed as Gerald, with a notation. 'Deceased, Cambrai about 25 November 1917.

Lavinia had given me two death certificates. Both used the same Walthamstow address, and named Beryl and her mother Anne Corwen, maiden name unknown, and 'Spanish flu' and the dates of January 10 and 11, 1919.

The location of the convent, or at least the residence, of the nuns who took me in wasn't on any of the few slips of paper in the collection I'd been given. But I vaguely recalled a discussion in the wages office where I'd worked, but of course Joan hadn't, where it was mentioned that death certificates had to be requested, and they were simply transcriptions from the death register for the "parish" or local administrative area. Someone – would it be the nuns – had taken the trouble to do that.

Then I took another look at the death certificates, and saw that the "informant" was listed as "Sr. Theresa Goodwin" and there was an address. Excellent. Now I had the name of one of my surrogate mothers. And I could probably be safe assuming the address was the house where they lived. Should I risk inventing a Sister Mary as another, and say that Sisters Theresa and Mary were the two who mainly looked after me? It was, if I needed it, a plausible expansion of the real details, but I would avoid using Sister Mary unless it seemed necessary to give some substance to my biography. I expanded my list.

There was a thin rent book. Oh. It was for the room Lavinia rented to "me". October 8, 1937 - May 4, 1940. I knew the name of the girl who died with Joan – Jane Willis – and I assumed she'd lived in the address which was destroyed in the bomb. As an invention, I'd already thought to use another girl called Doris who was with us on December 29 when we got blown up. Of course, it wouldn't take a Sherlock Holmes to go to British Home Stores and ask some awkward questions. I'd better try to come up with some sort of narrative.

I realized that blast did strange things. There were tales of people found stark naked with otherwise no apparent injuries. Mary Smith could have been blown clear, but concussion was common. She could easily have been floating around a rest centre or hospital for a few days. Lavinia would have had someone from the ARP or council office round to inform her that Mary Smith had perished. Then somehow, and in a confused state, I was brought or else showed up, and Lavinia took care of me.

Why didn't I go back to work? Because I couldn't face seeing other people? Because I was still shaken up for a couple of months. If need be, that would be a plausible narrative. I made a slip and pencilled in very abbreviated comments.

There were a couple of wage stubs. They gave the address of the British Home Stores. One was from October 1937, and I decided it was likely Joan's first wages from there. There was another from May 1940, with a larger amount. A promotion? I made a note of that – it was plausible given the timing. I wondered if there were still wages owing to her estate. Well, not likely to be collected.

Looking more closely at the wage stubs, I saw that they were signed V. Moore. Well, I could perhaps stretch that into something, but it wouldn't withstand a check on the actual people in the shop.

A small sheet of onion-skin paper was folded up with the death certificates. It was a short letter.

May 3, 1940

Dear Joan,

I got your letter. Good for you to get a promotion to senior salesgirl.

Where I am we're keeping fit and enjoying some milder weather. Can't say where, of course.

Do hope you are well and enjoying life as much as you can.

Cheerio for now,

Len

Couldn't call that a love letter, but it confirmed the promotion. Still, "I" had kept it, so Len was at least enough of a friend to be worth remembering. I had no idea of his family or what he was like. There was no address, nor a surname for Len.

Concerning the laundry where "I" had worked, I'd only a letter of recommendation.

July 31, 1937

To whom it may concern:

Joan Smith worked for me in my laundry from Monday February 13, 1933, until last week. I have, due to age and infirmity, had to retire. I can state that Miss Smith has always been a good worker, and she has my best wishes for her future.

Sincerely,

Eleanor Chatterton (Mrs.)

There was no address. It could have been written by Joan herself.

I checked the entries on my draft list for the things I knew or suspected regarding the laundry, British Home Stores, Len and my encounters with German bombs. A thin account. I folded it and put it in the lining of my handbag, and put a couple of tack stitches to close the opening. My envelope of documents I put in a pocket of the handbag. Those were now my "real" past.

* * * * *

By Sunday night it was clear the Germans had attacked Russia. Well, the Soviet Union as it was now called. We were fairly busy, despite it was Sunday, as crops were ready to harvest. I still made a short appearance at the WI meeting, but mainly to say hello and help sort out the timing for making strawberry jam.

The farm would supply the strawberries, which were coming along well, but the WI would also supply women and children to help harvest. We planned – and crossed our fingers that the weather would cooperate – to harvest and jam the following Sunday.

Since Midsummer was yesterday, it was light until late, so we worked hard and took off a lot of vegetables before we literally fell into bed.

* * * * *

We had a little over a fifth of an acre dedicated to strawberries. They were in three plots, and each apparently had a different variety, though Mabel told me the main reason for separate plots was to minimize the risk of plant disease wiping out the entire crop. This year, however, we were spared that horror.

Up to the time of the WI jam-making session, we'd picked about 300 lbs. of strawberries. They were in demand. Indeed, Mabel said that the previous year, that was the crop of which she thought Joe Short diverted the largest

proportion. This year, we'd see what the farm could produce. An average rate of production, according to the yield figures Delia had brought home, would see us pick about a ton – a long ton or 2240 lbs – of the fruit.

On the 29th, some of the WI members showed up at first light to start picking, and I was among them, though I also picked some of our other produce that was ready, and Oliver helped me. Mabel was in charge at the byre, where we were sorting and weighing, largely with the balance scales, since strawberries don't like being crowded or then get bruised.

One of the ladies of the WI worked with Mabel there, sorting the fruit. The arrangement was that the WI would get half the strawberries in exchange for picking them, with me in charge of suggesting where the picking should take place. However, jam did not need perfect fruit, so the prime berries were put into flats, weighed, and set aside in the byre. They would be collected late in the day to be offered for sale tomorrow morning in the shops. There was, of course, a bit of diversion into staff mouths. After all, we had to keep a check on the quality! On the whole, however, the WI ladies were very conscientious.

The other fruit – extra ripe, bruised, or mis-shapen – was weighed and sent to the kitchen for washing and hulling. Matilda was in charge there, and yesterday the sugar had been delivered and stored in the front room where she slept with it. Probably a good idea, given that the black marketers would gleefully steal it. Also on Saturday, a team of WI women had come and washed a huge collection of jars, which were set out on every free surface on trays or racks that had been borrowed from wherever they could be found. These would be sterilized in one or other of the ovens of the range, and coal had been set ready to keep that hot on Sunday.

Also brought in were the large cauldrons in which the jam would be cooked. Someone had also made sure we had pectin. There was a box of rubber rings to seal the jars. We were ready to make jam.

Most of the early crew left mid-morning to get home to change for church. I had decided with the Gaffneys to forgo church today. During the couple of hours between half-past nine and mid-day, I continued picking with the

children, but I insisted we take breaks every half hour to conserve our energy.

Around noon, a wave of women and some children who were capable of picking came to the plots, and there was a basket with a lunch of meat pies for myself and the children that somebody had been asked to bring us, along with some lemonade. With this crew of nearly 20, the pace of picking increased, and Oliver and I now spent our time showing our crew where to pick next to avoid having them pick the under-ripe berries or get in each other's way. Delia became a messenger to keep the pickers, the sorters and jam-makers informed of our joint progress. A couple of the stronger women had been using the wheelbarrows to move the berries from the plots to the byre and bring us fresh containers.

At about half-past three, I realized we had just about exhausted the ripe fruit, and Oliver agreed, so we declared a halt to picking and rather stiffly made our way to the house. In the yard, we found a couple of the husbands who were beyond military age had brought food for a picnic tea and had set up a couple of naphtha camp stoves and had kettles steaming on each. Food was set out on some folding tables that had appeared from somewhere, and most of the chairs from the house were brought out, though a number of folded sacks were set down on the ground to sit on.

At four o' clock, a half hour break was declared and two of the men volunteered to mind the pots so everyone else could enjoy a meal. The weather wasn't as fine as the previous week, but it was dry and mild enough to be comfortable outside.

One of the ladies – I didn't know all their names yet – called out “How many berries did we pick, Mabel?”

Mabel looked at a sheet of paper she had on a clip-board. Where had that come from? Then she said “We weighed a total of 1092 lbs of fruit, give or take a few ounces. I sent 550 lbs to the kitchen.”

A cheer went up from the assembled group in the yard.

Mabel asked, to nobody in particular, “How is the jam coming?”

Maud replied “We’ve used a pound of sugar to each two of fruit, and we’ll have about 800 jars of a pound of jam each. It’s fortunate that we ordered 6 gross of jars and three hundredweight of sugar. Whatever is left over we’ll use later in the summer, but there won’t be a huge surplus, which would be embarrassing and likely get us in trouble with the Ministry people.”

One of the other pickers asked “How many jars are filled already?”

Maud answered “About half, and the pots have half the rest of the fruit almost done, and the remainder is already heating. We’ll be done by around six and cleared away by seven.”

That’s pretty well what happened. Matilda shrewdly insisted that we clean all the spoons and plates on which we’d rested them by putting them in one of our large saucepans with the smallest amount of water possible. That way we got a rather thin strawberry syrup that we left on the back of the range overnight to evaporate down. It was still very thin, but usable to provide some sweetness in desserts for a few days. We weren’t going to waste a thing.

On the Tuesday night, a small group of women would come back to stick on labels that we had managed to get printed. A leap of faith had led to a large number of labels being printed with just our WI name and a box where the nature of the product and date would be entered. One of the ladies had a son who had a John Bull Printing outfit. The young lad did a good job of making up

STRAWBERRY JAM

JUNE 1941

but another lady had ‘borrowed’ an inking pad from her husband’s office, since it worked much better than the one supplied with the printing outfit. Apparently the inking pads in the kits were never very good.

We were hoping and intending to make other jams and similar products later, so avoiding specifics as to content and date on the labels seemed a good idea. Let’s hope we are right.

* * * * *

June 30, Monday, 1941

We decided to sleep in the next morning, that is, a half hour more in bed. Farms don't let you stay longer. We had a cup of tea and some bread and jam – there was a little that wouldn't fill a jar and was in a small bowl – and rushed to get the latest crops harvested. The van from Ilminster came for the strawberries and the other things I'd managed, with the help of Oliver, to harvest yesterday and, in a bit of a hurry, this morning. The children were off to school by then. A couple more weeks until summer holidays. Then Mr. Jessop came and took the Taunton deliveries. Finally, around ten o'clock, we took a break and Matilda presented us with mushrooms on toast. They certainly tasted wonderful.

Sadly, just as we finished, the telephone rang. Mabel answered it, and I heard her say "Oh no! How awful."

She said nothing for a bit, then very deliberately said "All right, I'll tell her, and we'll come to your place and figure out what to do."

When she came back to the kitchen she was crying. She went over to Matilda who was sitting at the table and put her arms round her.

"It's Dad. Someone came round to help repair the bomb damage and found him sitting in his armchair."

Matilda asked, very flatly, "Is he dead?"

"Yes. The doctor who came said it looked like a heart attack."

Matilda said "Dr. Waterfield had said he should watch out. He had a bit of a spell a year ago. We didn't tell you, as we didn't want you to worry."

Both women were crying quietly. Mabel said "Maud asked us to come to her, and we'll decide what to do."

I said "I can probably manage here. I think I know most of what needs to be done."

Mabel just nodded her assent, and then she and Matilda got ready to leave. Reggie watched them cautiously. He sensed something had happened. Funny dog. Toby, on the other hand, stuck close to me.

* * * * *

As I was on my own, I locked the house before I went back to the plots.

Jack had mentioned crime was up. I'd initially taken to putting a couple of envelopes under the mattress of my cot with my documents – my Mary Smith ones – and most of my money. I kept some money in a small purse I'd had for years in my trouser pocket on the left side, and my identity card was there too in its paper folder. The money purse was the type that folded together and it had a small section where you could put folded paper like a ten bob note and it would not get rubbed against coins. My Swiss Army knife lived in the right side trouser pocket with a handkerchief. The knife had a loop at one end of the handle, and I found a keyring that I looped onto this and on which I put the house key Mabel had given me.

A couple of weeks ago I'd bought a padlock and some chain from George to use with the bike I was riding. Another key on the ring. That same day I'd gone looking for some sort of means to lock up my private things. In a second-hand furniture shop I found a very scratched footlocker. It was about 24 by 15 by 12 inches and had a hinged top and a lock, but no key. And it was locked.

"Is there a key anywhere that fits this?" I asked the old man at the till.

"No, never found one."

"That rather diminishes its value," I commented.

"Five bob and it's yours."

"Done," I said.

I had to balance the footlocker on the crossbar and handlebars of the bike and walk beside it rather than ride. Rather than go home – I was now

thinking of the farm as 'home' – I went back to the ironmongery. George took one look and went to his storeroom where he had a box with assorted keys in it.

“I keep these just in case. Maud’s been on at me to toss them out, or at least send them to be melted down again. Why don’t you sit out back in the yard and try a few.”

It was slow going. I sat on a step and spread out the keys on the concrete surface of the step beside me. Some were clearly too big, and others too small, so I put those back in the box. Then there were some dozens of 'might be' keys. After almost half an hour, one of them fitted well and there was a substantial click when I turned it. The lid now came open.

Inside the box were a few letters in envelopes and a photo album. And dust. Well, I could clean that out. Time was getting on, and clouds were threatening a shower, so I put all the keys back except the one that worked and took the box back to George with thanks.

“How much do I owe you for the key, George?”

“A smile will do,” George laughed, and I thanked him profusely and loaded the box again and made haste to get home before the rain.

I didn’t avoid getting wet, of course, as I had work to do on the crops. However, I was able to put on my sailing jacket and only got mildly damp. It did mean that I spent some time that evening putting more dubbin on my boots. It was critical for me to keep my footwear in good condition.

Before I went to sleep that night when I’d acquired the footlocker, I opened, emptied and cleaned it. I looked in the photo album, but the entries gave no hint of the identity of the people in the images. 'Aunt Joan at Bournemouth'. 'Mom and Dad on their 25th Anniversary'. Some of the scratches and gouges in the box suggested it may have come out of a bomb site.

The half dozen letters were more helpful. All but one were addressed to the same location in Bristol. I thought of writing to the address to say what I’d

found, then decided to wait. I decided to read the letters. The contents of the envelope addressed to a street in Cardiff surprised me – two five pound notes, plus a very short message. "To Daisy, Happy 21st, Uncle George."

I ordered the other envelopes by the postmark. They were all written in the same hand, which differed from that of 'Uncle George'.

The first letter was mostly mundane personal news from the writer, someone named Jenny. However, it did contain one line that intrigued me.

"I'm glad you've got away from George."

The rest of the letters concerned rather common everyday life of two women. Neither gave any specifics of where they worked, or lived, apart from the address where Daisy was apparently living or collecting her post. The tone of the correspondence was guarded. Daisy Brompton, for that was the name to which they were addressed, was possibly escaping, much as I had, though George wasn't her husband. A pervert of an uncle? People didn't talk much about such things, and in some ways I found it hard to imagine a family member could try to Ugh! But then until William hit me I couldn't imagine that happening either. Life could be nasty sometimes.

I put the letters in the album and put it back in the footlocker after wiping out that box. Then I added some of my own things, including my handbag. I'd decided that I'd avoid using it and look for a new one, since it was a link to my former self, though I didn't yet feel I wanted to dispose of it. My keyring now had three keys. There was a house key in my handbag still. I wondered if I'd ever use it again.

* * * * *

Mabel found me working on weeding, tidying and picking vegetables. It was about half past two. I'd not bothered with lunch after the toast and mushrooms, but I had brought an old lemonade bottle of water with me.

I said "I'm sorry about your father."

“Thanks. It’s not unexpected actually. He told me himself last year, but he asked me not to let Mum know that I knew.”

“What’s going to happen now?” I asked.

“Maud and Mum are going to Yeovil to sort things out about a funeral. I’ll go down with the children on the train the night before the funeral, but try to get back right after. Maud’s going to stay with Mum for a few days to sort out the house. They don’t own it, so Mum’s coming back here to live, but we need to figure out which furniture and other stuff to keep. We’ve some space in our attic, and Maud and George do too. However, if Maud and I can, we want to persuade Mum to sell anything that’s likely just to sit around using space.”

“It’ll take some delicacy,” I said. “She probably has attachments and memories.”

“Yes, we don’t want to cause her more upset if we can avoid it. Anyway, George thinks he knows someone who might be able to help bring over whatever she wants to keep as long as it’s not too bulky. Right now it’s difficult to get a lorry with the fuel restrictions, but we know a fellow with an old horse and cart – actually a rag and bone man – who’ll do it, though it’ll take him a few days. It’s over 25 miles each way, and the old horse won’t be rushed.”

“I’ll look after the labelling of the jam tomorrow night, and I’m sure Jackie Hazelton knows what’s going to be done with it all.”

“Yes. She’ll look after getting it where it has to go and the proper records. Since it’s rationed at 8 ounces per month, each of our jars has to be sold to a couple, or given out as a two month allocation. We did think of 8 ounce jars, but that makes so much more work, so we’ve got ones that are supposed to be a pound. That’s why we figured out the level to fill them yesterday using the scales. We made sure nobody got short measure, assuming the jars were a uniform size of course. The rationing makes a lot more work, but we’ve definitely wasted no fruit.”

“That’s for sure!”

* * * * *

Matilda returned over the August Bank Holiday weekend. She just wanted to keep one particular, and not very bulky, armchair, a trunk full of her clothing and linen, and some mementos, along with some crockery and cutlery. However, despite grieving, she had had the sense to get both Mabel and Maud to bring empty suitcases to the funeral. These were put to good use to bring as much as possible back to Taunton as each daughter returned.

I hadn't seen Matilda since the day of the fateful telephone call from Maud. She was subdued all that first weekend. Reggie, as always sensitive to people, lay down beside her chair, which we decided should be installed in the kitchen, each the evening before going to his kennel for the night.

Wednesday morning, however, Matilda came out to where I was harvesting spinach and lettuce and suggested it could be more efficient if she picked and I moved the filled flats back to the byre. We'd arranged a pickup for that evening, so I was working as fast as I could to get everything ready. Mabel was in a different area, checking on some other plants and also picking the last of the strawberries. They weren't the best quality, and we had an idea to make a fruit compote with them and some other odds and ends of fruit.

* * * * *

Somehow through the summer I started to find the work, tough and long though it was, getting easier for me. Bit by bit, I was getting physically stronger. With the crops coming in steadily, there wasn't much time off, but Jack would sometimes drop by of an evening and we'd go for a walk or a bike ride. He found a pair of lights for me, as if the sun set on us I'd be illegal to ride, and with a policeman! I insisted on paying him back for this, which launched us into a discussion of how we should continue.

"Mary. Can't you just take the lamps as a present?"

"I suppose I could, but I don't feel right about it."

“As far as I can tell, we’re not seeing other people, are we? Both of us seem to be working every minute that there is on the clock.”

“That’s true. But ... give me a moment to get my thoughts and I’ll try to explain.”

“All right, but I’m getting suspicious I won’t like what I’m about to hear.”

I kept silent for a few seconds, then said “Jack. My feelings are that I’d very much like to be your girl. So my ... er ... reticence isn’t about that. I really and truly hope that we stay friends for many, many years. And possibly more than friends.

On the other side, the War means we lose people. Len you know about. My father at Cambrai in the last one, and probably my mother and grandmother too, at least in the form of the ’flu that it seems to have spawned. And you’ve mentioned that you’re not sure what the future holds for you. You’re young and fit, and only an accident of your occupation is stopping the Army or whatever from taking you away. And that would be away from me, and the closer I am to you now, the harder it’ll be when you go, no matter whether you come back. And even if you come back from the services, the time apart might leave our friendship damaged.

I hope you’ll still come by and ask me to walk or ride with you. Maybe even go to the pictures or a dance. But I’d really like us to keep it somewhat like two chums, where we each pay our own way. I know that isn’t really going to work, but for now I’d like to pretend it’s like that while things are still so uncertain.”

I stopped talking and for a while there was silence. Then Jack said “I liked the bit about being possibly more than friends. And you’ve reason enough to feel the way you do, so I’ll keep mum on the boyfriend / girlfriend bit and see what comes.”

“Thanks Jack.”

I don’t know what made me do it, but I gave him a kiss, and got one back. Fortunately, Jack had the good sense not to prolong it. He said “Better get

back before the sun is down,” and we walked hand in hand back to the farm.

* * * * *

Around the end of August, Jack was sent away for firearms training. He said he wasn't specifically told it was a secret where the training would take place, but thought it best to not say, and I told him I agreed. Loose lips and all that.

He said “The brass want as many of us as possible able to use firearms in case we need to respond to a threat. Initially that was invasion, but now more likely downed Luftwaffe people or escaped POWs, or perhaps some commando raid.”

“Are they training everyone in the police?” I asked.

“Possibly, though I don't think so. And though I've no real evidence, I have a suspicion that there may be some development such as a special unit to jump in when there are reports of parachutes or prisoner escapes. That is, I've got this feeling the training is not just in case, but more because I may get called for special duty.”

“Would that mean you'd not have to walk the beat?”

Jack laughed. “Not bloody likely. Probably mean I get to walk the beat all day, then run after some Nazi bastard all night getting shot at. Still, I'd probably get a promotion and a chance to learn lots.”

“Be careful what you wish for,” I cautioned.

“Yes,” Jack said quietly. “If I'm given any choices, I'd better think them through carefully.”

“Isn't it always a good idea to think about choices?”

“Yes. Certainly. But how many of us do?”

“True. Sadly true,” I said.

We were quiet for a few minutes, sitting outside a nearby pub. Jack, despite being born and bred in Somerset, preferred bitter. I liked most of the local cider, but always kept to a half pint. It could knock you off your feet for some reason that went beyond the alcohol. There were lots of stories of people sitting at the side of the road.

“I’m not drunk. Just my legs not working right.”

And apparently, they weren’t drunk. They could think and talk just fine. But like they said, their legs wouldn’t carry them.

Jack said “You seem to have settled in well with the Gaffneys.”

“I have. The hours are long and the work is heavy and sometimes dirty and wet, but I’m happy there. Probably as happy as I’ve ever been.”

“Not often good comes of one of those parachute mines. Some people call them landmines, but strictly those are the ones that blow you up when you step on them or a vehicle drives over them. Dudley had a parachute mine kill 10 people last November, then on the 12th just past another killed a further 5.

Didn’t you say you were blasted by one of the damn things?”

What was I prepared to reveal? I saw a parachute coming down. And there was an explosion. So I said “Well, I can say I saw a parachute in the moonlight and when it got about where I guess was roof level there was an almighty bang, though I’d ducked down by then. I suppose the parachute could have been someone bailing out of a ’plane, and the explosion was another type of bomb, but I don’t think so.

You know, I possibly wouldn’t be here except I desperately needed to pee and we had a bucket at the back of the” Here I nearly said "roof", but realized that wasn’t Mary Smith’s story. I continued after a short pause “I suppose you’d say garden shed. I was down the road from my new employers and someone said come in their Anderson shelter. When I said I needed to go, the lady who invited me in the shelter with her and her two kiddies said there was a bucket next to the shed that was mostly out of view.

When I saw the parachute I had to whip up my knickers and then I lay down. The dirt on the Anderson probably took a lot of the blast, but some came round the ends. A lot of stuff fell on the shelter and caved in part of it where I'd been sitting. And Mabel had to cut my hair because I had tar in it, I think probably melted roof tar or something like that blown about by the blast."

"So that's where your hair went!"

"Actually, I should have had it cut before. Used to have to put in rollers every night. What a nuisance!"

"Yes, I don't think I'd like to have to do that. Can you even sleep with rollers in?"

"A great many women do, but I've got to say they used to wake me up when I rolled over in my sleep."

I had to be careful. William had insisted I have long hair. "Don't want any wife of mine looking like a boy." Jack didn't seem to care. He said "The shorter hair suits you."

"Thank you. I like it this way too."

That evening I realized that I hadn't ever said that I was on a roof. Damn! I'd have to be careful. What I told Jack was a more suitable story, as long as nobody checked with the fictional lady with an Anderson shelter. Still, I could say that I never got her name. Lots of people had near misses in shelters. That's what I'd told the ARP man when I had arrived where I'd seen the mine blast. Better say no more, but remember now what I'd told Jack.

* * * * *

As September started, the harvest reached its peak volume, though not in amount of work, since things like berries were more fussy and time consuming than potatoes or marrows. As the equinox approached, we had

less daylight but about the same amount of produce to pick and prepare for delivery to the shopkeepers. But we were keeping up with it.

The children started a new year at school, so they weren't around during the day, and could not be expected to do much when they got home. However, Delia still collected the eggs every morning and put out feed for the chickens. And Oliver now had twice as many rabbits munching away at weeds and cauliflower leaves and whatever else we could find that they would take. The ducks, since we got them late, only produced a few ducklings, but they were now getting bigger. We might have duck for meat sometime.

When the time came for the rabbits to become meat and fur, it was Mabel who did the slaughtering and skinning of those for our own consumption. Those destined for the butcher we transferred to some of the cages that were loose and sat on shelves. The butcher would bring the cages back the next day, and we could use them as regular hutches when we didn't have rabbits ready for the pot.

I was glad Mabel did the butchering. She also took care of the hens that had outlived their laying lives. We didn't raise any chicken for roasting. I suppose we could have, but we acquired our chickens as young hens and didn't raise meat chickens. The old hens went for soup and stew.

Mabel asked me one day "Do you know how to kill chickens?"

I answered that I didn't, and that it rather scared me.

"Nothing to it. You just ..."

I didn't want to really hear about it, so I interrupted and said "climb up the ladder and fix the slate in place."

Mabel laughed. "All right. I understand. Each of us has our private fears."

Thus I'd be the person who went up ladders, and Mabel would dispatch the livestock.

* * * * *

Jack telephoned me when he got back from firearms training and we went for a walk to a pub on a Saturday night. He'd suggested the pictures, but I said we wouldn't be able to talk.

"True," Jack said, chuckling.

After Jack had collected me from the farm and we were walking towards town, I asked him "How was the firearms course?"

"Not bad. Actually rather interesting. I won't say exactly where it was, but I saw lots of bombed-out houses. I can see why you left London."

"You hadn't understood how bad it was?"

"I don't see how anyone can understand how it is unless they see it. And you saw it happening. I can try to imagine that. But imagining isn't the same as experiencing. Remember how you showed up with a plaster all over your face and a big graze on your left hand."

"I suppose so. If you've lived through the Blitz, you think it's all over the country. Here in Taunton, I've almost forgotten the sirens." It was true. I no longer expected the sirens' wail.

We walked for a minute or two without talking, my arm in his. It felt nice. I didn't remember William and I doing that, and wondered whether I'd forgotten, or if we'd never really walked together. Not that William and I went out together, even rarely.

I asked "Did you have to take any tests on the course?"

"Well, the basic firearm qualification is with a Webley revolver. They hand you one loaded with six bullets and tell you to shoot at a target. If you get three of the bullets in the target out of the six, they tell you you're qualified to handle firearms. The silly thing is that they don't show you how to load it. And if you are issued a Webley you probably have to hang it on a lanyard, as apparently there's a big shortage of holsters."

“That sounds a bit ... I don’t know ... amateur.”

“Perhaps I should be offended, but I actually agree with you. If we are sent out to tackle enemy servicemen, they’ll probably have better weapons and also better training in their use. Some of us also got to try the rifle, but police and other auxiliaries have been issued with World War 1 Ross rifles from Canada.”

“So they’re rather old,” I commented.

“The age isn’t the problem. Lee-Enfields from the same period would be preferred. The Ross was really a sporting rifle. Great accuracy, and preferred by snipers who’d pot enemy soldiers at over 600 yards. Nominally the Ross and Lee-Enfield use the same .303 ammunition, but the Canadians made it to tighter tolerances, and any dirt at all and the Ross’ll jam. And where the Lee-Enfield uses a bolt that you lift and pull to open, the Ross has a fancy mechanism so you just pull it back. However, you could disassemble it without tools – on paper an advantage – but if you didn’t get it back together properly the gun could fire and the bolt would take half your face off. Canadian soldiers frequently picked up Lee-Enfields from killed or wounded British soldiers, and eventually they were issued them and the Ross reserved for snipers.”

“You didn’t have any trouble with it?”

“No. We had clean conditions, and I think we had Canadian ammunition. Probably left over from 1918. That, of course, could be a problem if the powder isn’t stable or the shells stored improperly.”

“What was your score on the shooting?”

“I got five out of six on the revolver. We only got to shoot three shots with the rifle, and that was from 100 yards, and I’ve got to admit, the Ross let me put all three in the bulls-eye.”

“Good for you. Did you learn if you’ll get any special chances?”

“I’m not sure. There was this trio of men who called themselves the Civilian Police in Wartime Policy Review. They asked to talk to me and a few of the others. They said they wanted to know what conditions policemen and policewomen faced and how the system could be improved for greater effectiveness and efficiency. But it felt a lot like a job interview.”

“You think it might lead somewhere?”

“I think it already has. The Assistant Chief Constable has asked to see me next week.”

Much of the rest of the evening was spent enjoying a bit of a sing song in a local pub. There were some men from the Royal Army Service Corps who had according to Jack recently set up at Norton Camp. They were in good voice, though not necessarily in tune. Indeed the volume of song increased and quality decreased with the soldiers’ consumption of beer. During a lull, Jack said “Interestingly, the Norton Camp – strictly Norton Manor Camp – is near the site of another of those neolithic hill forts.”

Soon after Jack mentioned that, the noise and smoke encouraged us to take our leave, and we walked back to the farm, where Jack had left his bike. We didn’t say a lot as we walked, but we seemed happy enough to saunter along hand in hand.

As Jack was adjusting his bicycle lamp to ensure the slit did not show upwards, I said “Good luck with the interview.”

Jack didn’t say anything, just gave me a little kiss and was off.

* * * * *

November 11, 1941.

I’d another month until my new 24th birthday, but still had a sense that I had to at least privately acknowledge today.

At the end of October, there’d been bad news from Huddersfield. Someone – must have been a man – left a lit pipe in his raincoat in Booth’s clothing

factory, an old five-storey building with no fire escape. News was coming out that they didn't have a proper working alarm, and had never practised evacuating. 49 deaths, mostly young women. As if we didn't have enough to contend with. Fires like this would help the Nazis.

Jack had been to his interview. He couldn't say exactly what he'd be doing, except that he'd been asked to help set up a small team of younger policemen who would be available on call to deal with special incidents. The 'special incidents' were left without description. Unfortunately, this new job meant a transfer to Bath, with a promotion to Sergeant. I'd got a letter yesterday with his new address, though he also gave me the address and telephone number of the police station from which he'd work. I couldn't think why I'd telephone, however. I wasn't next of kin. Probably just the way we had become closer. Pity there was still William casting a dark shadow.

There was still some work to do outside. A few cabbages to cut and some of the potatoes that were late plantings to be lifted. Mabel had staggered the potatoes and Oliver had rather bullied her into estimating the planting dates so he could record them with the labels of the plots – we'd developed a letter-number scheme since the layout of the farm could be considered approximately a rectangle. This meant we had harvested new potatoes for a while, then got the mature ones as the last new potatoes were still being sent to the shops. And we'd done well in yield according to the numbers Delia had found.

At breakfast Mabel said "We should get a load of manure from Mr. Jessop later this week. It'd be nice to get more, but the farmers all need fertilizer."

I asked "Is there anything else we can get that will help the soil?"

"Possibly some leaves from the woods, but I think they may have the wrong acidity, but they could help to provide some fibre and structure."

Thinking back, I realize that a year later, in November 1942, the government announced the availability of National Growmore Fertilizer that was available even to home gardeners. A 42 lb. bag was supposed to be

enough for 300 square yards. We definitely got some, but not enough for all the plots, though it did help.

In 1941 we took some sacks to nearby woods and filled them with leaves, preferably wet and partly decomposed ones. Heavier, but we felt more useful. Jessop brought us some manure, and the WI ladies who weren't gardening kept some of their compostable waste for us. I got used to watching for bits and pieces that might help.

There was a small Armistice Day ceremony in town, but we didn't go. All of us were puttering around doing small jobs today. Some planting of winter crops had been done, and I was starting to look at the buildings. Over the year I'd got more capable with tools. I'd never be a carpenter or builder, but I could make repairs that would hold, even if they didn't look particularly fancy.

One job I started today was some hangers for our ladders. I'd found some short lengths of 2 by 2 inch wood, as well as some 1 by 2 lengths. Talking with Jack, I'd learned that if I did a butt joint to create an L, it would not be very strong, and he suggested what he called a half-lap joint. In the local library, I found a fairly recent book called *Teach Yourself Carpentry* and had been reading it. A lot of the joints were far too complicated, but I found ones called "halved joints" and I later found those were what Jack was talking about. Figure 12 of the book showed a quite simple looking joint, and I seemed to have the tools needed to make them.

I'd need to saw half way through each end across the grain, then along the grain to that cut I'd just made to get a 1 inch by 2 inch notch out of each part that would become the L. Then I could put them together with glue and one or more screws. George had mentioned one time that before screws went in, it was really necessary to drill holes so they went in more easily and didn't split the wood.

I figured today was a good day to really clean up the small workbench in the byre, so I opened the 'window' and got to work with a stiff scrubbing brush, but I used it dry. The debris on the bench was now mostly dust and old shavings.

The tools we had were still mainly in the house under the stairs. They were in a couple of wooden boxes. It took two trips to bring them out, then I realized that it would be sensible to hang them on the wall behind the bench either side of the 'window'. After I'd cleaned out the byre, I'd asked Mabel whether we should lock it to reduce the chance of theft. After all, there'd been sufficient demand for the farm products that Joe Short had robbed her. So now we had a good padlock on the byre. It wouldn't stop determined thieves, but it would prevent crimes of opportunity provided we were disciplined in locking up. Now we all had a key on a ribbon round our neck.

Before I tackled the half-lap joint, I nailed up several flat boards either side of the 'window' and put in some longish nails of a type George called 'finishing nails'. They had a small head, and would go through modest holes in tool handles. Thus I was able to hang up the tools and more easily access them. It took several tries to get them arranged efficiently.

In the toolbox were several clamps. I suddenly realized that they would let me saw the wood much more easily and used one to hold one of the 2 by 2s onto the bench. There was a folding ruler and a square. Also a couple of funny pencils with thick leads. I used my knife and sharpened one, marked off the piece that was to be cut out, and made the cut that was across the grain using a saw that had a metal ridge at the back of the blade. I think someone said it was called a back saw. I hoped it was sharp. It seemed to work. The Teach Yourself book had a page titled "Remember!" with one line "Don't sharpen your own saws. It is cheaper to pay a professional sharpener." But where I'd find someone who did that I had no idea, though George would likely know.

I wondered how to make the long-ways cut. The bench legs were quite solid. 4 inches square, and they were flush with the edge of the bench, so I clamped my piece vertically. Hmm. Better use two clamps so it didn't pivot on me when I tried sawing.

My attempts at starting the cut were pretty dismal to begin with. And I made a bit of a hash where the edge of the joint would be, but eventually I got the hang of it. My result wasn't perfectly flat. Wouldn't be a great joint.

I made the other part of the L, but this time only did the cross cut. Then I took a 1 inch chisel. I was about to hit the chisel with the hammer, when I remembered there was a wooden mallet. That was probably the proper tool to use. It was still in one of the tool boxes. I didn't try to cut off the whole of the piece of wood that would be waste, but positioned the chisel about half way down – the wood was still clamped to the bench. Just in case, I gave the clamp screws another twist. Then I positioned the chisel – I guessed bevel side up – and gave the handle a sharp rap with the mallet.

A piece of wood popped right off. However, It wasn't quite straight. The grain of the wood angled down a bit. So I positioned the chisel just a little above my cut line and got most of the rest of the waste away.

What to do about the rest? There was a rasp. Rather rusty despite my efforts with the oil, since the teeth had kept grabbing my cloth. Hmm. There was a rather funny brush with short metal bristles in the tool box. Yes! It was for cleaning files and rasps. Well, I'd do that later. For now I applied the rasp carefully and got my notch cleaned up. Also cleaned up the notch on the other bit.

The two pieces fitted together quite well. Be nice if the surfaces that touched were really flat. I'd need more practise.

I fastened the two pieces of wood to the bench so the L was formed and found the small hand drill. It had a crank on the side that turned a shaft with a chuck. I found a drill bit that was a bit smaller than the screws I intended to use, then marked two points on the top piece of wood.

How would I know how deep to drill? The Teach Yourself book showed a sort of device to clamp on the drill bit, but it would be too big. They also showed using some paper. Looking about, I realized we had some bits of chalk. Someone had fastened some slates to one of the posts of the byre, and we used the chalk to record weights when we had multiple sets of sacks to weigh and add up. I positioned the drill beside my wood with the tip as deep as I thought about right, then put some chalk on the drill bit. It didn't stay on very well, but was enough for me to judge.

I found it quite satisfying to drill the holes. Then I got the screws I intended to use. They had flat heads. How were they going to fit without splitting the wood. Somewhere in my memory the word 'countersink' popped up. I took a look in a small block of wood that held the drill bits, each in a hole roughly sized to take it. There was one bit that wasn't like the one I was using to make a hole. It had a head about half an inch across with a business end that was a set of ridges leading to a point at 45 degrees. I swapped out my drill bit for this, but kept the drill bit handy for my next try. The special bit made a nice indent in the top of the holes.

Taking a screwdriver, I found it easy to put in the screws. Then I took them out – I wanted to add glue. That was still under the stairs. Bother! Well, I'd have a cup of tea and come back. Better lock up, though. Tools were becoming like gold these days.

* * * * *

After my tea it was about three o'clock. Not a lot of time before it got too dark to work. I'd better set up a hook for a lamp or two. Anyway, I'd get one, possibly both Ls made. They were about 15 inches on a side. I wondered if I needed a cross brace. Probably not for our ladders, which were not that heavy.

I put glue on the joint, then put in the screws. Drilling made everything so much easier. I recalled William trying to put in a screw and cursing as it kept falling over, and finally the screwdriver had slipped and stabbed his hand. I had to bandage him up, and he never did finish that job. I think we had, as people said, to 'get a man in' to do it. Well, I was going to change that expression!

The second L took me only about 10 minutes. I was going to put them up on the wall. Oh. Better drill them. I had some 3 and a half inch round-head screws. After measuring and positioning, and with the screws partly turned in so their tips were just showing, I tried the first. Hmm. I hadn't drilled the wall post. As an experiment, I took the hammer and gave the top screw a good tap. The point of the screw made a mark where I could drill. I repositioned the L and tapped the bottom screw, then drilled its hole. Now I could attach the first L.

The second L was on the wall by four o'clock. Now light was getting dim. I decided to pack things in for the day and get Oliver or Delia to help me put the ladders on these racks tomorrow. They'd also be in a good place to paint or varnish them. I wonder if there's any varnish anywhere?

"Someone's been busy!"

"Mabel. Didn't hear you coming."

"I like how you've organized the tools. What have you been working on?"

"These ladder racks. Here, give me a hand and we'll hang them on."

We were easily able to put the arms of the Ls through the ladders and both just fitted.

"If there's some varnish, I'd like to get them protected from the wet."

"I don't think we have any varnish, but there's a gallon tin of boiled linseed oil. We should telephone George to ask if that will work."

* * * * *

George said the linseed oil would work well, but that we should give the ladders a bit of sanding to get rid of splinters and rough spots that would catch the rag used to apply the oil. And we should make sure to spread out the rag on some stones in case of spontaneous combustion. George had mentioned that before.

I had seen a few sheets of sandpaper, so we were pretty well ready to go. George said to wrap a suitably sized piece of the sandpaper – it could be folded and torn to size – around a block of wood that fitted my hand.

The next day after field work, I sanded the ladders, and over the following few days applied a couple of coats of oil. The ladders looked much better, and were now stored safely too.

We didn't have a broom in the byre, but I found an old bessom – a witches broom – lurking in the chicken coop. Delia didn't like it and it was just

propped at the back of the henhouse, so I appropriated it for the byre. It didn't get all the sawdust and other dirt, but was good enough. I'd watch for a better broom.

* * * * *

I'd written to Jack the day after I got his first letter. Described my work in the byre. Had a long, long contemplation of how to sign it. Finally decided on 'Affectionately'. Not 'Love' or 'Always'. After I'd written my closing I actually felt all right with my choice. It was truthful without offering anything that I couldn't give.

Within the week I had a reply.

November 16, 1941

Dear Mary,

Thank you for writing back so quickly. It was a joy to read your description of what you've been up to in the byre. I can almost feel your excitement at getting the tools to work for you to create what you want there. That feeling of accomplishment makes getting up each day worthwhile. While you have said the results were less than perfect, you did say they were functional and solid. That counts for a lot, and as time goes on, your skills will improve.

For me, it's similar, except I don't think I'd better tell you too much about what I've been doing, apart, of course, for the regular beat plodding. As a sergeant, I do less of the actual beat, but I'm involved with helping the others, particularly our Special Constables, who are generally older men who have volunteered to serve with us. Their knowledge, or rather lack of knowledge, of laws and regulations means that they are simultaneously reluctant and over-eager to act. So part of my job is to get them up to speed.

We've fortunately not had a lot of crime. The usual drunk and disorderlys, plus one case where we tumbled upon a black market operation. It was an out of town crowd from the East End in London, and they'd somehow got a bunch of tins of salmon and peaches. We only

caught them because a child fell off a bicycle in front of their van. One of my special constables made traffic wait while a local nurse comforted the child until the ambulance came. They didn't want to move the child in case of a neck injury.

As the constable was walking over to one of our police phone boxes, the sun glinted on the top of a tin, so he mentioned this when asking for assistance. By the time the ambulance came, I was there with another constable and the driver didn't give a very believable reason why he was in Bath. When we asked him to open the back of the van, my Special Constable noticed the man reaching in his coat pocket and pulling out a pistol. Ralph -- the Special Constable -- saw the handle and he had his truncheon out. Normally we leave the truncheon on our belt. Like I said, over-eager. However, I'm glad of it this time, because Ralph whacked him on the wrist. Actually broke a bone or two, and the automatic pistol tumbled on the ground.

CID is now tracing things back. We got to guard the tins. Almost a pity that over-eager Ralph submitted his report with a full count, or some might just have been spirited away by mice so they could show up in Christmas stockings. Not that I'd really do that, though with shortages of nice things, there's a huge temptation.

Must dash to catch the post.

Affectionately,

Jack

It was a good letter. And I appreciated the warm sentiments as to how my skills would improve. William was forever putting me down. Now I realized that he was wrong. In fact, I could work with tools much better than he could. I was capable, and moreover, I felt capable. I realized, too, that being appreciated and not criticised all the time was good for me. I was still making mistakes. Who didn't? But I was getting jobs done and everyone could see that.

Jack's next letter didn't arrive until almost the end of the month. He'd had to go up to London as guard on the black marketer. They actually took the van, with the fellow handcuffed around his good arm in the back. Jack drove. I wonder where he'd learnt.

He didn't actually say in his letter, but I got the feeling that he was part of an operation to raid the black marketers' den, possibly driving the van in. There was a report in the newspaper of a series of arrests. One of the men arrested was actually a minor peer. That would go down like a bunch of lead bricks in the House of Lords.

The main point of Jack's letter, however, was to invite me to spend Christmas Day with him and his family. Apparently he was getting Christmas leave, in part on account of good work. The suggestion was that I take the train up to Wells on Christmas Eve and return to Taunton on Boxing Day.

I had a bit of a sense of panic. This meant meeting Jack's family, and that implied that we were, or at least could be, much more than casual friends. Somehow I didn't want to admit that. Deep down, of course, I knew Jack and I got along well, and unless I was being fooled in the same way William had fooled me, he was a very different kind of man. Another part of me really did want to acknowledge a connection.

I'd got the letter in the morning post and shoved it in my back trouser pocket and was reading it under the shelter of a small, open hut in one of the far plots. We had a couple of these shelters. Four posts with a piece of corrugated iron on the top at an angle tilted back to let water run off. Then the back and sides were made up of some rough sticks pruned from trees or bushes about 9 inches apart to make a sort of fence wall through which rushes or willow twigs were woven. These walls didn't go all the way to the roof, but about 5 feet. Then we'd set up some sort of bench or stools to sit on. A place to get out of the rain and take a breather, with the woven twigs and rushes reducing the wind.

I had a thermos of tea, and poured myself a steaming serving into the cap of the thermos, then sipped it slowly. Toby was with me, leaning against my leg. Somehow I'd got used to feeling him there over the last few months.

I pondered my situation some more. In taking on my new identity I'd not appropriated any money or other property from anyone. Not even from William either, even though I probably was owed something, since I handed over all my wages to him and often got back less than I could use for the housekeeping. Miserable sod! Distance had not diminished my rage at him.

Somewhere I'd read that it wasn't fraud to use a different name as long as there was no theft or transfer of wealth or property. Was that really true? Certainly things could be sticky if Jack and I were to get married. Though even that would be Mary Smith – who to my knowledge had never been married – marrying Jack Morrison. My previous person was only involved through the lines that suspended a parachute mine.

Still, for now I could go to Wells for Christmas without committing any crimes. It was the future that possibly could be a problem. Getting close, even living together wouldn't be a crime, though it probably wasn't good for Jack's career. Marrying could be considered bigamy if it were traced to my link to William.

That evening, I'd write back to Jack and say I'd be happy to come, and ask what I should try to bring. As I made up my mind, I realized I'd need a suitcase. My trusty pillowcase was not going to give the right impression.

I stepped out of the shelter, and went back to gathering the late part of the cobnut crop. Some people called them cobs, others hazelnuts and yet others filberts. Mabel said they were really different varieties of similar plant species. Up to now, I'd never given the different names any notice at all when I saw them at the greengrocer or read about them in articles or books. On the farm, we seemed to have a mix of different types, and we didn't bother to separate them. For the main part of the harvest, we paid school friends of Oliver and Delia a ha'penny a pound to gather them from where they had fallen. We lost a few into pockets – they were a little too hard for children to crack in their hands or teeth, and we discouraged those who would try to crack them with one stone against another, mainly because it tended to crush the nut and waste it rather than concern for loss by diversion.

We got a reasonable crop of nuts. About 2 hundredweight. Moreover, they were from bushes that formed boundaries of the farm or between plots. Difficult to estimate the acreage, but it wasn't much. We'd had similar difficulties with working out yield for blackberries. There'd been a reasonable crop of those, but a goodly portion went in the mouths of the pickers, though their pay was tiny, so we accepted the diversion as part of tradition.

* * * * *

There wasn't nearly as much work on the farm at this time of year, so I was able to go to town to look for the things I felt I needed. Not that there was a lot available. The one or two suitcases available were eye-wateringly expensive or else likely to fall apart immediately. On my second visit to one shop that carried bags, the lady behind the counter – she'd been at the WI once I think – said "Having trouble finding something?"

"Yes. I need some sort of suitcase when I go for Christmas to my ... er ... boyfriend's family. There's precious little available. Either made of gold or already falling apart."

"Does it have to be a suitcase?"

"When I arrived here in Taunton, I'd been bombed out, and the rest centre had given me a pillowcase. I still use it, but it won't make a good impression."

"I think I've seen you at the WI, and most of the members can sew. If you're one of them, you might be able to make use of something I have in the scrap box. Let me get it."

She went through a curtain and I heard a bit of noise of things being moved, then she came back.

"We picked up this rucksack a few years ago, meaning to fix it up ourselves. But then, you know how you put things off, and now Bob's been made a Special Constable and assigned up in Bristol. The rucksack needs a

new strap put on. I've a broken belt we were going to use – it's here inside. You'll need a big needle and an awl."

"We may have those. In any case, I think I'll find a way to fix that strap. And it looks like some of the seams could use refreshing."

"Yes. I think someone used the sack for trying to carry bricks. They'll take a lot of load, but that's too much, and I doubt it was new at the time."

"How much do you want for it?"

"A shilling and it's yours. We were going to try for 5 bob fixed, but it's time it was gone from here."

I took the offer, but I also spent 13 and 6 on a small but pretty leather handbag. I didn't want to use my old one any more, as it might be a tip-off to my past.

"That's the last of my pre-War handbags," the shop lady said. "They don't want to use the leather for a long strap, and most women want a big handbag that they can use to carry some shopping in."

"I like to be able to have my hands free, and to be able to tuck my bag under my arm in a crowd," I said.

"Good idea. A friend was complaining how someone grabbed her bag the other day. Huge nuisance and it had all her family's ration books and the week's housekeeping. Bugger who took it dumped it behind a wall and some kids found it, but minus the money, of course. And on top, she'd already done all the rounds to get new ration books."

I thought about Jack trying to apprehend miscreants such as those who stole the handbag.

Anyway, I had a rucksack, and that meant walking with my things was a bit easier, though in a crowded train it might be best to take it off my back. When I fixed the strap – my efforts were a bit amateur in appearance, but served well – I added a handle at the top from some rope. In addition,

Mabel had been cutting up an old mackintosh raincoat and using the waterproof material for a rain hat. I asked if I could use some of the material to cover the bottom of the rucksack. I even curved it up an inch or so at the corners and sealed it with puncture cement. Now I could set the rucksack down on a wet or dirty floor and sit on it. It was about 16 inches high, with a drawstring top and a flap cover that made a pretty good seat as long as there weren't things inside that would get crushed and broken. It's what you had to do on trains these days. Not easy to get seating.

On my shopping outing, I still needed stockings. I'd only got one pair since I left my old life. When I got to Taunton, I figured I'd mainly do with socks, though truthfully the socks I had weren't suitable to wear with a dress or skirt, and none of my shoes were fashionable. I preferred to wear slacks, but for Christmas it would look better to have a skirt, costume or dress. I had no illusions I'd find silk or nylon stockings, but was successful in finding a quite smooth pair of lisle stockings. Well, they'd keep me warmer than the better looking silk or nylon ones.

I was so pleased with my purchases of stockings and rucksack that I nearly forgot I'd need a suspender belt and had to go back to some of the shops. It shows how I was still somewhat disorganized that I'd not tried wearing the one pair of stockings I'd acquired earlier, and hadn't registered the need. Of course, I'd not worn a skirt or dress at all during that time, except maybe once with bare legs.

Suspender belts were a stupid garment, though the vulgar postcards seemed to think men got excited at a glimpse of the suspender straps. I thought tights would be more sensible, but those seemed to be only worn by showgirls in theatres. Did I read or hear somewhere that tights weren't being made because of the extra material required? If there were elastic available, I could use garters, but they'd cut off circulation if they were too tight. Oh well, wear the suspenders when I had to, and carry some ribbon in case of necessity for garters. By preference, however, I'd still wear my slacks and socks.

I was about to head home when I noticed that an optometrists' was open and went in. The man behind the counter asked "May I help you?"

“I’m finding I have to squint when I’m sewing and thought I might need glasses,” I said.

“A test will only take a few minutes. However, at the moment we can only offer utility pattern spectacles unless you have your own frames, and then only if the lenses are compatible with those frames.”

“I don’t have any frames, and I work outdoors, so I’ll live with the available frames when I need to sew or read.”

The test showed I was actually very slightly far sighted, but not really enough to require spectacles. The optometrist offered a slightly higher strength prescription than he said I needed, since it would magnify for close work, but he warned it would possibly be uncomfortable for wearing all the time, and perhaps make it difficult to drive or ride a bicycle. I debated the possibilities, and decided on the higher magnification and put down a deposit. I would have to pick up my spectacles just before Christmas.

* * * * *

Peter came home on leave on the solstice. Sunday, December 21, 1941. The previous couple of weeks had, as expected, been quiet in terms of work on the farm. We did some odds and ends of repairs to hedges and fences, tightened hinges and clasps, checked locks. Some windows were draughty, and we got some putty from George and kneaded it well in the warmth of the kitchen. We’d need to clear out crumbled old putty with – what else – a putty knife, then push in fresh and run the putty-knife blade along the new material to give it a smooth line.

Mabel did the downstairs. She was all right on the small step ladder. I did the upstairs, given her fear of heights. Fortunately the upper edges of the windows were fine. It was always the bottom and occasionally the side of the frames where the putty was cracked or broken. A matter of exposure to the rain.

One day we also harvested a goodly volume of Brussels sprouts. Popular for Christmas dinner. And we dug out some parsnips too. Still, not

anywhere near the amount of product we were sending to the shops in the late summer.

Outside of our tasks, there was lots of talk about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and a wave of optimism now that the Americans were on our side. Especially as Hitler – more fool him – declared war on the USA. On the negative side, we now had a points allocation of just 16 points a month, and just about everything was on points. If, of course, you could find anything.

Peter's train was due mid-day, so we all went to church in the morning, then Matilda and I came back to prepare a hot mid-day lunch. Most people called it dinner. On the farm, we tended to eat our big meal in the evening. Tea. Strange how what you called your meals depended on class. "Dine with me" meant an big evening meal to the upper crust. "Come for tea" meant a generally lighter meal late afternoon to the hoi polloi, while 'dinner' was usually in the middle of the day. I didn't really know how I – as common as you might get – still ate a big meal quite late, mainly to take advantage of daylight and to avoid interrupting work to walk back and forth to the crops.

When the Gaffneys tumbled into the house together, Mabel's smile showed her joy that Peter was home again for a few days. She kept near him. The children showed a bit of reserve. Probably they weren't used to seeing their father in uniform.

We were all hungry. Hell, we were always hungry! Thus there was a quiet time while we ate. I felt Toby against my leg, and looking to the side, could see Reggie's tail. He was lying against Peter. The dog hadn't forgotten him. I was very glad.

Matilda asked "Are you allowed to tell us anything about where you are or what you're doing?"

"Well, I'm in one of the Anti-Aircraft divisions and we're, shall we say, somewhere in the south-west. I joined the Territorials, as you know, when things were getting hot with the Spanish Civil War, but my call-up was deferred because we're producing food, but eventually my training on ...

let's say certain guns meant they needed me. We have a go at Gerry 'planes if they get close to us. Wish we had more guns and more crews. There's talk of training up some ATS women as gun crew, but the brass are saying they won't let them pull the lanyard."

Matilda said sourly "As usual, let the women to the heavy job and say only men are capable of putting a finger on the button."

"I don't disagree. All polished metal, fruit salad ribbons and posh accents."

I could see why Mabel liked her husband. The contrast with William gave me one of my flashes of rage, but I kept it to myself, of course.

* * * * *

I took the earliest reasonable train to Wells that I could on Christmas Eve. In fact, I got up at five o' clock. Toby looked at me suspiciously. "Sorry, old boy, you'll have to make do with Matilda's company for a couple of days."

Matilda, bless her, was up too and made me some porridge and I got away to the station. I'd have to walk because I didn't trust leaving the bike at the station, even locked up, and there were no buses until later. Anyway, I made it in time.

For once, no delays, and I was in Wells well before eight in the morning and had to wait for Jack, who was coming in from Bath. His train WAS delayed. Fortunately, I was able to get a cup of tea and a biscuit and find a seat out of the weather to wait.

After I'd been given a big hug and a slightly more than polite kiss, Jack said "We could try to find a taxi, or walk the two miles."

"As you see, I'm set for walking," I answered.

"Indeed you are."

"Hope you don't mind my wearing slacks. Since I've been working on the farm, I like to keep my legs warm, and trains in December are draughty."

“What do you do in summer?”

“I found a couple of pairs of ripped pants second hand and cut them down and sewed cuffs so I’ve now two pairs of shorts. I also made myself a pair of very light slacks to protect against bushes and the sun. Matilda brought her sewing machine and has been teaching me how to use it.”

“Useful! And I don’t mind you wearing slacks. Mum might observe that girls didn’t used to wear trousers, but I think she’s been altering her view since seeing some of the jobs women have started to do lately.”

“Yes. Peter was saying that there’s talk of training ATS girls to operate AA guns.”

“Really. That’s one for the books.”

“Apparently they won’t be allowed to pull the lanyard, but do everything else.”

“Attitudes may change. I expect we’ll see more women in the police, and not just as women constables to take care of female prisoners. I know I’d rather have a strong young woman as my number 1 than some of the old codgers who’ve been made Specials. Some of them have to take a break after the effort of lighting their Woodbine.”

“Have you been doing all right? That black market villain you caught had a gun. If it hadn’t been for the Special Constable you said was over-eager, he might have shot someone, and that could have been you.”

“True. Some of the villains are pretty nasty. It’s going to be a lot of work to shut them down, or at least hinder their activity. It is, after all, hurting the War effort. I’d like to see Parliament add some offences to ‘aiding the enemy’ which would mean a possible firing squad in egregious cases. But even if they did, we may have to have them up for dodging National Service or something else fairly minor, but enough to get them off the street. They had to do that in America with Al Capone. Got him for income tax evasion, even though they knew he’d been involved in everything from running prostitution to wholesale murder involving machine guns.”

“Please look after yourself, Jack. For me and your parents if not for yourself.”

“Nice to have someone – someone pretty – to care about me. And I’d better tell you I care about you too. Might be awkward with family about.”

We were coming to a row of shops, and one of them had the Morrison name on it. There was a queue of women – it was always women – waiting to get vegetables, no doubt for the Christmas dinner. The shop front was fully open and there was a narrow passage between trolleys at the front of the shop. I saw potatoes, cabbage, carrots, parsnips, swedes, turnips, Brussels sprouts. A few onions were in a small bin near the scale – onions had been scarce since France and the Channel Islands fell.

Though the sign said ‘Greengrocer and Fruiterer’, there were only a few apples for fruit that I could see.

There was a woman weighing some potatoes. When she saw Jack, she smiled broadly and said “Jack! There you are. Cedric! Jack’s here. Mrs. Murphy, let me get you sorted so I can say hello to my son.”

A man came out from the back of the shop and gave Jack a handshake. Jack said “Dad. This is my friend Mary I told you about.”

“Nice to meet you, Mary.”

“You too, Mr. Morrison.”

Mrs. Morrison had finished with Mrs. Murphy. Cedric said “Angela, you take Jack and Mary inside for a cup of tea and I’ll handle the customers.”

“Not on your own, you won’t, Dad. Mary can take my case and I’ll give you a hand. I’ll just hang up my coat and hat and put on a serving coat.”

Cedric and Angela had brown lab-style coats that most grocers wore. Within a couple of seconds Jack had one on and was greeting a customer as Angela led me to the rear of the shop, where there was a storeroom. There was also a doorway with an open door and I saw a staircase behind. Up we

went, and I found myself in a quite large living room. Towards the back was a table that was clearly the dining table, then a doorway to what turned out to be the kitchen. There was a stairway parallel to the one we'd ascended, and Angela led me up after telling me to leave Jack's case, as he'd be sleeping on the settee.

"You'll be in Jack's room. He can put up with the settee.

Now through there is the lavatory, and that door is the bath and sink. Audrey's through that door there and we're in the front. I'll let you get settled, then come down and we'll get to know each other."

"Thank you," I said. "May I use the hangers in the wardrobe?"

"Course you can. I cleared some space so you could."

I unpacked, carefully taking out the biscuit tin in which a half-dozen eggs were packed in straw. I'd also brought some biscuits and cake I'd made from carefully hoarded rations. I also had some small presents: a jar of WI strawberry jam for Cedric and Angela, and a Swiss Army knife not quite the same as mine that I'd found looking very dirty and slightly rusty on a market stall one day. I'd spent quite a bit of time cleaning it up and with some advice from George had learnt how to re-rivet the handle so the blades didn't wobble. I even attached a leather fob from a piece left over from fixing the rucksack and had managed to burn a J into it with a nail held on a stick with wire that I heated in the fire of the stove.

I had hung up my sailing jacket – it served as my raincoat and was quite warm if I wore a pullover or two under it. That's what I'd done today, and I took off the top one of these – a button up cardigan actually. Then I realized I still had on my beret. That was a Christmas present from me to me. My old trilby was still fine for work wear, but it did have its share of dust and stains, and I'd spotted the beret in a fundraising sale the WI held in early December.

I hung up my skirt. My dress was too summery for Christmas. The skirt was still my only one, the one Maud handed me when I got to Taunton. With several bits of attention, it now looked all right, but I should start to look for

a decent costume. I laid my spare blouse on the bed. Wear it tomorrow, then put on the one I was wearing to go home. Not worth risking smuts from the trains on both my blouses. I'd leave my spare knickers and socks in the rucksack, which I simply left on the floor by a plain chair.

After I'd been to the lavatory and washed my hands, I went down to the kitchen where I found Angela had put out the tea and some mince pies.

"Sorry there's just one each. You understand. Later we'll have some little things I've made from odds and ends of fruit I've managed to preserve. As a greengrocery, we get some banged up items and I'm getting far too clever at salvaging things. Oh. Eggs. For us?"

"Didn't Jack tell you about the farm – well really a smallholding – where I live and work. We have chickens and rabbits and produce all kinds of vegetables and fruit on about 15 acres. I think the Ministry of Food people are wondering if we should be amalgamated into a bigger operation, but we're on the outskirts of town and the land has ditches and gravel paths between our plots, so they'd need to do a lot of work. Besides, I think we're out-producing some of the farmers."

"Jack said it was just you and the lady who's the missus of the place, plus her children."

"And since Mabel's father passed away, her mother Matilda has come to live with us. She does a lot of the cooking and housekeeping which frees Mabel to work on the crops."

"Do you get a chance to use some of your own produce, or must you send it all to market?"

"Anything rationed is controlled more or less, but most of our products aren't on the schedule. That may be one of the reasons the Ministry men want to poke their noses in. But then many people wouldn't get much in the way of variety in vegetables. I was going to bring some sprouts, but Jack said he was sure you had a reliable supplier."

“Yes. An older couple run an operation that sounds a lot like the one you work at. And they are keeping an eye out for the Ministry men too, but their operation is on the side of a hill. Tractors’d topple over. They work it pretty well all by hand, though they have a donkey that they use to bring stuff into the shops, and I think they use it when then need to work some difficult soil.”

“We use a neighbour with a donkey in much the same way.”

Our conversation rambled on in this fashion until one o’ clock, when I heard Mr. Morrison shout. “Mrs. Howard, you’re the last in the queue. I’ll serve you, but nobody else. Wednesday early closing as usual.”

Angela said “We always close early Christmas Eve, but it being Wednesday means we don’t have to apologise. I’d better get dinner on. They’ll be a while tidying up, since things have to be put away so they’re saleable on Saturday. Next Monday’ll be a bugger – excuse my language – with messed up deliveries and everyone desperate for stuff.”

My offer of help was initially turned down, then I was given some carrots to slice.

We had a nice hot dinner at around two o’ clock of a meat and vegetable pie with potatoes and carrots. There was an apple crumble and custard for dessert. Given the difficulties of wartime rations, Angela had worked a near miracle, and I said so, which garnered me an appreciative smile.

After dinner we had a small glass of port, then settled back around a modest fire in the living room with the wireless and books. I’d found a copy of *Anne of Green Gables* at the farm. Having never read it, I’d picked it up and decided it would be a good choice to bring with me. I knew nothing about Prince Edward Island. Sometime soon I’d need to go to the library and find out more.

Jack was reading T.S.Eliot’s *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*. Somehow I was surprised that he liked poetry, but also that in another way, the surprise was not astonishment. Nor was it unwelcome. He was just less predictable than I had assumed. Good.

Angela was reading a Hercule Poirot story by Agatha Christie. “Don’t expect me to behave like Monsieur Poirot, Mum. Real detective work’s much, much different.” Jack had recently been told he’d be transferring to plain clothes work on a full-time basis.

Cedric had two newspapers, the Telegraph and the Daily Mirror. “I like two different viewpoints so I can try to average them and hope for the truth.” I could appreciate the sentiment, but wondered how many viewpoints were really needed. Two seemed far too limited.

Something seemed missing. Ah. There was no tobacco smoke. Nobody in the house smoked. Well, I’d not yet met Audrey, who was in the ATS and should be here by six on a 48 hour leave. Still, it was unusual that nobody smoked. At the farm, none of us who were there now did, but Peter liked a pipe, and I remember there was a hint of pipe tobacco in the air of the farmhouse when I had arrived.

William had smoked Churchman’s No. 1 cigarettes. When we first married it didn’t bother me, but as time went on, the smell of them became a source of torment. Truthfully, I was very glad Jack didn’t smoke. I should tell him in case he’s thinking of taking it up.

* * * * *

Audrey arrived on time and full of bubbly enthusiasm and was fed some of the dinner we’d had. Angela had carefully kept it warm but covered and well moistened. The rest of us had sandwiches and a cup of tea. Audrey was a little over three years younger than Jack, and had joined or else been called up for the ATS. I hoped to get to know her a little over the short time we’d have together.

We walked to a local church for a special Christmas Eve Evensong with Carols. I hadn’t been to church often. Before we went, Angela said “Oh, Mary. I’ve been so rude. We didn’t ask if you’d like to come. We just assumed. And then I remembered Jack saying you’d been brought up by some nuns, which probably means you’re Roman Catholic, and won’t want to come to a Church of England service.”

“I’d love to come. I don’t know if I was or am actually Catholic, but the nuns treated me and the other girl as if we were, but they weren’t ... oppressive about it. After I left the nuns’ house, I mostly stopped going to church, but more because I don’t find I’ve any particular religious affiliation. One of the things I love about the farm is being part of the growing world. I feel that’s what a church should be like, full of life and growth. I hope I’m not rambling on too much. I’ve been to church at St. James in Taunton with the Gaffneys who own the farm, though they aren’t very regular. But I do like the Christmas music, so I’m sure I’ll enjoy the Evensong.”

“We’d all be a lot better off if people would think that way,” Cedric said.

* * * * *

The Evensong with carols was delightful. I felt happy. Jack was beside me, and I liked his family, as far as I knew them. They seemed to be very much themselves, with no special facade for me that I could sense. There was interest in who I was, the things I liked or didn’t, but I hadn’t been interrogated about my history. There was attention but not probing.

After the service, we returned to the shop and had tea and some Cornish pasties followed by some date bread.

Cedric explained “In early 1939 I had a chance to get a fairly large order of pitted cooking dates. They’re not fancy, but do nicely in pastries, or even in a few savoury dishes we’ve tried after a fellow I met down the pub told me that in North Africa they put them in stews that are like curries. They serve the stew with some sort of cooked wheat that sounds like cuckoo, but I know that isn’t what it really is called. I found a couple of good metal trunks that’ll keep vermin out and I’ve got them in the store-room. We let our regulars have a block from time to time. Since they’re pre-rationing, we’re not constrained in how we dispose of them, but we think it best to let them out bit by bit, making sure we’ve some ourselves, since they’re a nice source of a bit of sweetness.”

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I woke to light coming in the window. I looked at my watch and saw it was after 8 o'clock. I'd had a very good sleep, but I needed the lavatory, so got up. Mabel had lent me a dressing gown. I should see if I can find one for myself. I was also still wearing the pyjamas that had been Peter's before modification to fit me.

After I'd been to the lavatory, I went in the bathroom and had a wash in the sink, where there was warm water on tap. At the farm we didn't have that luxury, and had to wash at the kitchen sink, getting water in a jug from a tap on the side of the range. If, of course, the fire was lit. I wonder who got up early this Christmas morning to light the fire. Or perhaps they banked it up last night to keep it going, but coal had been rationed since last July, so probably not.

Angela had put a towel and flannel for me on the chair in Jack's room. I'd brought my own, but I'd leave them in the rucksack. I was careful to avoid wasting any hot water, but still luxuriated in being able to wash without wincing from the cold when the flannel touched my skin.

I dressed in my blouse and skirt, and put on a pair of stockings. My pullover would be needed, even though the forecast was for a mild winter day, and I pulled it on, then combed my hair. There was a modest mirror hanging on the wall to aid me. I put on my shoes and went downstairs, where I found everyone but Audrey at the table drinking tea.

After greetings, Angela asked "Any sign of Audrey yet?"

"I didn't see her, nor hear anything from her room."

"I'll go up and wake her."

Cedric said "Oh, Mother. Let her be. The ATS gets them up early and makes them go to bed late. Best present you can give her is waking up when the mood takes her."

However, just then we heard the toilet flush, so the issue was moot. Angela said "I'll start the breakfast. Mary brought us half a dozen eggs, and I'm

going to use them all and make scrambled eggs with mushrooms on toast as a treat.”

* * * * *

It had been decided that with the eggs for breakfast we could have a Christmas dinner after the King’s Christmas message at three o’clock and just have two meals, but make the dinner special. I’d brought a few other things, such as some cheese straws, some tea, and a jar with a good portion of my month’s butter ration, as well as a carefully wrapped brace of rabbits, boned and skinned by Mabel. The rabbits weren’t a surprise. They were going into a mock roast. We spent about five minutes discussing what it should be called, since it was going to contain the rabbit, some bacon, a bit of lamb and some sausage meat, plus some crushed filberts. I’d brought them too.

In any event, after a leisurely breakfast – well the tea drinking was leisurely, and we did have extra toast with dripping and Marmite – Angela said “Jack. Take Mary for a walk so Audrey and I can get on with the dinner. Cedric. You’re in charge of the spuds and the vegetables, but I’ll set you at the dining table so Audrey and I have a clear field of action.”

Thus Jack and I got ourselves dressed warmly and went out to explore Wells. It wasn’t too cold and not raining, at least for the moment. Jack showed me round the town, finishing at the cathedral, where worshippers were now exiting.

“Shall we go in?” Jack asked, and I agreed.

The double scissor gothic arch supporting the tower took me by surprise.

“It was needed to stop the tower collapsing,” Jack said.

“It’s a very elegant solution. When was that completed?” I asked.

“Fellow named William Joy was responsible. Sometime in the 1300s.”

“1300s! They look modern.”

“Yes. Amazing, isn’t it?”

* * * * *

The Christmas dinner was a great success, even as it was unconventional. The men had beer. The ladies drank cider. The pudding, which used carrots and potatoes to provide body, was accompanied by a sauce that had a bit of brandy to give it flavour. Whether by accident or design, and I suspect the latter, I found the silver thrupenny piece in my serving.

After dessert we took cups of tea to the fireplace end of the room where a small wreath of decorated holly served the role of Christmas tree. There were presents to open. By letter, it had been agreed that Jack and I would exchange small presents, as would the senior Morrisons and I, though nothing extravagant, but Audrey and I, who would only meet for the first time on this holiday, would not get gifts for each other. This meant less pressure on all concerned.

The WI strawberry jam was warmly received by Angela and Cedric. Normally jam was now rationed, so this was a treat. I got a block of dates, which I’d been wondering if I could ask to purchase, so my expressions of gratitude were genuine.

Jack very much liked his Swiss Army knife, and Audrey said that if I ever saw another, I was authorized to pay up to ten bob for it, even if it needed some work. Jack explained how he’d seen the one I had, and how it was useful on many occasions.

In return, I got a flannel scarf, a knitted balaclava and gloves. Jack said “I’d noted you didn’t have a scarf, and only work gloves. The balaclava is a guess, and it’s more practical than fashionable, but I can imagine some days when it will be useful if you have to go out to work on the plots at the farm.”

Indeed, I appreciated what he had given me. Cedric said “Surely Jack, a girl would like something a bit more fancy than that.”

“Actually, Mr. Morrison, I’d rather have these than some silk stockings. I like my work on the farm a lot. I’m very happy there. But there are days when the wind bites. I want to be out doing things, but without some protection, that becomes harder.”

“I can second that,” Audrey said. “I’m not sure how much I should say, but we’re being trained on searchlights and anti-aircraft guns, and Gerry doesn’t just come on fine evenings. We try to put on every layer of clothing we have, and keep our fingers and noses warm so we can do the job.”

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We’d had a bad start to 1942, with terrible news from Pearl Harbour, Hong Kong, Singapore and the Dutch East Indies. On top of this, the War had finally come near to Taunton. Between the 23rd and 27th of April, there was a blitz of Exeter then Bath. This eventually was allowed into the news, and I was worried about Jack.

We were writing to each other at least once a week, often twice. Unfortunately, we only managed to spend a day together at Easter, with Jack taking the earliest train to Taunton and last one back at night.

I got a letter May 5.

May 3, 1942

Dear Mary,

Now that the Bath Blitz has made it into the newspapers, I'd better let you know I'm all right. Had a busy time of it, of course, and won't bore you with details of my work. Will tell you what I'm allowed to say when we get together again.

On that subject, I'll get a week's holiday in early June. Can you get off for a few days and go walking with me in the Mendips. A friend has offered a cottage in Cheddar. Separate rooms -- all right and proper.

Let me know.

Affectionately,

Jack

* * * * *

Mabel asked “Jack all right?”

“Yes. Says the bombing kept him pretty busy.”

“You look concerned, nonetheless.”

There were just the two of us in the kitchen. The children were at school, and Matilda had gone shopping on Mabel’s bicycle.

After a pause, I said “Jack wants me to take a few days with him in the Mendip Hills. He says separate rooms. His words are ‘all right and proper’.”

Mabel laughed. “More fool him.”

“Mabel!”

“Don’t tell me you aren’t interested in more than conversation. I can tell by the way you talk about him and look at him when I’ve seen you together.”

“But with the War on, we can’t make any plans, build any future. I’ve still not sorted myself out from Len.”

“True. But perhaps that’s more reason to enjoy the time you have. And my hunch is that Len wasn’t going to be the man of your life.”

“You’re not wrong, but I still can’t figure out how I should behave.”

“The main thing is not to let whatever you do lead to disaster. At least avoidable disaster.”

“Meaning?”

“Well, getting in the family way until you can do a proper job of it wouldn’t be too cheerful. Peter and I were thinking of another child when the Spanish civil war started. We’ve been taking precautions since, and now I doubt we’ll try to have another child. It would put a burden on the other two, especially Delia.”

“Does Peter not mind doing without?” I asked, hoping that I wasn’t being too nosy.

“We don’t do without. We use rubber johnnies. Peter gets them from the barber. He got some before he went to the Army, but either forgot or else figured we’d be very ... er ... active, because he brought home some more at Christmas. I’ve an old tobacco tin I’ll put a few in for you, just in case.”

I just nodded, not really wanting to agree or disagree, though having an option if things got ... steamy ... would be sensible.

* * * * *

Jack and I sent a flurry of letters back and forth as we worked out details. We’d need to make sure we had our rations and to bring along enough food for our time. We decided on three nights, and would have the better part of four days, as the train to and from Cheddar was fairly straightforward.

We met at Cheddar station late morning on Friday, June 5. Jack was in the waiting room, reading the Daily Mirror. As I’ve said, though rare for the time, Jack didn’t smoke, for which I was thankful. Never liked being in smoke.

I had my rucksack plus my trusty pillowcase, the latter tied with a length of rope and containing a number of food items. Jack had a suitcase and a basket.

He gave me a kiss, then said “It’s not far, about five minutes walk.”

The five minutes was really nearer 15, and the cottage was a tiny one. It had only two rooms, a kitchen parlour and bedroom. Jack said “As I said, separate rooms.”

There was a small sofa in the kitchen. If Jack had to sleep on that he'd hang off the ends and be very uncomfortable. The floor might be better, but it was tiled. Easy to clean, but cold. I'd acquired some men's slippers and tended to wear them all the time indoors.

"Where's the lav?" I asked.

"Blue door, just outside."

I disappeared. Hadn't had a chance to go for a while. The toilet was at least a flushing type, and there was even a little washbasin. Emphasis on little, and a cold tap. Still, functional. Newspaper sheets on a hook. Toilet paper was getting rare.

I came back into the kitchen, and Jack had the kettle on a small camping stove and was setting up a fire in the ancient and rather small range that was there.

"There is a boiler in this range, feeding the sink there, so we can have hot water. I arranged that there'd be some firewood, as nobody lives here permanently, so no coal ration. I won't light this until we come back later, assuming we go out for a walk this afternoon."

"Yes, we need to take advantage of the weather," I answered. "But I'm looking forward to some lunch. Mabel and I have started to make rabbit meat paste – or paté de lapin if you want to be fancy. Nice on sandwiches with some of our lettuce or tomato." I hadn't put on tomato today, as it made the sandwiches soggy, but there was lettuce. I handed Jack a pair of triangles and took two myself.

"Oh, wow. These are good." Jack practically inhaled the sandwiches.

"I'll have to see if I can send you some. It rather needs to be eaten quickly because we're not sure how long it keeps, and we don't want anyone getting food poisoning."

* * * * *

After we'd eaten, we unpacked quickly, then set out for a walk to Cheddar Gorge and the caves. Actually we went first to the caves, which took about an hour to tour, then walked further up the gorge. There was a nice bench and we sat for a bit of a rest.

"I'm glad you invited me," I said.

"I hope you aren't annoyed that the separate rooms is just the two rooms."

"No. No. I ... er ... I've sort of wondered if we should talk about sharing the bed."

"Oh. I ... I ... I never expected that."

"Jack. I think you know I like you. More than like you. My reservations are from a whole lot of things that aren't about us. Well, of course they're about us, but not about me finding you unattractive or me not wanting you."

"Still thinking of Len?" Jack asked.

"Not about Len. I've realized I'm not going to make my life with him. But I wouldn't do anything that is or could be in any way construed as cruel, though I'm almost certain he's dead. It would be a relief to know for certain."

"There's not a lot we can do about it, is there?"

"No. We're rather stuck with the situation. And because I'm not next of kin and am not in touch with his family, Len is historical, but still a ghost in my past and our lives. Though, truthfully, there's something else that worries me more."

I'd decided to tell Jack about William, but indirectly to get his reaction.

Jack said "What's that?"

"Well, the place I was living in 1940 was a semi-detached. There was this couple next door. He worked in a bank and acted like he was the Managing Director, but I think he was just a clerk. He was in his 30s and had a young

wife, about my age, and they'd married when she was about 18. He used to treat her like she was an infant, as if she couldn't do anything. And very controlling. Then once or twice we heard some pretty strange noises and it was clear he was hitting her. But he was a crafty bugger. Made sure he hit her where it wouldn't show. My landlady asked me if I'd heard the noise too, and one day when Mr. Nasty was out we had the girl round for a cup of tea and my landlady put it to her that her husband was beating her."

Jack said "I can't abide a man who'd do that. And I also hate it when a man shows disdain for his wife. I'm not talking of being blind to mistakes and things done badly, but you've got to focus on the things that are going wrong, and not say the person is bad because of them. Skills can be improved, and problems can be tackled to try to solve them. But telling someone they're worthless just makes them give up and start to turn in on themselves."

"Well, X – that's what I'll call him – was a real piece of work. Our neighbour – I won't give her name for reason's I'll explain – told us he'd courted her assiduously. And she was very much like me – parents died when she was young and she'd been taken in by a woman with several young kiddies. But the foster mother really just wanted a cheap servant and nanny. I think that situation didn't do a lot for how our neighbour regarded herself, because there likely wasn't any love or affection, or even kindness in the foster home. So X was able to fool her and get himself someone he could dominate so he could be treated like a minor god, which was far from what he was."

Jack said "In the police we hate what we call domestics – fights in private houses between husband and wife. The courts tend to want to leave the law at the door. Very rare that wife-beaters get convicted of anything short of murder."

"That's what Mrs. ... well, my landlady told our neighbour, but she had an idea. After one of the big bombings she'd picked up an envelope in the street with a birth certificate and some other documents for a young woman who'd been killed. In fact blown to smithereens. Nothing but a few bits of cloth and offal left of the girl. Ghastly case. And nobody ever came forward as family of this girl to whom the documents could be given. So my

neighbour and my landlady went to one of the council offices and my landlady said she knew our neighbour. Our neighbour had some bruises from Mr. X that gave some credence to the bomb story, which was embellished to state that our neighbour had ended up losing a lot of her clothing and her identity card.”

“They gave her a new identity card?” Jack asked.

“Yes. Then a few weeks later, there was another big raid and some of our neighbour’s things were found next to a crater. Perhaps she was killed or injured or simply managed to leave for a new life.”

“Can’t blame her. We occasionally see women like that tipping over the edge. One of the cases we were taught in training was about a woman who’d been bullied for years. Finally snapped and buried an axe in her husband’s head, then went and slept on the sofa. Even left the axe stuck in his head. When the body started to smell, the neighbours complained and the police had to go in. Lady said ‘He wouldn’t stop hitting me’. They didn’t hang her, but she’s in a mental hospital, though in my view the axe is almost a sign of sanity.”

We were quiet for a while. Then Jack said “Do I dare ask about sharing the bed?”

“Yes. I said we should talk about that.” Actually I was feeling a lot more confident about Jack given his reaction to my story.

Jack looked fidgety. I decided to be direct.

“Jack, I think I should tell you I’m ... er... not a virgin. I’ve not much experience, and it’s supposed to be magical and fantastic, only for me it was simply all right. Didn’t do much for me, but not horrible. But I do like you, and the way we get on together, so perhaps it will be better with you.”

“Actually, you’re ahead of me. I’ve not got beyond some slap and tickle. You know. Petting. And going all the way, there’s always the worry of pregnancy. But yesterday I went to the barber and got some rubbers.”

“Mabel gave me some too.”

Jack laughed. “She didn’t trust us not to get carried away.”

“I think more that she feels the War means we’ll miss out if we don’t seize our opportunities. And with the cottage, we don’t have to fumble with clothes in places that aren’t suitable for enjoying ourselves, or hurry in case we’re discovered doing so. I really don’t want to get involved with that kind of thing. If we’re going to ... er ... make love, let’s do it in comfort.”

“Mary, I’d better not tell my colleagues. They won’t believe there’s a woman around who says things like that.”

“I suspect there’s lots of women who would like to have time and comfort with someone they genuinely feel affection for and find attractive.”

“Why don’t we find something for tea – I think I spotted a fish and chip shop – and then we can curl up together and find out how we get on.”

“Yes. I’d like that. I’d really like that,” I said, and meant it.

* * * * *

We found our fish and chips and took them back to the cottage. Jack had brought some cider, and I’d made a rhubarb tart. We lit the range so we’d have some hot water for dishes and washing. After we’d finished eating, we were both a little awkward.

“I’d like to wash before we go to bed,” I said.

“Yes. Me too. But I’ll go outside while you wash,” Jack offered.

“If you feel more comfortable doing that.”

“I thought you would want me to.”

“Well, at some point I’ve got to ... I suppose the expression is ‘drop my knickers’.”

We both laughed. Then laughed some more. In fact had a fit of giggles. Then I made sure the curtain on the window facing the street was closed, and simply took off my slacks and blouse.

“Can you unhook my brassiere?”

Jack was more than willing to oblige, and was undressing too. I turned on the tap and waited until the water turned warm. It hadn't had time or fuel to get very hot, but I partly filled the modest enamel bowl that was in the large kitchen sink. Nobody used the full sink these days.

“Oh, I forgot to get my flannel and towel. They're in my rucksack.”

Jack went to get these, as well as his. Wrapped in my towel was a small tobacco tin that had a small piece of soap. It had been rationed since February. Apparently the fats used for soap were also needed for explosives.

There was evening summer light coming through thin curtains above the sink. The blackout curtains on that window weren't drawn. There was also light coming through similar thin curtains in the bedroom. Two naked people washed themselves then moved to the bed. Jack pulled back the covers and we got in together. I noticed that he'd put a small packet on a small table that was beside the bed.

With no reason to hurry, we took our time and I found myself experiencing something new and very enjoyable. We were rather clumsy with the rubber sheaths, but with some laughter managed all right. Somehow the two of us were able to talk and cooperate to sort things out, and the silly awkwardness that is sex was just part of what we were going to be happy remembering together.

Afterwards – it couldn't have been very late as there was still light – I was lying in Jack's arms and he said simply “I think your neighbour managed to get away.” And he pulled me closer, and kissed my forehead, since I was snuggled down against him and that was the only bit available.

So he understood. I wouldn't say anything that would require him to lie. What had been said was about a 'neighbour'. So I said nothing, but hugged him. As I did, I noticed that he was getting interested again. Good! I was too.

* * * * *

The rest of the weekend was a time I think we'll both remember fondly as long as we live. 'As long as we live'. That's the rub with this War going on. Still, Mabel was right. Seize what chances we have.

On Monday morning, there was just bread and jam for breakfast – some of the WI strawberry from last year that I'd transferred to a left-over small jar. The bread was now a bit stale, given that it had been baked on Thursday last. We'd brought tea and some powdered milk so tea was possible.

"Jack. This weekend has been the best time of my life. I really want to say thank you."

"But I feel the same. The trouble is, I'm not sure how we go on from here."

He looked genuinely distressed.

"I think we both have to keep on with our lives for now. You doing the best you can in the police. Me with the farm. When we can, let's try to get together like this. I know that won't be easy to arrange. But until the War is over, we really can't plan a solid future, and – oh, I never thought I'd think this again – I really want a future with you, Jack."

He came round the table and pulled me up and gave me a long, passionate kiss. Then, without saying anything, we practically sprinted back to the bedroom. Fortunately our trains weren't until the middle of the day.

Afterwards, Jack said "Much as I hate to accept it, what you said about going on more or less as we are is the sensible thing to do. It'll be hard to sort out chances to do something like this cottage again. I think the friends who own it are planning to put an evacuated family in it, so it won't be available."

“Jack, I ... er ... could find a wedding ring if you wanted to go to an hotel.”

I still had my rings.

Jack looked thoughtful. “Well, I could get in big trouble if I gave a false name. But if we simply showed up with our identity cards and you were wearing a ring, there’s no illegality in that. In fact, my guess is that if the hotel reception notices the names aren’t the same, saying ’there’s a war on’ would be enough to shut them up. It isn’t illegal to share hotel rooms, just the policy of some hotels, while others probably haven’t had two people married to each other in the same room for years.”

We both laughed.

“We’d better get dressed,” I said.

“Not until I’ve given these wonderful playthings a gentle squeeze.”

I’d noticed Jack was fascinated by my breasts. “Sorry they’re not bigger. Both Mabel and I often use a fairly tight fitting singlet for both warmth and to avoid having to wear a brassiere. As you’ve noticed, brassieres are a bit fiddly to get on and off.”

“I don’t mind taking them off,” Jack said, pretending all innocence. “And as for size, I think your ... er ... ”

“You can say ’tits’ if you like. Between us. Not for general consumption.”

“Thanks. Well, I think your tits are a nice size for your body. Overly heavy girls seem very awkward doing anything physical, but I guess some men like them big and ... floppy.”

“Well, do me up.” By now I had my panties on, and Jack could re-hook my bra.

* * * * *

When we kissed goodbye – we travelled together to Bath – I couldn’t stop a few tears. Jack wasn’t finding it easy either.

As we broke apart so I could climb into the carriage, he whispered “Love you, Mary.”

“You too, Jack,” I whispered back.

Fortunately, the guard blew his whistle just then.

* * * * *

Unfortunately, we didn’t see each other again for over three months. The farm was busy. Ministry men came nosing around saying they were considering bigger fields because they were more efficient. We gave them a cup of tea and while they were drinking it I said to Mabel “Did you record yesterday’s production of plot C 8?”

I knew she had. And she got to reply “Yes, in the log, and on the slip there on the board.”

One of the Ministry men said “You have a plan and record of the whole smallholding?”

“Yes. Right here on the wall,” I answered. “That plot has produced ... er ... 3920 lbs of tomatoes so far, with perhaps a sixth of the product still to come. It’s about a tenth of an acre.”

“That’s a very good yield!” the man seemed surprised.

Mabel said “Yes, fifteen short tons an acre is considered average according to some numbers we found thanks to the local librarian. We like to keep our yields up, but it’s difficult to get manure, of course, and the lack is hurting.”

“How about your other production?” the man asked.

“Come and look at the slips,” I suggested, and he got up and came over.

“Well, Joe. I think we’d be wasting time and effort to produce less than these industrious ladies are harvesting. And they’ve got their figures organized better than most. Besides, lots of work to fill in the ditches and get the gravel off the paths.”

Mabel and I gave each other a surreptitious grin.

* * * * *

We were now near the end of September.

The summer had been busy. The WI did jam again. I was happy working outside with the crops, and my days were long and full. I wrote to Jack about twice a week. Nothing very momentous, but I told him what produce we were harvesting, minor tales of the children and their work. Oliver, now 13, had shot up a few inches. He had expanded the rabbit production, but now had to find extra food for them. Somehow he made barter arrangements around the neighbourhood and assorted children would show up with sacks of material such as weeds and peelings. Some wasn't suitable for the rabbits, but Oliver was able to use most of it and I helped him build more hutches. Somehow he acquired the wire netting to do this. I think George helped him find a source, though it may have been off the books. All sorts of materials were becoming difficult to find.

This year we sent some ducks to the butcher, and sold a very few duck eggs, which were considered special. Our output was so tiny it was currently outside the ration system, and we didn't give the ducks special feed.

Toby was still my companion, but he now divided his loyalties between me and Matilda. I didn't mind. Reggie still took his duties seriously. One night there was a lot of barking and screeching and we came out to find Toby and Reggie had killed a fox that was trying to get at the chickens. It was a gory mess, and both Mabel and I had to praise the dogs even as we were struggling with nausea. But we didn't lose any chickens. Delia, somehow less squeamish, nailed the fox's tail to the henhouse as a sort of warning trophy.

In all the summer, we saw very little of the War. It was in the news, of course, but it was difficult to decode the real situation. In August there was a lot of noise about the Dieppe Raid, but by mid-September the casualties were reported and we began to wonder what had really happened. It seemed that there was a lot of covering up of mistakes.

By the time the casualty lists for Dieppe came out, news of a victory at El Alamein was on the wireless and in the papers. Later we found out this really was correct to the extent that Montgomery stopped the Axis from reaching Suez. A couple of months later, he really did get a true victory. Both battles, of course, killed a lot of men, but not anywhere near the same 2/3 killed or captured at Dieppe.

At the end of August, the Royal Family lost the Duke of Kent when the Sunderland he was on crashed in Scotland. The War affects everyone. I was glad Jack was in the police. At least I'd have a chance to see him. Mabel's Peter had now been moved somewhere else, but it seemed still in Britain. She guessed Plymouth, and was hoping he'd get some leave. Even 48 hours would give him a chance to get home if he really was in Plymouth. Perhaps it would be better if Mabel went there, then they'd have more time together.

After tea, which was late now that we didn't stop outside work until dark, I said "Mabel. If Peter gets leave, why don't you go to him so you can get the benefit of his whole leave."

"That would mean me paying for the train, and there'd be a hotel too. If Peter comes here, he gets a travel warrant."

"Well, I've not spent much in the last year. How about a combined birthday and Christmas present of a fiver?"

Matilda spoke up "I'll do the same. With ten quid you and Peter should be able to have a nice couple of days."

Mabel temporized "It'll mean Delia and Oliver don't see him."

"That's true," I said, but then Oliver jumped in. "Mum, I think you should, if you can, do what Mary and Grandma suggest. Don't you think so too, Delia."

"I would like to see Daddy, but the two of you need some time to talk and be together. Christmas was nice when he was here, but it was so busy. I don't think you had a chance to just ... sit and talk."

Matilda responded “That’s extremely mature and generous of you, children. And I think that settles it, Mabel. Better write tonight and find out if things can be arranged.”

* * * * *

Monday, October 5, 1942

Matilda had made one of her wonderful rabbit stews. Good job too. We expected Mabel back mid-afternoon, but there were delays – there were always delays – on the railway, and it was well after dark when she came in. After she’d been to the lav and washed up, and given the children each a book that was a present from their father, we set a bowl of the stew, a cup of tea and a large wedge of bread, unfortunately National Loaf, in front of her.

“Ah. This is soooo welcome. I’ve had nothing since about 10 this morning except a couple of biscuits and some water. Good job I took that lemonade bottle with me and filled it up.”

The children peppered her with questions about where she and Peter had gone. They’d found a modest hotel in Tavistock and managed to walk on Dartmoor since the weather had been dry. By dint of taking a morning bus out of Tavistock and walking back, they’d managed to get some variety of scenery. The hotel had provided breakfast and dinner, and Mabel had taken some provisions just in case, though she’d managed to bring most back again. Waste not, want not.

The books Peter had chosen, and Mabel pointed out he’d already got them before she arrived in Plymouth, were one of Richmall Crompton’s William books and a book on British wild plants and bushes. He’d written in both ‘To Delia and Oliver. Love Dad, October 1942.’

Mabel said “He couldn’t decide which one to give to each of you, but they’re books, so you should be able to both enjoy them.”

Matilda said “I wouldn’t have thought that books about an eleven-year-old tearaway would be much of interest to Delia. That Crompton fellow writes for little boys.”

“Except Richmall Crompton is a single lady of about fifty,” I said. “Apparently, she’s volunteered for the Fire Service. The William books are about a young boy, but they can be read by all ages.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that. How odd, for a single woman to write about children, and of the other sex.”

About this time, I headed up to bed, and Mabel wasn’t far behind me. There was a quiet knock on my door just as I was getting into bed. I opened the door and Mabel said “Can I come in for a minute?”

“Of course. Is everything all right?”

“As all right as things get in this War. I just wanted to say thanks. It was absolutely right for Peter and I to have a getaway. Almost a second honeymoon.”

I couldn’t resist, and said “I hope Peter came prepared.”

“Oh, yes. He had plenty.” Then with a smirk, she added “And we used nearly all of them. This morning I was rather sore, but in a nice way.”

“Peter had been saving up, then?”

“Not just him. I’d been deprived too. I just hope we didn’t scandalize the other guests. The bed was a bit squeaky!”

* * * * *

That day I’d had a letter from Jack. He was being promoted again, to Inspector, and transferred to the Criminal Investigation Department, or CID. So he was now Detective Inspector Morrison. In my reply I congratulated him.

The letter also said his duties would still include special activities as needed, but probably he’d mostly be looking into criminal activity, especially black market and rationing crimes. He wrote, of course, that he wouldn’t be sharing details. I told him to look after himself. There’d been some nasty characters around in London.

Talking with Mabel, I realized I'd been missing Jack. A few times when working in the plots I'd daydreamed about our weekend in Cheddar and found my knickers wet. It hadn't been like that with William.

* * * * *

November 11, 1942

Jack had got a couple of days off and I'd come up to Bath. There was enough bomb damage that he'd booked us a room near Saltford, about half way to Bristol. Bristol had had its share of bombs too.

Jack had met me about six o'clock in Bath. "Sorry to say, I'm on standby in case something develops. Let's hope it doesn't. I'll have to give the telephone number of the hotel. A bit awkward. I've told my colleagues I haven't seen my fiancé for three months. Got the usual wink and nudge, but I think they'll not call unless it's critical."

"Did you tell them my name? Some men might take me for a ... you know ... good time girl."

"No. Figured it's none of their business. But given some of the investigations I'm involved in, I don't want anyone thinking I'm getting some bribes or special favours from the crooks. My colleagues simply know you're working in Taunton in agriculture."

The hotel was able to give us an evening meal. Not great, but could have been worse. They did have a well-stocked bar. Well-stocked by the standards of the day, anyway. We weren't going to be drinking whiskey or other spirits, but we did have a sherry before eating and beer with the meal. Even some coffee to follow, which I'd only had a couple of times before.

In our room, which had a sink and some tepid water, we were rather anxious. Everything happened a bit quickly. All in about five minutes.

"That wasn't quite what I'd planned," Jack said.

“We were trying too hard. Let’s cuddle and in a while we’ll try again a bit more slowly.”

“Yes. The cottage in Cheddar was much more conducive to that.”

“And a good deal warmer. There’s frost forecast tonight I think.”

Jack pulled the eiderdown up around me.

We held each other close for a while, then he said “I was in London for a planning session ten days ago. We’re sharing information on gangs, since they don’t stay nicely in one policing region.”

“Is that your first time there apart from delivering the prisoner in the van?”

“Since the start of the War, yes. I was there a couple of times on outings with my parents in the 30s.”

“Did it seem more knocked about than before?”

“Not sure. We’ve had similar here in Bath and Bristol. Not like Taunton, which has pretty much escaped so far.”

“Did you have to stay over?”

“Yes. We were put up in a hotel in Chelsea for a couple of nights.

Actually, I had a few hours free and managed to learn that your former landlady died.”

I tensed up, and Jack noticed. “Sorry. Perhaps I shouldn’t have, but I know Mrs. Carter – I learned her name from a street directory – was a good friend.”

“Yes, she was. Probably owe her my life.”

“That’s more or less how I view things. Anyway, I simply went to the address I’d noticed on your identity card. I knocked and said who I was, but that my visit was a personal and not a police one to find out for a friend

why she'd had no letters from Mrs. Carter with whom she'd had a friendship. They told me she died of cancer in August 1941 and they were the new tenants, so didn't know much."

"Did you learn anything about the man next door?" I was rather stiff with anxiety as I asked that.

"Ooh, you're all rigid. Calm down, Detective Inspector Morrison won't be arresting you." He gave me a kiss and I relaxed a little.

"What did you learn?"

"I asked the woman who answered – a Mrs. Jones, which is sort of funny given you are Smith – if the neighbours might have any information about Mrs. Carter. She said that there had been a couple there, but the wife had been killed in the May 10, 1941, bombings and the widower had been asked to move to smaller lodgings by the housing authorities since he was one man in a whole house. I got his address from Mrs. Jones – the warrant card is quite helpful in loosening tongues. Unfortunately, we've also noticed some criminals forging police identity cards. With the War on, we can threaten to charge under the foreign agent rules which puts the wind up even fairly hardened crooks, but the message hasn't fully got out yet."

Jack was wandering off topic. I asked "So did you find out any more about William?" Clearly Jack already knew his name, and presumably the name of his supposedly late wife.

"Yes. I don't think he liked being a lodger, and sweet-talked his landlady into marrying him so he's now cock of the roost in her house."

"Poor woman. We can imagine what he'll do to her." I said this, and meant it, but somehow was relieved that William wasn't likely to want me to re-appear in my old identity. My thoughts nearly had me miss what Jack was saying.

"Actually, William may treat her rather carefully. His new wife has a brother whose name I've seen in the files. William should have done his homework. Brother Tom is the type of person who can make someone turn

into a corpse floating in the Thames. I'll possibly have to keep an eye out in case the new brother-in-law should lean on William to give information useful in a bank robbery or something similar."

"Jack. Thank you for looking into things."

"Well, I want us to be able to have a future, and if your former neighbour, as she will continue to be, is allowed to rest in peace, that future is brighter."

I pondered what Jack had said, then asked "To change the subject a little, what was in your mind when you told your colleagues I was your fiancé?"

"Would a good answer be 'wishful thinking'?"

"I think 'early warning' might be better."

"What?"

"Meaning I'd be happy for it to be true, and we could agree that I'm your fiancé whenever you are ready."

I got a kiss for that, and some gentle manhandling of my breasts, then between my legs, where I could tell things were very slippery.

"Should I get a towel for you to lie on?" Jack asked, and I nodded.

He slid out of bed so he wouldn't push the covers back, grabbed a towel from the rack beside the sink, and rushed back under the covers. We fumbled around under these to get me onto the towel, then Jack was playing with me again.

"That feels really nice at the front of my ... slit."

"I can tell."

"Hmm. I didn't think detectives used truncheons. And this one has some extra bits."

“Mary. You are wicked, but none of your wickedness falls under chargeable offences. Unless, of course, I don’t get a rubber on and find a warm place to put my truncheon.”

* * * * *

We were mostly lucky with our couple of days, but there was a telephone call early on the 13th. We’d managed a bit of walking on the 12th, and a bit of daydreaming about what life might be like when the War ended. We talked about whether getting married sooner would work, but the likely outcome would be that I’d be back in the pool for national service, and then possibly sent somewhere else. The farm was a good situation for me, and it offered a bit of stability, even for Jack.

I’d worn the wedding ring I had. That was for the benefit of the hotel. I wondered about the engagement ring I already had. Jack said he’d save up for a new one, and I said I’d rather he saved up for a nice house and furniture and pots and pans and dishes. He got the idea, and agreed that building a life together was more important than a bit of jewellery.

I was thinking that it would be nice to be married, but not nice to be apart. The War was only recently looking more favourable to our side. This year had started gravely with the Japanese onslaught. And the U-boats were still sinking lots of ships and threatening to starve us to death.

We sat on a bench and Jack put his arm round me. It was cool but, though some rain threatened, had stayed dry.

“Jack. What do you think we should do with the engagement ring? And the wedding ring, I suppose?”

Jack told me the name of a jeweller in Taunton who he trusted, and said it would be worth getting it appraised, even if that cost a shilling or two.

“Tell him it belonged to your mother or a family member if he asks,” Jack said. “Then you’ll know if it’s worth anything. If it is worth something, we’ll think how to use the value sensibly. However, we don’t want any suspicions it’s looted. Apparently looters were fighting each other to steal

jewellery off the dead Café de Paris patrons when it got bombed, and the rescue services couldn't get through to help the injured, who I'm guessing were also being robbed. Makes me sick! I can see why looters can be summarily shot, though the courts haven't imposed the death penalty yet for looting."

"Yes. Better to just put the ring away or throw it away than get into a spot of bother because of it." I was almost ready to throw it away now.

"I can afford a new wedding ring for you," Jack said. "And Mary Smith should have her own, right?"

"Of course she should," I agreed, and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "But how soon? I want like blazes to be married to you, but don't want to be traipsing round, living in dismal rented rooms until the War's over and we can get settled."

"Well, I can't see that it makes sense to leave the farm. I know you are happy there, both with the people and, unless I'm totally wrong in my observations, you find the work rewarding."

"Yes. I do enjoy the work, even though it's quite long hours a lot of the time and physically demanding. And I feel part of the family. It's what I hope we can build eventually."

"Even if my career's in the police, I can't see that you shouldn't find something like that. But do be aware that when Peter comes back, your role would change. I'd hate for you to come a cropper emotionally because you weren't prepared for things to change. But you and I could find somewhere that would allow you to grow things. My guess is that even when War ends, there'll be shortages for a while. We've a hell of a lot of rebuilding to do, and no money in the government coffers."

"You sound a bit despondent about that," I said.

"Not really. It'll be a challenge, that's all. And a lot of people will expect that everything will suddenly be all right and wonderful, but of course it won't. It's the disappointment that might be worse than the reality."

“Let’s hope not for us.”

“I agree, Mary. And it’s one reason why I’m happy you want ‘like blazes’ to be married to me. So what should we do?”

“Do you want to get married as soon as possible? Quietly, but so when we are able to be together, we don’t have to worry about appearances.”

“Yes, even in wartime, we have to keep up appearances. Especially a police inspector.” Jack said this with a tinge of irony in his voice.

“I could go and see the vicar in Taunton at St. James where the WI meets in the hall. I could find out when we could get married. Though I’m not a regular at services. In fact, hardly at all, though I’m usually at the Hall for the WI on Sunday afternoons.”

“Why don’t I write a letter to the Register Office. It’s in the Municipal Building – so you have my agreement that we want to marry. I can include my police address and telephone if they need it, as well as my lodgings address and birthdate and birthplace. But since I was a bobby there, someone in the office will know me. Somewhere I read we need to give notice of at least 29 days. I think that means that if we give notice tomorrow, Friday 13 November, the earliest we can marry would be the 42nd of November, known as the 12th of December, which is Saturday. But maybe they insist on one more day, so Sunday 13th would be the earliest date. And I may have to give notice at the Register Office in Bath, since that’s where I lodge now.”

“You’re in a real hurry, Jack.”

“No. Just working out the earliest date to see when it falls. But clearly, we can get married before the end of the year. Unfortunately, since I had Christmas off last year, I’m on duty this year. Thursday 24th to Monday morning following.”

“Perhaps we could get married on New Year’s day. That might be a nice time,” I said.

“Yes. Will you have time to get a wedding dress?”

“I think I’d prefer something different. I’ve ... er ... seen all the fuss about the white dress, and it’s a lot of work for something you get to wear for a few hours.

I think I’d like a nice costume that would do for dressing up for a number of years. Some of the CC41 Utility costumes were horrid, though the ones that actress Deborah Kerr modelled were really nice in appearance. The other day I saw a nice one in a shop that I quite liked, and it had a CC41 label. I’ve spent almost none of my coupons, so I think I could get a complete outfit, including a coat, a blouse, and some undies, though I’d likely then not have any coupons left. Still, I think it would be worth it.

Mabel and I have also been trying to find out if we qualify for a work clothing allowance. If we had some points for overalls, they’d give Mabel some flexibility for the children’s clothing. We can get dungarees without points if we don’t get the extra coupons, but not the best types. And we can get blackout material without coupons. Some people sew items from that. Someone in the WI was able to get material from a German parachute. I don’t know if from an airman or a mine that didn’t go off.”

“Well, as a man, I don’t expect to get a word in edgewise when you’re enthused about women’s clothing, but I will say I think that a well-fitted suit of skirt and jacket would be very appropriate to a wartime wedding. And you’ve not got a coat that’s not really work-wear.”

“Would you wear a suit, or a police uniform?”

“I probably would look better in uniform, but once we have a date, I’ll write to the Chief Constable and ask permission to wear it so nobody can complain. I actually hadn’t thought about it, but it makes some sense.”

“You know, it’ll be a lot easier visiting your family if we’re married,” I said.

“Or when I come to Taunton. But we’ll have to learn to fit in a single bed.”

“I can think of worse problems,” I laughed, and got a kiss for my levity.

Then Jack turned a little serious and said “It occurs to me that there are quite a lot of people like yourself who were bombed out and lost everything including documents. It’s plain that there’ll be mistakes in the records, and no doubt some people will find they’ve been declared dead by mistake.”

“You think that might happen to me?” I asked, guessing that he wanted to tell me something.

“Possibly. Never know when someone sets up a memorial for people killed in a raid and then someone else notices that one of the victims has been married later on. That sort of thing. I’m sure something like that could happen. Or people are similar in appearance to someone who died. There could be unhappy encounters of the sort ‘I thought you were dead’ with strangers.”

Carefully and tentatively, I said “Do you think there’d be a lot of trouble in such cases, or just some temporary awkwardness?”

“Probably depends. In your situation, having been bombed twice, and injured – remember how your face was when we met; there’s still tiny marks if I look very, very closely – it would be remarkable if there wasn’t some confusion in the records.”

“Is there anything I should do to make sure my situation is all right?”

“You’ve got your documents and identity card. There’s probably some confusion about ration cards for early 1941. You were recovering from one bombing and then got blown about by another. I think the main thing is not to get in a flap should there be anything come up. You are clearly alive, and you have been living and working in Taunton since escaping the bombing. There’ve been some fiddles with false claims for compensation and benefits to bomb victims, ration cards and so on. I’m sure there’s other rackets being tried. But you haven’t been involved in anything like trying to use an old and a new ration card at the same time. Just the opposite – you somehow managed without. So best to be polite but firm that you’re who you say you are. Say as little as possible, because it’s only likely to give people red herrings to make a fuss about. If there’s some official request for

information, I'd get a solicitor to advise on how to reply, for example, to correct information that says you're dead."

Jack knew my real name, of course, but I understood that it was important to him that he never acknowledged that he knew. That he could never be accused of addressing me in a way that showed he knew. That made a lot of sense, and it helped me be Mary Smith. Jack was giving me excellent advice, and from the viewpoint of a fairly senior police officer. Probably violating several policies and undertakings.

"How would I find a solicitor?" I asked.

"I know one or two from my work, of course. Actually, it would make sense for us to both make our wills. We don't have much now, but having them gives clarity and helps later. I've known of cases where people didn't have a will and there were court cases over disputed rights. Also if we're married, you'd qualify for some benefits if anything happened to me. I'll write to you with a couple of names and addresses. Have to look them up. That way we'll take care of the future and we'll have the contact if we ever need it for other things, even buying a house."

"Yes, it would be nice to have our own house."

I meant what I said about a house, but also wanted to bring this thread of conversation to a close. It made me anxious, both from the point of view of my identity and because Jack was talking about benefits if he were killed. On the other hand, I knew Jack was trying to give me some direction in how to handle what could bring disaster upon us. There could be people who knew the old me. Someone might recognize me despite my change in hair and the fact I'd become more muscular with my work. It wasn't out of the question. Just have to say "Sorry. Do I know you?" and "Oh. There must be someone out there looks like me."

If the record of Joan Mary Smith being blown to unrecognizable pieces was raised, Jack's advice to get a solicitor involved was good. My story of being twice involved with bombs, plus some injuries noted by Jack as a policeman, Mrs. Hodges and Mrs Appleby at the rest centre and Maud Brown and Jackie Hazelton at the WI, would allow me to argue that I had

trouble remembering exact details. There were plenty of cases of people 'not quite right' after being blown about by bombs. Jack was telling me to provide no details that could be checked and challenged.

The most awkward situation, and one he didn't mention, was if Joan Smith had friends or acquaintances who somehow encountered me. "You're not like the Joan Smith I remember." But I used Mary Smith, soon to be Mary Morrison if I got my identity card changed. Yes. I should do that. Was there anything else I had to do? Well I had made a note of the names of the people at the rest centre and its location. And I actually still had the old label with the map to Paddington. They were in my footlocker.

* * * * *

I stopped by the Municipal Buildings on my way home from the station when I got back to Taunton. It wasn't much out of my way in any case. Friday, January 1, 1943 had an opening in the late morning and I asked if I could book that and register our intent to marry. I passed Jack's letter to the lady who was at the desk.

"Oh. You lucky girl! I met Jack a couple of times when he was on the beat here. Lovely man. And now Detective Inspector. Good for him. And you, of course."

While the lady was quite helpful in telling me what Jack needed to do so that we had all the correct procedures followed, she seemed a lot more interested in how he was doing, where we planned to live, and how the farm was doing, since she knew Mabel and Peter by acquaintance. Still, it was good to have a friendly and interested official rather than a coldly bureaucratic one.

Mabel and Matilda were excited by my news, and both said they would come with me on Monday – we didn't want to try shopping for clothing on the Saturday – to try to find an appropriate outfit. I was somewhat anxious beforehand that they would argue for the white dress, but both had been struggling to figure out how to dress themselves and the children on the limited points. There was enough clothing for now, but the children were

growing and work pants and other items took a lot of wear and tear out in the fields.

Over our tea there was quite a discussion about how quiet our 'quiet wedding' would be. Mabel assured me the WI members would insist on a bit of celebration, if only for an hour or so. I realized as they were talking about this that Jack's family would want to come. I included a question about that when I wrote to Jack that evening.

* * * * *

In a sense, William got the last laugh about the engagement ring. The jeweller didn't even charge to tell me the ring was paste.

"Looks good from a distance, but won't stand a close up view. Glass in place of diamond, and a plated metal ring. Not a bad appearance, but my guess is this is a theatre prop. Sorry, luv."

Fortunately, I'd said nothing to the man except that Jack had recommended him as an honest dealer and that I wanted to know the value of a ring. I thanked him, and wondered why he seemed to be expecting me to say or do something, then realized that he suspected I'd been given the ring to hasten a seduction. I said archly "I should have known he was a fraud!" which was, of course, true. The jeweller seemed satisfied with that response.

I'd gone to the jeweller first on Monday. That would be November 16. Matilda and Mabel were doing some shopping and would meet me at the clothing shop where I'd seen the CC41 "utility" costume I liked. I got there a quarter hour before them and had learned that, much to my disappointment, the item I found interesting was well outside my size.

By the time Mabel and Matilda arrived, I'd found two costumes that fitted me. I wasn't thrilled by either. In any event, I tried each on, unfortunately with my heavy lisle stockings which did no favours to the overall appearance, and my friends confirmed my verdict.

The shop owner said "Wait a minute. I have a suit that was going to go to ... well, one of my other customers. I said I'd hold it until last Saturday, but

she didn't pick it up. Just before you came in, her mother telephoned to say she got called up for the WAACs and won't need it. Let me see if you like it and it fits."

We were lucky. It was close to the model and fabric I'd first found attractive in the window, and it fitted me very well. In fact, no adjustments would be needed.

I'd already seen a coat I liked. It was a nice tweed one and would last a long time if I took care of it.

I'd now been in the shop three quarters of an hour, and thought we'd be out in another few minutes. However, choosing underwear and a blouse took another hour. Actually, it wasn't the choice of garment, it was the juggling of the points so I got a new pair of stockings – still lisle but of a better quality – cami-knickers, panties, blouse, along with the costume and coat. In the end, Matilda saved the day by lending me a coupon. I could pay her back when we got our new allocation.

Fortunately, I'd got a pair of decent enough shoes just before rationing of clothing came in. They were low-heeled but quite suitable for nearly all occasions, and I'd never been comfortable with high heels. Mabel had had the foresight to stock up on dubbin, and at the farm we were all fiends when it came to keeping leather well-protected. Since clogs – the English rather than Dutch kind – were available without coupons, we'd been wearing those when we could, which was much of the time. Our feet got used to the wooden soles, and they weren't uncomfortable for outdoor work, though not appropriate for walking any distance. We also had Wellingtons, though I was using Peter's. Sometimes they were available. Points needed, of course.

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It turned out that Jack and I didn't see each other until New Year's Day when he came by train as early as he could. We weren't concerned about the groom not supposed to see the bride in advance. By contrast, we were deathly worried that train delays would mean we missed getting married.

We'd had a lively correspondence throughout December. Jack had quite easily managed to get a ring. For sizing, we'd made several traces of the ring I'd kept as well as a mark on a cardboard wedge.

Jack's parents had decided to close their shop for the day and come to the wedding. Audrey, however, was not given leave, but that was normal in these very abnormal times.

The WI ladies insisted on a wedding lunch in St. James Hall, and also insisted I make no attempt to interfere with their plans. In retrospect, I believe Jack would have found a number of contraventions of the rationing regulations if he had been inclined to investigate how they acquired some of the items we consumed after our Register Office ceremony. I believe, however, that Jack himself was guilty of destroying some of the evidence by virtue of consuming it with relish.

George took photos, letting Oliver hold the camera so he got in one or two pictures. Jackie Hazelton had a camera too, saying "Just in case there's an accident with developing those George is taking."

Most people say a 'Registry Office' wedding, but I noticed that the plaque for the one where we married clearly said 'Register Office', and since it is the place where the Register of Marriages, Births and Deaths is kept, 'Registry' is a slip. But realizing that it mentioned that deaths were recorded, I had a moment of unease. Where was Joan Mary Smith's death recorded?

* * * * *

Jack had told me he would take care of a short honeymoon. He had work on Monday, but not until the afternoon. Somehow he got some police friends to pick us up from the church hall at two o'clock. They made a great show of 'arresting' us. For a moment I had a sick feeling they might be there for ... well the reasons that scared me. But it was all a nice gift to get us to Taunton Station in time for the train that we'd take. Mabel had lent me a suitcase, saying "You can't take a rucksack on your honeymoon."

On the platform, I asked "Jack. Where are we going?"

“Now that we’re out of the crowd, I can tell you. I’ve booked us three nights in the Randolph Hotel in Oxford. Plenty of things to see there, and it’s avoided the bombings.

By the way, I really like your costume and coat. You did well, and no fussing about changing to leave.”

“Well, I still owe Matilda a coupon. If I’d had a wedding dress, I wouldn’t have the costume. And I’ve only my old nightdress that I fixed up from a second-hand one.”

“Perhaps there’s a new wartime regulation that newlywed brides aren’t allowed to wear nightdresses.”

“Given how we’ve behaved before, it would not be a great surprise if the regulation were unnecessary. But it might be quite cold and, I’m afraid to say, my monthlies came later than I expected.” I whispered the last bit, as I didn’t want all and sundry on the platform, which was fortunately not crowded, to know my private business.

“Does that mean we won’t be able to ... er” Jack seemed anxious.

“I talked to Mabel, and she said there’s no danger, only possible messiness, so we should take a bit of care to lie on a towel. And she said that her doctor had said there was much less likelihood of getting in the family way at that time, though apparently it could happen.”

Jack said “We’ll manage,” and I knew we would.

Our trains, with only minor delays, got us to Oxford so we were at the hotel by six o’clock. On the way we talked quite a bit about what we’d like as a future. It seemed Jack wanted to stay in the police, and that made sense. He was doing well, and would likely get to be a senior officer at quite a young age. He already was. We both wanted a place to live that had room to grow things, and Jack thought we might keep an eye out for somewhere that would allow a smaller version of the Gaffneys’ place. One I could manage more or less on my own. I’d really like that, I think.

I asked about children, and it seemed we both assumed we would have some, though both of us wanted to wait until the War was over to start. Until then rubber, or perhaps near my monthlies. Pity it was so awkward.

The Randolph was imposing. We probably could have walked from the station, but took a taxi, which pulled up by the wide entrance steps.

“Jack. Can we afford this? It’s pretty swish.”

“Mrs. Morrison, we can afford three nights quite easily. More than that, and I’ll have to send you out to work. Oh. But you already work.”

We had no difficulties registering. Jack’s identity card was one of the special ones with a photograph and he was listed as Detective Inspector. I handed mine to the clerk with one of the two smaller marriage certificates we’d arranged to get with the large main one.

“Congratulations Detective Inspector and Mrs. Morrison. I hope your stay here will be one that gives happy memories.”

* * * * *

The room had its own bathroom! What a luxury, even if there was a line for the allowed depth. And somehow there was a little – a very little – heat in the radiator.

The dinner we had on Friday was good, even though it had to conform to the rationing regulations. Or was it good because we were together and just married?

Given it was wintertime, we were lucky to have only a trace of rain, though the temperature wasn’t much above freezing. We walked a lot, looking at the town and the colleges. On Saturday afternoon we walked across Port Meadow, one of the few remaining common grazing areas in the country. In a pamphlet on Oxford that we found, it was reportedly given to the freemen of Oxford by Alfred the Great, though that was, according to a footnote, a legend, but the right to graze animals was in the Domesday Book.

There were remnants of a military camp on the meadow. In 1940 it was used for soldiers who escaped Dunkirk, but the tents were now gone and just some signs of pathways and tent pegs remained. We were able to get a meal in the Trout, then had quite a walk back to the Randolph. We didn't mind. We were together, and happily so.

Some of the colleges had been taken over by different military units for use for training. A few, like Wadham, appeared to be still functioning more or less as always, though this was too early for the term to start, so it was very quiet.

There was lots to see, and I suppose I should have been more interested in the stories of the places, but it was enough to be with Jack and sharing the time and the places. I'd read about Oxford, but the variety of different types of views and buildings and land surprised me.

Of course, so much was historical, but still in use. Jack took me to The Bear, a truly ancient pub where even I had to duck to avoid bumping my head.

* * * * *

We took an early train on Monday. Jack was going back to Bath. I was returning to Taunton. After we'd parted – no tears, but we both were subdued – it seemed being married didn't feel much different from before when Jack and I took some time together. On the other hand, I found a sense of comfort, of coming home, as the train pulled into Taunton. Unfortunately, no rucksack and I had to walk to the farm. My fingers got a bit tired with the suitcase, but it could have been worse.

Toby, especially, but also Reggie both seemed pleased I was back. Mabel was out on the plots checking how things were doing, but Matilda was doing the laundry.

"If you're quick, I can do some of your things in the next batch," she offered. So I hurried upstairs and changed into my work clothes and gathered my laundry and hurried downstairs.

“It’s a mixed bunch, I’m afraid, so some will have to wait for next week, but nothing’s critical,” I said.

Matilda selected the items that would go with the next set of clothes to be put in the galvanized tub we used for washing and put the smallest amount of soap in too. We rinsed in the sink, and often would do the heavy work clothes in a second shift in the soapy water. The main thing with the outdoor clothes was to get the mud and muck off them.

I gave Matilda a hand with the rinsing and hanging up. We weren’t drying in the kitchen today, as the weather was decent, so I took things out to the lines in the yard and hung them using the gypsy-made pegs and raised the line with our ancient but trusty prop. Toby followed me around. He seemed worried I might go away again. Silly hound. I wasn’t going to desert him.

About a quarter past one Mabel came in.

“There you are. Have a nice time?”

“Very! Thanks for asking. Jack had booked three nights in the Randolph Hotel in Oxford. A room with its own bath and toilet. Luxury, even with the line in the tub and not much heating.”

“Good for ’im,” Matilda said. “You want to get off to a good start.”

“Yes. Pity we can’t stay together just yet, but I suppose we’re doing better than a lot of couples.”

Mabel said “Yes, some’ll have two nights and then several years apart. That’ll make it difficult to build a good marriage later.”

I changed the subject and asked what I should consider working on.

“There’s not a lot in the plots. May be a good time to check all the baskets and flats. Clean them up and fix any breaks as best we can. Also sort out the stakes and strings for tomatoes and beans. It’s rather dull work, but now’s a good time to have a go at it.”

We had some soup – we called it 'lucky soup' because you were lucky if you could guess what was in it, since we tossed in bits and bobs of vegetables and scraps of meat. There were wedges of National Loaf with a little dripping and Marmite. Then I put on my sailing jacket and my work gloves and went to the byre with Toby. Fortunately I remembered my key.

Toby darted in, but got no rat today. In fact, I think he'd pretty well got all the resident vermin out of the byre. I went up to the loft and opened the door for light. I found a brush that had a handle and started on the bushel baskets. They were mostly pretty clean. Occasionally some leaves of bits of grass and soil. Two needed some sort of repair, and I didn't know exactly what to do with those. Have to ask Mabel. Probably some sort of re-weaving of the reed or straw. Anyway, I set those two aside and then worked on the flats.

The flats generally needed more cleaning. Some had decayed remnants of vegetables or fruit and those I took outside and got a bucket of water and a scrubbing brush to clean. Then I set them to dry on edge so they wouldn't collect water that might cause damage to the wood.

A few had loose slats. I found the pliers and pulled out the nails, sometimes removing the slats, then re-nailed them if the wood were good. A few needed new slats. I rummaged in the loose lumber we had and found some I could use. The saw and workbench were handy, and I got this done quickly. But we didn't have a lot more wood of the right dimensions. Better talk to Oliver about scrounging for more. Make do and mend!

I didn't have time today to do all the repairs, and there was a pile of sacks I should check for holes, but it was getting dark so I closed and locked the byre and headed to the house. Toby had been lying watching me work, and he jumped up to accompany me. I wonder how he'd take to Jack when we finally got to all be together.

* * * * *

In early June 1943 Jack got a weekend off and came to Taunton. We found we could fit in my bed quite comfortably, though it was naturally crowded. We did take Saturday night in a local hotel. That evening, Jack said "Let's go to the Vivary Arms for a drink. Apparently the American Medical Corps

people often drop in there. They've set up the Musgrave Park Hospital near there and taken over Norton Manor Camp as a supply depot for medical stuff. It's apparently the oldest inn in Taunton."

By now I knew Jack well enough to say "Must be some villains cooking something up that you want to sniff out."

Jack laughed. "Well, yes. You'll provide nice camouflage for me. There's been rumours some of the American troops in either the hospital or the depot or both are doing some black-market trading. They have lots of cans of peaches, cartons of cigarettes and so on. I'm not sure what we have to offer in return."

"There was a fellow – said his name was Gene ... Gene Hammond – who tried to chat to me about strawberries when I was weeding them a couple of weeks ago."

"They're a high value crop, but strawberries would be a small side-line if he's seriously involved. You and Mabel do well with your production, but I think these fellows are looking for something bigger. Possibly trading heirloom jewellery or paintings or antiques."

When we got to the Vivary, Jack ordered me a half of cider – he didn't bother to ask and I was going to chide him when I realized that I would have asked for that anyway. He also knew that I'd have said in advance if I wanted something different. He got himself a pint of bitter and suggested we find a seat outside. I thought that odd until we'd sat down and who should come to the pub but the man I'd mentioned, Gene Hammond.

Gene went inside, then came out with a glass of what was probably beer. He came over to where we were sitting and said in a loud voice "Mary, the strawberry lady! Won't you introduce your fellow."

I didn't really want to do this, but in a very cool manner said "This is my husband, Jack." Emphasis on husband.

"Good to meet you, Jack." Then, much, much more softly "Sorry to have to leave off the titles."

He and Jack shook hands and Gene sat down across the rough table that had several chairs around it.

Jack, not overly loud, but audible to anyone near asked “Are you with the hospital?”

Gene said “No. I’m a stores manager at Norton Manor Camp.”

Jack whispered to me “But also Military Police.”

Gene asked “How are the strawberries coming along? We could sure use some to cheer up some badly wounded guys in the hospital.”

“I think we’ll be picking some early ones soon. The production is, of course, pretty well committed to local shops and the Women’s Institute Jam.”

“Yes, I’ve heard what a great job your WI does with preserving and canning. Set a big challenge for our American gals to do as well.”

Jack, lifting his glass to apparently take a long draught, whispered “Some small amounts of produce will allow Gene and I to share messages.”

Thereafter, the conversation was almost entirely mundane until we’d finished our drinks and Gene said “Let me give you guys a lift back. I’ve a jeep, and plenty of gas.”

This let Gene and Jack agree that I’d work with Mabel to prepare the odd flat of something special that would be provided in exchange for some cans of peaches, evaporated milk, or some chocolate. Nylons were offered, but I said that would be too blatant. We could argue that the barter of food for food was reasonable and more or less expected when British families entertained American servicemen. Nylons would be seen as black-market or else would reflect badly on the morals of Gaffney’s farm women. Jack and Gene laughed.

“If I bring a chocolate bar, look inside the wrapper. For peaches, under the label. The labels to watch for will be a little torn at the edge. You get the

idea.”

I nodded.

Gene let us off at our hotel, and we retired early. In bed, Jack said “I wondered if I should tell you about Gene in advance, but I wanted your initial reaction to be rather a cold shoulder so nobody got suspicious. There may have been some of the crooks there drinking.”

“How will I pass messages to Gene?” I asked.

“We can use your invoice or bill of lading to tell him that there’s a message hidden somewhere he knows how to find. If the second last digit of the invoice number is odd, then there’s a message. Otherwise not.”

“Is this a dangerous operation, Jack?”

“Possibly. But we don’t know yet quite what the objective is. It’s likely purely for material gain, but in wartime, it could cover espionage or sabotage.”

“So it could be our duty to find out?”

“Not could be. Is.”

“But right now we can do something else for national service.”

“Right now. What?” Jack seemed confused.

“Make sure our equipment is all fully functional.”

“Oh. Well. Yes. The whole war effort would grind to a halt otherwise.”

* * * * *

One of the potential weaknesses of the arrangement was if the shipment got diverted, or even if Delia or Oliver ate the chocolate bar. Jack and I decided we would tell the Gaffneys an investigation was in progress and that

shipments to and from the Americans, either at the Camp or Hospital, were to be checked carefully by me before anyone else touched them.

On Gene's side, Jack was represented as someone whose family were in the food trade, which could cover shipments. That this was true was helpful, of course. Therefore the messages I was relaying were at several levels. At least we got some interesting bits of food. We were among the first locals to try Spam. At first, not considered a wonderful choice, but later we realized that it did provide meat in a form that was versatile and somewhat indestructible.

* * * * *

It was early September when things came to a head. I'd transmitted just one message and received two, but Jack had been around a few times, so we'd managed two weekends together, even though he had on one of them to make a call during which I was left in the car. There were things I did not ask about. What I didn't know, I could not tell.

Jack showed up at the farm on a Tuesday night in a car. He wanted me to act as his camouflage again. This time he did tell me in advance what was going on. An American stores officer had arranged to trade a large amount of desirable food items as well as some nylons in exchange for some antique jewellery that had been acquired in robberies or other ways by a London gang of villains. Later in the evening, the jewels would be transferred by swapping two objects that looked alike, such as two similar thermos flasks. This would be done in a local pub.

However, Jack wanted to verify for himself the layout of the pub. I would be his camouflage for an early evening drink. Later, two of his detectives would be present to observe the trade, while Jack kept watch outside.

Private cars were now scarce, so we parked some distance from the pub and walked a couple of hundred yards.

"Tonight I'll try a sherry if they have one," I said.

Jack went to the bar to get our drinks and I went and found a small table with two chairs in a corner. The pub wasn't busy, but there were a couple of older men talking about the allied invasion of Italy with the landlord, and he didn't seem too anxious to leave the conversation. They were also saying something about Italian POWs doing agricultural work.

A pair of American servicemen came in, and one took a chair while the other went to the bar to get drinks. The one who sat had a book. He was close enough that I could see it was an Agatha Christie mystery.

I wasn't sure, but it didn't quite seem right. Then I became sure it wasn't right when a couple came in and sat on the other side of the room. She had a book too, and it looked almost identical to the one with the American. Moreover, she didn't fit. Actually wearing stockings. Probably late thirties or early forties and well-dressed, but hard looking.

Jack came back with our drinks. I'd found a pencil stub in my pocket. Always seemed to need one, so I kept one there if I could. I took the newspaper Jack had been carrying and turned to the crossword puzzle.

"Jack. Do you think this is right for 3 Across?"

Jack momentarily looked puzzled then, seeing I had written 'BOOKS' and glancing around the room, said "I think it works, but it may be that it is too early to put it in."

"You mean it might be safer later?" I said. Jack nodded, took the pencil stub, and wrote in GO LAV and CALL POLICE, then said "I think those are right."

"Don't do too much more. I need to go to the lavatory," I said in a voice that would be loud enough to be audible. I got up and went to the bar and motioned to the landlord to come over.

"Pretend I'm asking where the lavatory is, but can you call the police."

The landlord whispered "Jack needs some help? We don't have a 'phone, but there's one round the corner. There's a back door by the toilets."

I said “Thank you” loud enough that it would be heard if anyone was listening, and disappeared to the back. I went out straight away. There was a car parked there. Since it wasn’t there beforehand, it must belong to the couple. They certainly didn’t fit the usual clientele here. As I noted, private cars weren’t common.

Choices! I didn’t want the crooks to be able to get away, so I quickly ducked down behind the car and deflated a front tire. If I had the wrong people, we could arrange to get it pumped up again. Then I ran to the telephone. There was someone inside, so I opened the door and said “I need to call the police. It’s urgent. I’ll pay you for your call.”

The woman inside grumbled but let me take over. She hung about outside the door, probably to make sure it wasn’t a ruse. 999 had been started in London in 1937. Not quite here yet, and our phones connected via the operator still.

“Operator, I need the police. Urgently.”

“Connecting you now, caller.”

“Taunton Police.”

“Hello, This is Mary Morrison. My husband Detective Inspector Morisson is at ” and I named the pub. “There is a crime in progress, and he needs support right away.”

“Oh dear, Mrs. Morrison. It’s Sergeant Skinner here – I was at your wedding – and I’ve only got one Special with me. I could send him, but he’s on foot.”

“What about the Fire Brigade? They’d give enough bodies I think.”

“Good idea. I’ll take care of it, Mrs. Morrison. You try to keep out the way in case things go wrong.”

He hung up. I passed the ’phone back to the woman, but she said. “I’m going to get my husband’s cricket bat and see if I can help. Jack Morrison

used to be the bobby round here. Can't let him down now."

I walked quickly back to the pub. The car was still there, and the yard was quiet. I noticed the back door of the pub had a latch of the type where you pressed down on a thumb lever to lift the latch bar. And the lever was on top of a half-heart shaped handle. But this door opened inwards. There was a broom beside the door. I pushed the handle through the loop of the handle and let the head of the broom rest half across the door jamb. The weight of the handle would keep it there, preventing the door from opening. One exit blocked.

I walked round to the front door and went in. All was much as before. I hoped nobody noticed I'd gone out one way and in the other, but it seemed people were still all pretending to socialize. The couple had struck up a conversation with the pair of American soldiers on the basis of 'What a coincidence that we're reading the same book', but soon they'd want to do the swap.

Jack looked up questioningly. I sat down and said "Any more clues?"

"I think this one should be ..." and he wrote 'WHEN'. No question mark needed.

I said "Then this should be ..." and wrote FIRE BRGD!

Jack said "We should think some more before filling in any more clues in case we're premature with those others."

We waited a tense few minutes. It was probably only two or three, but felt like hours. And we saw the books being 'mistakenly' picked up, and people starting to say their farewells.

A vehicle pulled up and a man in a Fire Service uniform came in. "Heard there might be a need for the Fire Brigade here," he said.

Jack got up and said "Everybody stay put. I'm Detective Inspector Morrison and I'm arresting these two American servicemen and this couple on suspicion of various offences."

One of the Americans said “You’ve no jurisdiction over us. Part of the deal for having the US of A help you out with Hitler.”

Jack said “You might want to read United States of America (Visiting Forces) Act 1942. UK authorities perform investigations and arrests but hand American service personnel over to Courts Martial here in Britain for verdict and sentencing, which in some cases is much more severe than the UK permits.”

I looked, and was glad the Americans weren’t carrying guns. However, my relief was short lived as the woman of the British couple had taken a small automatic pistol from her handbag.

“I think, Bobby, we’ll take our book and leave, and anyone trying to stop us will get a bullet.”

She grabbed the book she had originally brought and headed for the back with her companion. I’d assumed the man was the boss, but once again was misled. As they headed to the back, I followed, with Jack in quick succession. He whispered “What’re you doing?”

I also whispered “I’ve barred the back door. If we can shut them between, they won’t get away.”

Meanwhile, the fireman had dived outside. The door to the back unfortunately opened inwards. We pulled it shut, but there was only an ordinary handle.

“Everyone out the front!” Jack yelled, as we heard a muffled “Blocked!” from inside and footsteps coming back. Jack and I didn’t have time to make it to the door. He pointed to one side of the door, where there was a slight indent for the start of one end of the bar. Jack went the other side, and I noticed he picked up a chair.

I realized I’d not taken off my pruning knife, which was in a small sheath on my trouser belt. It wasn’t likely to do much against a gun, but it was what I had.

I heard the door open, and Bobby came out in a rush. Jack brought the chair down on his head, and he went down at Jack's feet, but the woman was right behind Bobby and I saw the gun being raised towards Jack. I didn't have time to think, but brought my hand with the knife down across her lower wrist as hard as I could. She yelped, and the gun went off as the weight of my blow brought her arm down. Bobby let out a cry and a hole appeared in the back of his thigh. The woman's hand was pouring blood from a deep, long slash. But she was reaching for the gun with her other hand. Jack saw this and punched her in the jaw. He was too close to kick, and Bobby and the broken chair were in his way.

Still the woman was trying to get bring her gun to bear so I grabbed her hair and brought up the knife and yelled "Drop it or I'll slit your throat, you bitch!"

At this she did drop it and grabbed her cut hand. Jack quickly picked up the gun and somehow removed the bullets quickly. He yelled "Can we get some help here?" and a couple of firemen came in along with two men in civilian clothes.

Jack said "Ah. Telford and Hughes. Good. Hughes. Go outside and detain those two American servicemen. Also ask all witnesses to stay until we get their particulars. Telford, get a couple of firemen, and any more help you think you need, and get this pair cleaned up and arrange to transport them to the Police Station. I'll want both those books as evidence, and we'd better see what's inside."

The firemen, their foreman having heard Jack say he was arresting the Americans, had made sure they didn't escape in the confusion. The telephone box lady had also, apparently, heard Jack announce he was making arrests and stood stalwartly in their way with her cricket bat.

An hour later, and the names and addresses of all the witnesses had been taken. They'd not left, however, as the event had spawned an unexpected party. The lady from the telephone box was still there – with the cricket bat – as well as the old men who had been at the bar. The landlord was smiling widely. Only the miscreants and Telford and Hughes were missing. Jack had gone with the detained crooks on the fire engine – it was the most

convenient vehicle available with four prisoners to transport. A couple of firemen had returned with a tire pump to get the car in the yard mobile, then Jack had come back with one of his detective sergeants – I couldn't remember which one, and the policeman had driven the car away.

Jack said "I'm declaring myself off duty," and ordered another pint. The landlord refused payment, even though Jack said it put him in an awkward position. So the landlord said he'd take it, but then put money in a tankard and said "Here's a start to contributions for policemen hurt on duty." Well, that could be accepted, and there was probably an official charity to which money could be sent.

I had a half of cider. Somehow the sherry and Jack's beer had disappeared. Someone probably drank it! Even in the midst of a police operation.

We didn't stay long. Both of us needed to unwind. Jack's police car was now in the yard, so we headed back to the farm, where we had to relate the full story to Mabel and Matilda. Oliver and Delia were fortunately in bed.

I was aching to get to bed by the time we were able to excuse ourselves. The bed was narrow, of course, but it felt good to be close.

Jack gave me a big kiss. I said "That was too much excitement for one night."

"Yes. Remind me never to get you really angry."

"I wasn't angry. I saw her – a woman whose name I don't know – trying to kill the man I love. I've been ... er ... I've known someone who was pushed around and hit, and I'm not going to let someone do that to Mary Morrison."

"And I can't think of what you could have done better. By the way, barring the door and deflating the tire were quick and sensible thinking. And Skinner said you had suggested the Fire Brigade, since he didn't have resources to send.

So you know, the woman is Betsy Morton, and she runs a quite nasty gang out of Southwark. The book had a lot of antique jewels. We know one piece for certain came from a robbery last year. The Americans are going to be interrogated tomorrow with Gene in attendance. The other book actually had some morphine in it. This was a serious crowd.”

“Does that mean you’ll be here another night at least?” I asked.

“Yes. I’m afraid so.”

“Why afraid so. I’m glad!”

* * * * *

Sometime in the afternoon of the next day I was working in the yard putting some flats and sacks in the byre for tomorrow morning’s collection. A woman on a bicycle rode into the yard. Toby barked and bared his teeth but stayed just in front of me. Reggie came bounding too and positioned himself beside me.

“Hello. I’m Katherine Scott, a reporter with the Chard and Ilminster News, but we also forward stories to the national press. We heard that someone who lives here was a heroine last night and we want to publish the story in the next edition.”

This was something I definitely did NOT want. I thought of saying I wouldn’t tell her anything, but the story could come from others. Could I beg them not to publish. Probably not. Just then Jack arrived in his car.

After Jack had been brought up to date – I said who Katherine was, but didn’t give Jack’s name or position, and had not given mine – Jack said “I should inform you that there is an ongoing police investigation related to the events that I believe interest you. Moreover, there are several civilians who performed quite remarkable acts of bravery in support of the police. There are still criminals associated with those we have detained who are capable of hurting those people or their families if they can identify them and locate them. It’s possible we will request reporting restrictions, even the

possibility a D-notice could be issued. However, we hope that won't be necessary, and we plan to issue a statement tomorrow morning."

Katherine said "From what I hear, it's a pretty good story."

Jack gave her a big smile and said "That I can confirm. I will endeavour to provide as much information as I can in our statement, and I'm sure more will come out as trials of those arrested begin."

Katherine asked "You're not just feeding us a line about civilians being in danger to cover up some police mistake, I hope?"

Rather than let Jack answer, I said "I can tell you that I was present at the arrest of several people last night at a public house in Taunton, and that there was a serious chance people would have been killed by some of those arrested. I feel certain there are equally dangerous associates of those involved who would not hesitate to hurt people who they felt threatened their interests. Worse, they take resources away from the War effort."

Somerset Constabulary

Public release of information

On the evening of Tuesday September 7, in Taunton, police undertook an operation that resulted in the apprehension of several people and recovery of stolen or illegal-trade property. In the course of the arrests, a firearm was produced and discharged. Several members of the public were instrumental, through conspicuous courage, in effecting the arrests, and the Constabulary expresses its sincere gratitude for their assistance.

Because investigations are ongoing, further details cannot be released at this time.

The American troops had another bonus in store for Jack, but one he would rather had been omitted. One night soon after the pub incident, the

Detective Chief Inspector in Bath was driving back to the police station from an interview with a witness in a separate case when his car was in collision with an American lorry that was, unfortunately, driving on the right hand side of the road. The Chief Inspector was badly injured, and lost a leg to amputation.

Jack was made the acting Chief Inspector, then confirmed in the position when it became clear his predecessor would not be returning to regular duties. I went up to Bath the first weekend in December and we took a hotel room for one night to take note of the promotion.

I won't say celebrate. We both were excited that Jack had progressed so far already in his career, but we were unhappy that it was at the expense of a colleague, and indeed a colleague that Jack said he respected greatly.

"I think the Constabulary will try to find a role for him to play so he can share his knowledge and intuition," Jack said. "We can't really afford to lose his skills, but on one leg it's unlikely he can be operational."

"It could have been you in that car," I noted. "That gives me the chills."

"There is some discussion of how to approach the Americans. It's not in their interest to have these accidents, but some of the low-level officers are bloody minded and blame us for driving on what they call the 'wrong' side of the road. I think the senior commanders are aware how important it is that these accidents don't happen."

* * * * *

We spent Christmas in 1943 with Jack's family. I now called Angela and Cedric Mum and Dad. There was even less available in the shops. Fortunately the farm and the shop allowed a few extras.

Talk over Christmas was about how the Americans were taking over so many parts of the country, and that some villages were being completely evacuated to allow for training for what was assumed to be a forthcoming invasion of France. Our English opinion was that we didn't give way to

Germans, and it was ironic that now we were being pushed aside by Americans.

We slept in Jack's old bed at the shop over Christmas. Not too bad. Then I spent a few nights in Bath at Jack's digs. I took Mrs. Young, Jack's landlady, a half dozen eggs, which got a big smile. Mrs. Young had told Jack she didn't mind if I stayed as long as we managed something with the rations. With his promotions, I sensed she acquired some extra status with her neighbours.

I stayed until January 2, 1944, so we could celebrate our anniversary. Jack took me to Sally Lunn's. It was supposed to be historic, but Jack said the proprietor, a woman named Marie Byng-Johnson, had taken over the premises in 1934, less than a decade before. She claimed to have discovered an ancient document in a secret niche above the fireplace explaining that a French Huguenot woman, possibly giving her name as Solange Luyon, had come there in 1680. There were, however, mentions of Sally Lunn buns in various writings from the late 1700s through Charles Dickens and others. All very convenient to promote the eating establishment.

In any event, we had a nice meal given rationing conditions, and celebrated our marriage in the tight quarters of Jack's lodgings. Given the cold room, we did this under the covers, then had lots of giggles as we tried to squirm into our pyjamas again. Romance had to give way to practicality. We weren't prepared to freeze!

Lying in each other's arms, I said "I hope you're not sorry that you married me, Jack."

"Why would I be sorry?"

"Well, I do bring a few complications, but no money or property."

"Mary. In these times there's precious little anyone can count on having and keeping in the way of money and property. When we're together, you show delight at seemingly small or insignificant things. Views, details of plants or buildings. Or a simple picnic."

“It’s mutual. I don’t want fancy or posh. That doesn’t mean I didn’t enjoy the Randolph last year, but I’m more at home with a Cornish pasty in a country pub. Hopefully when the War is over, the pubs will be able to offer nice cheese and pickles, and Scotch eggs again.”

Jack said “Let’s hope the cheesemakers will know how to make some of the local cheeses again.”

“What do you mean? "Again"?”

“Perhaps it’s not widely known, but to ensure availability for cheese rations, only certain types are permitted to be made. I think it’s Wensleydale, Cheddar, Dunlop, Leicester and Cheshire. I read or heard that no creamy Lancashire, no Stilton, no Caerphilly and no Gloucester cheese allowed. And production is off-farm. We had several thousand farmhouse cheesemakers around 1900, but with the Milk Marketing Board, that was already dropping by the start of the War, and I’d guess they’re just about gone now. When things free up again, many won’t bother to restart.”

“You mean they’ll not have the money or inclination?”

“That, or the MMB won’t allocate enough milk to them. There’s plenty of official ways to prevent competition for the resources, and my guess is the MMB is staffed by people aligned with the factory producers.”

“Jack. I believe you’re a cynic.”

“Call me Chief Inspector, and you’ll know why. I hope that hasn’t put you off being married to me.”

“Oh. I think you’ve got a bit of time yet. And I suspect you’re right. Let’s hope things right themselves when the War stops.”

“Don’t get your hopes up too much. I’ll guess the reconstruction will be pretty painful. So many buildings destroyed, and lives messed up. And our American friends are being very helpful, but a lot of that help is tied to loans. We could see a long period when we’ll have to work to get back on our feet.”

“Well, I don’t mind work, and I know you don’t shirk either.

Jack. I want to say that the best thing about being married to you is you’ve never just assumed your opinion is the only one – well, except for just ordering me a half of cider at the pub without asking, but that’s pretty forgivable. It means a lot that you treat me as a real partner.”

“It’s what I want,” Jack said. “And I wonder what other woman would have stopped a crook from shooting me. Many people – men at least as much as women – go to pieces in a crisis. There’s a good deal of my work that is pretty boring standard bobby-on-the-beat policing. But also a few cases that I can’t, of course, talk about. And unfortunately, probably won’t be able to for some time even after the War is over.”

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On January 2, 1944, a Sunday afternoon, I went back to Taunton. On the train I thought about the last year. I’d been part, albeit inadvertently, in the arrest of people involved in the crimes Jack was striving to block. But that was just one thing, and he had mentioned nothing else, except last night.

The thought gave me a chill, a chill deeper than the January cold. There was a woman, now a ghost in my dreams, who had married a man who had first treated her like a princess, then bit by bit, made her a slave. My husband Jack gave me respect. My best memories of him weren’t things he gave me. In fact, he gave me few material things. No baubles. No attempt to buy affection. The presents I’d received were small, often practical.

But how do you value the smile of appreciation of a good picnic sandwich? What’s the price of sharing a moment of beauty on a Spring morning? Or the warmth of an arm to cuddle into.

Whatever the cases he was following, I hoped he would not get hurt. That he wasn’t now in the Forces suggested his value in the police was high. And, of course, it could be that his police work was a cover for something more sinister, though I didn’t think so.

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Through the first half of 1944, my life on the farm would have been much as it was in the previous two years. Lots of work and tired muscles, but the rewards of producing food that was desperately needed. Perhaps the wireless news of the War was more hopeful, but we knew much of it was distorted.

My main distraction was that I received a summons to appear as a witness in the trial of Betsy Morton and her co-accused. Jack had warned me that it would come, and I'd been quite concerned that it might result in trouble related to my identity documents. Jack, however, was unconcerned. He pointed out that I would be presented as the wife of a ranking police officer, if indeed I was called to testify. The court would be interested in my recollection of what happened in the pub in Taunton.

As it turned out, neither the British nor the American courts needed to call witnesses. There were numerous charges against all the accused. They chose to plead guilty to the undeniable offences. The prosecutors, both American and British, had limited time and resources to conduct a complicated trial for such crimes as attempted murder of a police officer. Sentences that took the crooks out of circulation for several years were brought down with laudable efficiency.

For myself, there was a palpable relief.

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Looking back, I realized Jack and I saw very little of each other in 1944. We had the weekend after Easter in Taunton, and the second weekend in September in Bath. Not much for a married couple, but as we'd noted before, better than many wartime marriages. And better than Peter and Mabel, who had managed only a few hours since the new year.

We lived in our letters. One or two a week from each of us. Not long ones. Just a page or perhaps two of 5 by 7 sheets. With my fountain pen, I'd perfected an efficient, tight script. Strange. In my earlier life I'd hardly written a letter. Did William ever write to his beaten down wife? Had she ever written back. I did not think so.

Somehow Jack's workload got a bit easier towards the end of the year. He mentioned that a few more War Reserve police officers and a couple of young women police constables had been assigned to the Bath area and they were beginning to take up the load.

Late in the year, a letter brought new personal excitement.

November 1, 1944

Dearest Mary,

I'll post this tonight to catch the first collection in the morning. Can you come to Bristol on Saturday or Sunday? I've found this property. I won't say house because it's a mess. However, it has about 4 acres and would make a nice garden that I think could generate some income. And it's only about 3-4 miles from central Bristol, well, the University for example.

Phone and leave a message at the main police station. Just give time you think you'll arrive by train. I'll stay and do work in the office and you can telephone when you arrive and I'll come and get you.

Love, Jack

Since the farm work was winding down, it wasn't a problem for me to go. I knew roughly the train times, though delays were still common despite the reduction in bombings. So I phoned right away. Jack was 'out', as usual, but I said I'd try for noon Saturday and my message was taken.

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The property Jack had seen was on the Bristol side of the village of Abbots Leigh. The house was overgrown and seemingly quite tumble-down. It looked like some of the slates had been stolen from the roof of a sort of arcade on one side of the house. The ground around, however, was cultivated and fairly tidy. There was also a building that looked like it was a garage big enough for two vehicles.

Jack said “A farmer just up the road was assigned the land by the War Ag Committee after the owner died. The current owner is essentially the bank, as the mortgage wasn’t paid after he died for a while until the heirs were found somewhere in Australia. In one of our cases I got to know a local estate agent and mentioned I might be looking for somewhere for us to live that had potential for a big garden. He pointed me to this. Thinks it might be worth a look.”

“Can we afford it?”

“Dad and Mum said they’d lend us a bit – might be that they’d hold the mortgage, so they wouldn’t be taking any risk. Dad says now’s the time to buy houses, as there’s going to be a big demand when the War ends and men come home.”

“Can we look inside the house, even though it might be a bit of a mess?”

Jack had borrowed a key from the estate agent. Inside was rather dismal. There were still quite a few things untouched since whoever had been there had died. The lower roof indeed was leaking, but it was over an addition to the house. The main building was a quite solid brick structure, though everything was old, dusty, and full of spider-webs.

Jack said “I’ve no idea how sound the plumbing and electrics are. There’s supposed to be gas as well.”

“Should we ask that we be able to inspect those things to see if they work?”

“I talked to Dad about that, and he suggested we might want to think very carefully about making an offer on the property as it is, subject only to a condition that the land is as listed on the survey. He thought the work to check things would slow down proceedings, and that it was likely we’d want to replace all the pipes and wires as soon as possible anyway. I’ve suggested that if you think the place is worth considering, Dad and Mum come up tomorrow and we have another look with four pairs of eyes.”

The detritus and general chaos of the house were a drag on my imagination, but the garden, as I immediately started to call it, held great possibilities. It

was gently sloping down to the road, with some nice hedgerows on the border. Currently it seemed to have been set up for potatoes. The Ministry men loved potatoes and other root vegetables. Never mind. It looked to be in decent shape and reasonably drained.

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We went to a pub and had some Cornish pasties for lunch. Well, that's what they said they were. Barely acceptable. Jack phoned the estate agent and got the name of the farmer who was using the land. I'd suggested we ask him how well the land produced. After lunch we drove to the farmer's home – Jack had a car from the police.

Mr. Cowden said "The land's fine, but not really big enough to make it worthwhile for me to take the tractor over there, even though it's only a half mile away. Where do you farm now, Mr. Morrison." Clearly he viewed farming as a male occupation.

"I don't. My wife and a friend work 15 acres near Taunton."

"But you'd start to work it if you bought it?"

"No. Mary would put it into whatever she thinks worthwhile. I'm with the police."

"Oh. So that's how you have a car. Not many people can drive these days."

"I have to be able to get around to my officers who are on cases. Crime doesn't stop for the war. If anything it's been increasing," Jack said.

"My husband is Chief Inspector Morrison," I added.

"That'll explain why you're not in the Forces. Well, if you take the old Valentine place, it should keep the bandits away," Mr. Cowden said.

I said "I'd also be there most of the time, assuming I set up the kind of mixed fruit and vegetable production we have in Taunton. But that won't happen until the War's over. In the meantime, we'd likely continue to rent the land to you or whoever the War Ag designates."

“Well, let’s hope another season is the last and we can get back to a bit of normal.”

I could second the farmer’s motion.

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We did take the place. Cedric said he thought it would be a good investment if we could get it for under 700 pounds, and our offer of 625 pounds was accepted. Jack and I had about 400 between us at this point, and we took a loan of 450 from Cedric and Angela, as we would need some cash to start fixing things.

Since we got the purchase settled by mid-December, we engaged Oliver and Delia to come during school holidays to help clean up the house. It was a bit like camping, but Jack’s position helped to oil the process of getting utilities turned on. The full blackout was now ended, so we didn’t have to try to put up the blackout curtains we found in the house. They weren’t in very good shape.

Over about four days we got the place tidy and reasonably clean, discovering that apart from the addition, which seemed to be a sort of conservatory, the roof was essentially sound. Some windows would need puttying and possibly new sash mechanisms, but they were all in place.

The plumbing was noisy, but seemed to work. Chimneys would likely need sweeping, but small tests of burning spills of paper suggested that they weren’t blocked, though they were helping to make the place draughty.

We were lucky that Jack could sometimes get use of a car. There was a bus along the A 369, but it looked like walking or cycling would be my form of transport when I moved here.

Cycling! I’d need to look for a bike.

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January 1, 1945

There'd been some unhappy news of a lot of fighting in Belgium. It appeared that the Germans had undertaken a major attack. News was unclear on what was happening.

Jack had planned to take the day off today – Monday – so we could celebrate our 2nd anniversary. I'd come up to Bristol on Saturday and done some puttering at the house. I had to get out here by bus as Jack was on a case. The weekend was a bit of a tryout to see how the house would fit with Jack's work. I'd hoped to get the whole day together on the Monday. Unfortunately, we didn't get our time all to ourselves. Jack had once again to meet with his detectives on some cases, so I took a bit of time to look about Bristol.

Still, we did get a good part of the weekend together, and talked a lot about our plans for our new place, which we decided to name Phoenix Cottage. It was Jack's suggestion.

"But why call it ... Oh! Of course. Thank you. I like the idea," I said.

We had a modest dinner Monday – the restaurant we found tried hard, but they didn't have a lot to work with. We had an early night for more than one reason. The house was cold! We were now used to sharing a bed, and had tried the double one we found in the house. It sagged so badly we moved the mattress to the floor.

We slept well, nonetheless. In fact, we had become comfortable with each other physically, and well beyond the fun aspects. Listening to other women, I got the sense that some couples never managed to find that ... what to call it ... 'fit'?

"I learned something today from the files," Jack said softly. Since his mouth was next to my ear, he could whisper and his voice would be loud.

"Something that would interest me?"

"Seem's William's brother-in-law has purchased a small haulage firm. Just a couple of lorries. The son of the owner was killed in Normandy, and I think the family decided there wasn't a future in it."

“Why would buying the haulage company be important?” I asked.

“Legitimate haulage can cover the transport of other things, and the drivers more around a lot, which lets crooks get away from the scene of their misdeeds. I think they’re aiming for the future. Possibly also a way to hide dirty money by passing it through the books of the regular firm.”

“Do you think William’s involved?”

“As yet, no idea. I haven’t even had a chance to check if he’s still at the bank.”

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Through 1945 we had our usual busy time at the Gaffney farm. At Easter – Easter Sunday was April Fool’s Day too – Jack and I spent the weekend at Phoenix Cottage and did more minor jobs. The land was still being used by the farmer, but we cleared some of the undergrowth from the edges and laneway. With Oliver, I’d already done that next to the house.

Soon after we’d bought the house, we’d managed to get a tarp on the arcade. Not a great solution, but it stopped water getting in and doing more damage to the floor.

There were still occasional raids. There were several people killed in Kingston upon Hull in mid-March when an He 111 strafed and bombed the place. And sporadic V-1 and V-2 hits. The War wasn’t over yet, but the end could be sensed.

We had a drop of rain, and came in for a cup of tea. Both of us were a bit untidy from fights with brambles and nettles. I produced some jam tarts I’d made with some WI jam I’d held back for such a treat.

“Not only pretty, but useful too,” Jack quipped.

“Got to look after my fella’,” I responded.

“I meant to tell you. I found out that William has been made Managing Director of Daphne Deliveries. Daphne is his wife’s name.”

“Is he now the owner?” I hardly credited William with that.

“Doubtful, though he may on paper have some shares. My guess is that the brother-in-law wants someone who looks respectable. We’ll see.”

“As long as whatever they get up to doesn’t harm us,” I said. “And of course, I should add a hope they won’t harm others either.”

In fact, I felt a little ashamed of thinking first of ourselves. Perhaps one had to be a bit selfish to stay alive in these times.

* * * * *

9 September 1945

A week ago we had VJ day. I suppose things should feel different, but on the farm we were busy getting in our harvest. It looked like rationing would continue. So much destruction and devastation. Still, we weren’t dodging bullets and bombs. A few people were being released from National Service jobs or the Forces.

I was working in and around the byre in mid-afternoon when a couple rode in on bicycles. The man said “Sorry to bother you, but could we get some water to drink. We’re on holiday and we were foolish enough to forget to bring something to drink when we came out.”

“The tap’s just there,” I said, pointing. “It’s a bit stiff, so make sure it’s off when you’ve got some water.”

I noticed the woman – she was about my age – looking at me. And when I took a more careful look at her I realized she was someone who had worked in the office of the factory that had been blown up with the firewatchers on the roof. I was careful not to stare, but kept on with my work.

The woman said “Don’t I know you?”

Suppressing my London accent a bit, and stressing words as people did here in Somerset, I said “I can’t think where that would be from. Can you?”

“London. At the start of the War.” She named a company. I did my best to keep working with the produce and not looking at her.

“Well, I was in London for some of that time. Didn’t like the idea of the Blitz one bit and figured I’d get on better back here. Must have been someone else you remember.”

“Well, it was nearly five years ago. The person I remember was apparently blown to pieces with another girl. They were firewatching on the roof of the building.”

“Let’s hope all that’s been an’ gone now, and you can enjoy a nice holiday,” I said.

“Thanks for that, and the water,” the man said. “Best wishes to you too.”

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It was just over a week later when an official-looking letter arrived. It was from a National Registration office, and said they were trying to sort out records, since they had a Joan Mary Smith recorded as killed on the night of December 29, 1940, but that I had obtained a new identity card in mid February 1941. Could I get in touch and provide my account of what happened?

Alex Spencer was the solicitor I had gone to in December 1942 and he had prepared wills for Jack and I and held copies of them for us. Not that there was any money or property then to be concerned about, but after we were married, there would be some benefits if Jack should get killed on duty. And we had been saving while the War continued. In fact, I spent almost nothing while at the farm. Food and lodging was provided, so my pound a week had gone in a Post Office Savings account. Mabel also shared the rewards from our ducks with me, along with the odd bonus when we got a bumper crop of something. Jack, too, had saved, Now we had the property near Bristol and we’d move there late in 1945 when Peter was thought to be coming home. He was in early and older than most, so his demob score was high.

“Come in, Mrs. Morrison, come in and tell me why you needed to see me.”

I’d telephoned as soon as I could to arrange an appointment.

“I got this letter two days ago,” I said, passing it to him now we were seated either side of his desk. I let him read it.

“You look very lively for a ghost, Mrs. Morrison, but I’m sure that getting such a letter is very upsetting.”

“Yes. You see, I’m not sure of what really happened.”

“Why don’t you tell me in your own words, and I’ll make some notes – they are totally confidential, by the way – and then we’ll see how we can sort things out. Let me say from the start that there must be thousands of cases where the records have the wrong name on deceased persons. Worse, there are people looking for loved ones who will never come home.”

I related my story. After telling about being with Jane and Doris, I continued,

“There was a big bang and the next thing I remember was finding myself lying in somebody’s garden. Apparently unhurt. I must have been taken somewhere. From what my landlady, Mrs. Carter, told me later, I was brought back a couple of days after, and she’d been informed I was dead.

I really don’t remember much of what happened after the bombing on December 29, 1940, until a few weeks later, and even then I was still shaken up, though I had no apparent physical injuries. Then just as I was getting my life back in order, I was blown up again in the May 10 raids, and my accommodation and new job and new employers all gone. I can give you the address: 39 Hollyhock Road, though that hadn’t yet been put on my identity card.

There was a lot of confusion that night, and the ARP pointed me to a rest centre in a church. I don’t remember the name or address, just the names of two nice ladies. A Mrs. Appleby who had been a nurse in the first War, who cleaned up some scrapes on my hand and cheek and put a big plaster on my

face, and Mrs. Hodges who gave me a pillowcase to carry things and a ripped old shirt I've fixed and still wear in the fields for work. But I asked the lady in charge – I don't remember her name – if it might make sense to get out of London since I had nothing to really keep me there. I thought I'd get to the country and possibly join the Land Army.

I've this label on which the lady drew a map of how to get to Paddington Station from the rest centre."

Mr. Spencer said "Keep that safe. It provides support for what you've said, and if necessary allows the rest centre to be located. But I strongly doubt we'll need to go that far. What you've said suggests that this girl named Doris perished with Jane Willis."

"Can you tell me what I need to do, Mr. Spencer?"

"Well, since you've already felt it best to consult me, and I've got the information I think I need, why don't I undertake to write to the person who sent this letter. I'll very likely NOT tell them your whole story as that will take scarce paper and the more details the more questions may be asked. However, I will state that on December 29 you were with Jane Willis and a woman whose christian name was Doris when a bomb exploded nearby, and while you did not suffer apparent physical injuries, you did suffer shock and confusion, to the extent you are not sure how you were returned to Mrs. Carter's address. Then as you were recovering, you were victimized by a second bomb, in which you did suffer observable injuries. With the disruption to civil infrastructure in London, you made your way to Taunton where you have lived and worked since. Would that be a sensible summary?"

"Yes. I don't know if we told you, but Jack, my husband, was the first person I talked to here when I got off the train. I asked him where I should go to find accommodation and work, and he sent me to the WI."

"Well, that was a most fortuitous meeting. Mr. Morrison is an up and coming member of the police. And you'll no doubt be moving to your new property near Bristol soon."

“We hope to move in around Christmas time,” I said. “Peter Gaffney should be demobbed soon, and I want to get my own land producing.”

“Good for you, Mrs. Morrison. Definitely not a ghost, I might add.”

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Later on I saw a copy Mr. Spencer’s letter to the Registration Officer. It was masterfully worded to present a condensed version of what I had told him while also telling the recipient to stop being a nuisance.

September 18, 1945

H. Jacobson
Registration Officer
...

Dear Mr. Jacobson,

My client, Mrs. Mary Morrison, nee Smith, is in receipt of your recent letter saying that there is a record of her demise on December 29, 1940. I can assure you she is very much alive and a contributing member of the Taunton community.

So that you may correct the error, please note that Mrs. Morrison suffered from bomb blast while in company of Miss Jane Willis and a young woman whose first name was Doris. Miss Smith, as she then was, suffered shock and likely concussion and was not restored to her lodgings for several days, and took some time to recover.

She was again the victim of a German bomb on May 10, 1941, this time sustaining visible injuries and losing her prospective accommodation, employment and employers at 39 Hollyhock Rd. She provided to me names of potential witnesses as well as anecdotal and physical evidence of her activities that night, when she decided to come to Taunton in an effort to restart her life.

I trust you will rectify the erroneous records with all despatch so my client may put behind her a most troubling episode.

Yours,

Alexander Spencer
Solicitor

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That Christmas, the first after the end of the War, we spent at Phoenix Cottage. Cedric, Angela and Audrey came, and while things were a bit disorganized, we managed a most pleasant time together. Jack and I got several rather practical presents of crockery and pots and pans, all second-hand but nevertheless welcome, and had managed to collect some furniture from disparate sources. We had, in fact, some furniture that was in the house when we acquired it, and I had spent some effort to clean it up. Jack had started living in the house in November. I moved in a week before Christmas.

Jack was going to transfer to the Bristol police, and there were discussions of a promotion to a new Superintendent post to be created as and when Bristol and Somerset amalgamated their police services, whenever that occurred.

We had to put Audrey on a sofa, but had the old double bed for Cedric and Angela, though with some reinforcement of the springs so it didn't sag so much. They brought some bedding with them, as we were still rather short. Also quite a bit of our Christmas fare, as rationing was now as bad as ever.

Jack had been able to find me some Wellington boots and a large watering can. Audrey said "Jack. That's so unromantic. A husband shouldn't give his wife such presents."

"Oh. No. You're wrong there, Audrey," I said. "I know most women would want something feminine and personal, but for me, what he's found are the best presents I could imagine. I'll use them every day, and be reminded who they're from. I'm only sorry that the best I can do for him is a sleeveless pullover that I knitted."

“Given the shortage of coal, I’ll be very glad of it. And it can be worn under my suit. So I’m happy too,” Jack answered.

We had managed to find ourselves a new bed. Second-hand, of course. Our house was still a bit of a patchwork of different types and styles of furnishings, but it was functional. And it was, of course, ours, which was best of all. We made sure we could keep the kitchen cosy on the rationed allocation of coal and gas. I’d repurposed the blackout curtains – several layers – to draw across the kitchen doors and windows to keep draughts out, and had rag filled "snakes" along the doorsills for the same purpose.

Not all the rooms were in use, but they were cleared and tidy. Upstairs we only occupied our own bedroom and the bathroom. Moreover, the living room downstairs and the study were, for the moment, mostly dark. We had, nevertheless, removed all the rubbish, cleaned thoroughly and fixed any egregious dilapidation. The rooms could be used when we were ready to do so.

We anticipated that our location, about 3 miles from Bristol University, would offer us a chance to rent to a student or two. It was Oliver who gave us this idea, since he hoped in a couple of years to start studies in engineering there. We would certainly welcome him, whether or not we sought other tenants before then.

Now that we were installed I was planning what I’d plant this year. Since the field had been potatoes, I wouldn’t have heavy digging, which was a relief. Being on my own, I decided to keep things as simple as possible, but I’d already started some strawberry seeds in the conservatory, despite the leaks. I’d grow some potatoes, mainly for the early new potato market, but a few for ourselves. We’d been scrounging material for a chicken run and some rabbit hutches. It would be work. I hoped Toby would be a good guard dog. Next year I might look for another dog, but didn’t want Toby upset.

One of Mabel’s cats had had kittens, and we took one and then were given another locally. Jack made a flap for them to come into the conservatory, though occasionally we let them into the kitchen. Yes, we were softies. Still, it seemed that they were catching mice.

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In mid-September 1946, Jack decided to take a day off to do some work on the house. We were re-roofing the conservatory, as we now called it. It would serve nicely for starting plants from seeds if we could get it fixed up. I was starting to think that a part of my business could be potting plants early in Spring if I seeded them in protective locations. We'd even started to draw up some sketches of small lean-to glass greenhouses on three sides of what we called the garage, in which there was space where I already stored pots and tools.

Given the cost of slates, Jack had removed them the weekend before and we'd rolled out some tar paper. Today he was sealing the edges and putting on some metal flashing. We weren't going to put the slates back yet, but had stored them for use on the main house or for re-use on the conservatory if we could get some of a similar size and shape. Once the roof was secure, we'd fix the places where the floor had some dilapidation from leaks.

I was cleaning up the strawberry patch. I'd meant to do this several weeks ago. It had done quite well this year, though the only jam and preserves were my own, as I'd not yet joined the local WI. Still, I'd found several local greengrocers eager for my produce, especially the strawberries, and it hadn't been too difficult to find local children eager to earn some pocket money picking.

Toby was lying nearby, keeping me company. He knew how to be close but not a nuisance. As I worked, I was vaguely aware of a car coming down the road towards Abbots Leigh from Bristol. Not too many people had cars, but there were a few more than during the War.

Suddenly I heard a voice "Excuse me. Can you direct us to the Bristol and Clifton Golf Club?"

The voice originated with a rather blowsy woman of perhaps forty, and the accent was, I thought, false posh. Toby slightly bared his teeth and made a low growl, but probably too quiet to be noticed from the car. He often made quick decisions on whether he liked or, as in the current case, did not like someone.

I didn't want to shout, so I set my hoe against the wheelbarrow and walked to the edge of the plot, which was bordered here by a post and square wire fence. I was in my work clothes and had on my old men's trilby hat that served so well to keep my head dry and my face free from sunburn. I might even have been taken for a man. As I got near the fence, I could see the driver beyond the woman. William! I kept my head tilted a bit down, but could still look at the woman. As much in a West Country accent as I could, I said

"Need to turn round an' take first right. Then about two miles on t'right." As I said this I turned back to where I was working.

"Thank you! There, William. You see I told you it was that road, but you wouldn't listen."

"Daphne. I did say I'd take the next turn. Bound to lead there. But I'll turn round at that entrance up a hundred yards, or I'll never hear the end of it."

I went through the motions of clearing the strawberry plants as the car did a three point turn at the nearest gate, then passed by to turn into Beggar Bush Lane.

Jack had looked up and watched the proceedings. I walked over slowly. He said "What was that about?"

"A couple wanting to get to the golf club. Actually William and Daphne."

"Really! Since they drove away without hesitating, I'd assume there was no sign of recognition."

"None whatever, I'm pleased to say. But I could use a cup of tea. Or something stronger."

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