

I

The big open sky was cloudless and blue, empty of everything except sunshine and larksong. The weather was remarkably warm for May. Lorna, taking her dogs for an afternoon walk up the Beacon, was thankful that she was wearing a sleeveless dress. She pitied her sealyhams; they couldn't change into something cooler when summer arrived.

She reached the Beacon summit and propped herself against a five-bar gate to contemplate the scene spread before her. Winwold Beacon, a spur of high ground (or what passed as high ground in East Anglia) was celebrated for its uninterrupted views over the surrounding countryside. Historically, too, it was notable; here, in early times over a thousand years ago, fires had been lit to warn the local populace that Viking raiders were pillaging the land, ravaging and burning the little homesteads of the Anglo-Saxon farmers.

Time heals all things. Over the centuries Fursey Down had turned into a place far removed from warfare and violence, becoming a peaceful turfy common studded with the furze bushes from which it drew its name. Here and there cattle grazed. Beyond the common were fields of arable land dotted with those clumps of elms which were such an endearing feature of this part of the countryside, where Essex sleepily became Suffolk. Sheltered by one large clump was an old sprawling farmhouse, red-roofed and drowsy – Weldon Court, home of Lorna's family since her grandfather's day. Here Lorna Washbourne had been born twenty years ago.

The landscape of Lorna's birthplace was so deeply imprinted upon her mind's eye that she could have drawn every detail of it with her eyes shut. Timeless and unchanging, she knew that what

she looked at now was almost exactly what her grandfather had seen when he had retired from the Indian Army and had returned to England to find a place which could be 'home' for himself and his wife during the final quarter of their lives. The Washbournes had originated in East Anglia, but having been a soldiering race since time immemorial had never been much good at putting down lasting roots. Nevertheless, Grandfather Washbourne had felt himself drawn to this corner of England from which his ancestors had come. His progeny had felt the same way about it and Weldon Court had been home to them ever since, whenever they happened to be in England.

Perhaps, thought Lorna, it was because they only lived at Weldon Court in, as it were, blissful snatches that they had all nursed such a strong love for the place. Familiarity is said to breed contempt; to have lived year in, year out, for ever and ever at Weldon might possibly have made it less precious. But this said, deep in her own heart she couldn't believe this was true. She herself had spent quite long periods of time away from Weldon and whenever she had left it she had felt desolately torn. She was convinced that if she were given the chance to spend her whole life there, never leaving it, the place would in no way lose its charm for her; she would simply love it more with each year that passed.

Indeed as a young schoolgirl, at boarding school in England because her parents were in India, she had made up her mind that whatever other members of the family did she would never leave Weldon (where she spent all her school holidays) once she had reached the age when she could decide what to do with her own life.

'Decide what to do with her own life!' Propped against the gate, absorbedly thinking about Weldon, she had sunk into a sort of trance, but this phrase, 'Decide what to do with her own life', brought her back with a jerk to hideous reality. Surely the past three

war-torn years had taught her, taught all her generation, that there could never be any such thing as anyone being able to decide what to do with their own life? This was the one thing above all that nobody could decide: Fate made that decision.

Lorna, on the outbreak of war, had been eager to get into uniform like her two brothers, both Regular soldiers. She had been prevented from joining up by the objections of her father who, a retired general of the old school, believed that women should leave uniforms (apart from those of the nursing services) to be worn by men. After much persuasion, he had eventually agreed that Lorna might join the FANY, the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry Corps, and she had been on the point of signing up when her father, who had been flogging himself unsparingly on the regional committee for Civil Defence, had suffered a stroke which had left him semi-paralysed. Lorna had postponed joining the FANY and had stayed at home, helping her mother to nurse him. His recovery had been severely set back by the death of his eldest son, Tom, at Dunkirk. This had taken some getting over. Almost exactly a year later the younger boy, Tony, had died of wounds at Tobruk. Lorna's mother had had a fatal heart attack after hearing this news.

Surely enough for one family to suffer! But Fate had held yet another searing blow in store for Lorna.

After eighteen months of standing alone against Hitler, Britain found herself with strong new allies: first Russia; then the United States in the wake of Pearl Harbor. Fursey Down, requisitioned by the Government on behalf of the new ally, like many another hitherto remote backwater of south-east England, was earmarked as an airfield for the United States Eighth Army Air Force Bomber Command. Weldon Court, situated right in the centre of the projected airfield, must go.

So 'Look thy last on all things lovely,' Lorna now told herself, as she stood on the Beacon staring at the beloved scene spread out

before her. She would never see it again. Any day now men and machines would set to work, and with clanging din and clouds of dust they would level her beloved Weldon Court to the ground; tear up the orchard, the elms; tear up the golden furze; destroy the entire place to build runways and hangars for American bombers.

Lorna realized, of course, that she should be thankful that her country no longer stood alone. But, that said, she knew, in the depths of her being, that she would never forgive the Yanks for taking Weldon Court from her. Even if they turned out to be the most splendid allies known to all history, she'd never forgive them.

She had already sworn a private vow that, once the work of destruction had begun, she would avoid Fursey Down like the plague for the rest of her days. She would preserve inviolate her mind's-eye vision of Fursey Down and Weldon Court as they had been, would always be, for her. Airfield and Americans for her simply would not exist. Here was one decision which, come hell or high water, she had every intention of keeping!

So she had looked her last on Fursey Down and Weldon Court, this Friday, 12 June 1942, the blackest day of her life.

Blinded by tears Lorna turned from the gate and plodded away. The two little dogs, seeming to understand, trotted dismally along behind her, close to her heels.

II

The miserable trio headed back for The Warren, Lorna's new so-called home; a large dark house of late Victorian vintage, on the edge of Fursey-Winwold village; the only house in the neighbourhood which she and her father had been able to find at such short notice. They both hated it. Indeed Lorna had thought that

they should move right away from Fursey-Winwold. Her father, however, had disagreed. 'When war's on and you're in a tight spot, stick with your friends and neighbours. Keep together. Don't get strung out.' And that was true, reflected Lorna. If they moved away they'd have to start all over again making local friends.

Nevertheless, this said, Lorna would still have given anything to escape from the village, to get as far away as possible from Fursey Down and memories of Weldon Court. And, yes (be honest, Lorna, she told herself), she had to confess that she would also have given a great deal to have escaped from her father; not because she didn't love him, but because she now felt in bondage to him since devotion to him was no longer a matter of free will but an inescapable duty. She was tied to him, bound hand and foot to him.

At one point, earlier that year, when the conscription of women at long last had been introduced, she had believed that an escape route was opening ahead of her. She'd allow herself to be directed into anything, just to get away! She'd even go in a dreaded munitions factory!

But the Government had not demanded that she must desert her father. Not for her the excuse 'I'm obliged by conscription to leave him'. There was something called Household Release, which exempted women with children or invalids or aged parents to care for. Her father was an invalid *and* aged. Well, growing old anyway; older than his actual years. It was true that they had Mrs Cuthman, their cook-housekeeper, but she was now sixty-two and could hardly be asked to make the General her full responsibility in addition to her other duties in the household; furthermore, though she had been with the Washbournes for almost three decades, that was still different from being family. Lorna had to face it; she was all that her father had left, and he dreaded losing her.

She well remembered the morning when she had told him that she had received her call-up papers.

‘Have you now? I thought they were due. But don’t worry; nobody’s going to press-gang the one and only member of my family left to me. Now I’ve lost your mother I must keep my daughter. That’s essential!’

She had endeavoured to hide her desperation as she had replied: ‘Isn’t it rather necessary that I should go into some kind of service? The country is acutely short of manpower and needs women to fill the gaps. And this *is* a call-up! I mean, if it had been either Tom or Tony left as the one and only member of your family, they’d still have had to answer their country’s call.’

‘Totally different situation. Not the same at all. You’re my daughter, not a son,’ he had retorted emphatically. Then he had reached out and patted her hand, supposing that he was comforting her. ‘Don’t worry. You won’t find yourself carted off.’

Nor had she been. No escape for her from Fursey-Winwold! She was imprisoned there.

This sense of imprisonment, however, had one thing to be said in its favour; it increased her sense of empathy with her soldier boyfriend, Ivo Bastable, in prison-of-war camp in Germany. She told herself that, if Ivo was spending his war shut up in a prison camp, she was spending her war shut up in Fursey-Winwold with Father. One fate was as inexorable as the other. They shared the experience of being victims in captivity.

On arrival indoors, after her walk up to the Beacon, Lorna hurried upstairs to finish preparing the guest room for her friend Bunty Bastable, Ivo’s sister, who was coming for a brief stay. This friendship with Bunty dated back to their days together at St Hildegard’s Secretarial College, where they had been students just before the war.

St Hildegard’s! Lorna, as she made up Bunty’s bed, found herself back there, among the typewriters and the notebooks full of

Pitman's shorthand. Dots. Dashes. Abbreviations. Shun hooks. 'Ready for dictation, girls? We are trying for forty-five words a minute this morning, remember! Starting now: "Gentlemen, I am happy to present our annual report which, thanks to the healthy upturn in the demand for steel . . ."' Those ghastly annual reports, taken from the *Financial Times*.

Miss Trott for shorthand, Mrs Plessey for typing, Miss Knott for book-keeping. Madame Bonnard-Krutz for French. Miss Binkle as head of all.

St Hildegard's Secretarial College, conveniently close to Regent's Park on the one hand (they ate their lunches there in fine weather) and Baker Street Tube station on the other, was an exclusive and expensive establishment which prided itself both on the class of girl it attracted and on the high standards it achieved in turning out excellently trained and qualified secretaries of impeccable efficiency, grooming and poise. 'Show me a top-drawer secretary unobtrusively but decisively at the helm, and the chances are that, nine times out of ten, you are showing me a St Hildegard's gal,' was the favourite maxim of Miss Binkle, the college principal, when interviewing the parent, or parents, of an intending entrant. 'Even if your daughter ultimately pursues a career other than secretarial, or simply settles down into marriage, her time at St Hildegard's will *never* be wasted. Everything that she learns here will serve her in good stead *whatever* path she may follow in future life.'

Shorthand, typing, book-keeping, filing and indexing, duplicating, office organization and etiquette, commercial English, foreign languages (choice of French, German, Spanish); how to use the telephone with poised efficiency, how to become a polished receptionist – all these were on the curriculum. Students were guaranteed to emerge with a typing speed of forty to sixty words a minute and a shorthand speed of eighty words a minute minimum – Miss Binkle

was dissatisfied with students who could not reach at least one hundred and twenty words a minute shorthand. These attainments necessitated gruelling hard work.

To achieve a fluently effortless speed with the typewriter the girls typed to music. Mozart's 'Turkish March' was a great favourite with Mrs Plessey in pursuit of fluency with the typewriter. Lorna, who played this on the piano, thanks to Mrs Plessey had reached the stage where she shuddered at the mere sound of the opening bars of what formerly had been one of her favourite pieces.

Lorna's greatest friend at St Hildegard's had been her companion since childhood, Violetta, daughter of novelists Daphne and Dicky Stacks who lived at Winwold Manor, which made them neighbours of the Washbournes and had resulted in Lorna and Violetta being, from an early age, friends so close that they had been akin to sisters. They had gone to the same boarding school, where they had been inseparable, and from school to St Hildegard's, where their time-honoured twosome had developed into a trio when they had met Bunty Bastable.

Bunty (real name Stella, but she was never called anything but Bunty) aspired to fame behind the footlights. She had reached a compromise with her parents that she should go to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA as she always called it) providing that she first went to St Hildegard's and acquired secretarial skills which would, as her father put it, 'keep her afloat should she fail to make the grade as Sarah Bernhardt'.

'Of course,' said Bunty buoyantly, 'Mother and Daddy *would* see me in terms of Bernhardt; they're both such impossible high-brows!' It didn't surprise either Lorna or Violetta to hear this; Bunty's father was the judge Sir Humphrey Bastable, who specialized in classical *bons mots* in court, while her mother concerned herself with the Arts, very much with a capital A. Bunty, on the other hand, saw herself as a second Gertie Lawrence and, when she

remembered to do so, she cultivated a Gertie Lawrence manner and voice, but really ‘She isn’t one bit like Gertie Lawrence; she’s herself and she should cultivate *that*,’ said Lorna. Bunty, though not a beauty, was blessed with really lovely eyes, hazel with amber flecks in them, set very wide apart, and she also had, as all the St Hildegard girls had enviously agreed, ‘simply fabulous legs’. She wore her heavy tawny hair in a long page-boy bob and used a dashing coral-pink Guerlain lipstick which all the others had considered the height of sophistication. She painted her nails to match. Miss Binkle had warned her about her appearance: ‘You seem on the flighty side.’

Memories of Bunty Bastable as a ‘St Hildegard’s gal’! Lorna, putting embroidered cases over Bunty’s pillows, smiled at these recollections, and then went on to smile at thoughts of Bunty at RADA, where she had spent the first two years of the war: Bunty ‘dropping her voice’ half an octave to give it the right husky sound and developing a throaty gurgle to match; adopting theatrical mannerisms and gestures which varied from week to week, according to which star she was worshipping at the moment; experimenting with make-up, plucking out her own eyebrows and drawing in Marlene Dietrich ones, and extending her cheek rouge up to her hairline (‘You look like Mephistopheles,’ Lorna had commented unkindly).

Finally Bunty had landed her first professional engagement, in a chorus-line of HP sauce bottles featured in an ENSA show. For several weeks she had pranced around, entertaining the troops as an HP sauce bottle, and then out of the blue, in the late autumn of 1941, had announced to her friends that she had become Mrs David McEwen; a wartime marriage, made without any fuss or preliminary notice. Her husband was twenty-three, an RAF Bomber Command pilot. He was dark haired, nice, and rather reserved in manner; Lorna and Violetta agreed that he was a much quieter type

than they would have expected Bunty to have married. However, Bunty obviously adored him.

She had confided to Lorna that he was anxious that they should have a child – ‘So that he can leave something of himself behind if he gets killed,’ added Bunty, with a smile that was not really a smile at all.

‘And are you pregnant?’

‘No, I’m not. Efforts must be redoubled on his next leave!’

This conversation, thought Lorna now, as she smoothed out the bedspread, had occurred a mere seven weeks ago. David had been lost three weeks later, shot down during a heavy raid over Germany. Poor Bunty, struggling hard to get over her loss, had written to Lorna asking if she might come to stay a few days; being with Lorna would be such a help.

Lorna wished that they could have had Violetta with them, too. She was always so vivacious and amusing; much more so than Lorna felt that she could ever be. But Violetta, when the conscription of women had threatened to see her directed into a munitions factory, had forestalled her call-up papers by going of her own volition into the Auxiliary Territorial Service where she was now sweating out her first weeks as a squaddie.

Bunty’s bed completed, Lorna gave a last glance round the room. All that was needed now was the final finishing touch of a vase of roses on the dressing table; Bunty shared Lorna’s passion for roses. Passing through the kitchen on her way into the garden, in order to check that all was being done that needed doing, Lorna discovered Mrs Cuthman’s granddaughter, sixteen-year-old Ruth Cuthman, who had now come to work at The Warren, standing at the sink carefully washing the china from the shelves of the kitchen dresser: china of a decorative rather than a utilitarian sort, including part of an old Wedgwood dinner service, with a splendid soup tureen as centrepiece. The kitchen was by far the

sunniest, pleasantest room at The Warren; Lorna felt that it deserved a dresser of attractive china. Mrs Cuthman agreed: 'I always had a nice bit of china in my kitchen, even when I hadn't much else.'

Mrs Cuthman's husband had been a gamekeeper. 'He was a good husband, but violent in drink; I used to be black and blue all over.' He had died unexpectedly while still quite a young man. Mrs Cuthman had gone back into service (before marriage she had been a kitchen maid); she had become cook at Weldon Court in order to support herself and her child, Florrie, who had spent much of her time being cared for by her maternal grandmother, 'who never kept a proper eye on her'; with the result that, at the age of fifteen, Florrie had produced Ruth who, wholly unwanted by her young mother, had been brought up by Mrs Cuthman, with, as the child grew older, occasional periods of lodging in Ipswich with Florrie, who seemed to grow fond of her daughter without feeling any great responsibility for her.

For the past two years Ruth had been in Ipswich, working as a bottle-washer for a dairy. Mrs Cuthman, determined to get Ruth into a better class of work, had brought her back to Fursey-Winwold, where the girl had become trainee house-cum-parlour maid to the Washbournes, under whose roof, in any case, she had largely grown up. The move had been nothing dramatic for her, she was back among old friends. However, she did let drop to Lorna that she found Fursey-Winwold a bit quiet after Ipswich, and that, in any case, she was only waiting for her eighteenth birthday when she would join the Women's Land Army.

Lorna had been a ten-year-old schoolgirl when she had arrived home from the summer holidays to discover Ruth, barely five, installed at Weldon Court, under Mrs Cuthman's care. Lorna herself, in those holiday times, had been largely under Mrs Cuthman's maternal supervision and little Ruth had soon fallen into the role

of being Lorna's plaything-cum-baby sister. Lorna and Violetta had played with Ruth as if she had been a kind of living doll; indeed there had always been something doll-like about Ruth, small, endlessly smiling; with round rosy cheeks, floppy light brown hair, and long, thick, straight eyelashes dropping down like a pair of little sun blinds over her round blue eyes every time she lowered her lids. Exactly, thought Lorna, like one of those china dolls which, when you tilted them back, lowered their lids and said, 'Ma-ma!' only instead of 'Ma-ma' Ruth said 'Lar-na!' As she grew older Mrs Cuthman had insisted upon Ruth saying 'Miss Lorna'; but the relationship between the two girls had essentially remained that of two playmates, one considerably older than the other.

The sixteen-year-old Ruth who had returned from two years of bottle-washing at Ipswich had been surprisingly unchanged from the Ruth of former days. She was still small and doll-like, with round rosy cheeks; the ingenuous blue eyes were the eyes of the guileless little Ruth whom Lorna had played with and had petted. The girl herself was as innocently fond of unsophisticated pranks and jokes, chatter and laughter, as she had ever been and, quickly over an initial shyness at finding herself installed back at The Warren with a recognized job as house-cum-parlour maid, fell into her old habits of happy prattle and confiding ways.

Ruth had her friends among the village girls, and at weekends would occasionally return to her 'mates' (as she called them) at Ipswich: it seemed that, as yet, she had no boyfriends; she confided to Lorna that boys were a 'silly nuisance'. Some of her friends already had 'steadies', but Ruth had her sights set on the Land Army and a career of dedication to agriculture. 'I wouldn't mind marriage to a farmer maybe, some fine day, but I'm in no hurry,' she said, smiling into the copper pan she was polishing as she chatted. 'And with a war on you no sooner meet a boy and grow friendly than he's called up, so what's the use? For the next few

years, Miss Lorna, once I'm in the Land Army I reckon it's pigs I'll get the most out of.'

'You could do a lot worse than that,' commented Lorna, laughing. 'Plenty of time yet for you to start worrying about boys, Ruth.'

'I reckon so,' responded Ruth, vigorously polishing the bur-nished pan.

Now she remarked, as she carefully rinsed the Wedgwood soup tureen, 'This is a lovely thing, this tureen. I remember when I was little looking at it and thinking it's real beautiful.'

'I remember thinking the same thing when I was little,' replied Lorna, pausing on the doorstep before hurrying into the garden. She added, 'I still do think it's an absolutely beautiful piece.'

'Yes, Miss Lorna. Worth washing as careful as if it's a babby.' And Ruth positively crooned as she took up a tea towel to dry the tureen.

A crisp white cloth and tea things had been set out on a table in a shady corner of the lawn, in readiness for Bunty's arrival. Bunty, poor love, would be dying for a cup of tea after her journey from London.

And so it proved. Bunty arrived hot, sticky, smutty and weary, after having stood in the corridor throughout the journey, in a train packed tight with troops. 'Travelling's no joke these days!' were her first words of greeting, as she and Lorna embraced.

Lorna made sympathetic sounds: 'Let me show you to your room, and then we'll have a cup of tea.'

'Sounds bliss!' said Bunty.

She had noticeably lost weight, and in her wan face her eyes looked bigger than ever. Her vivid lipstick made a brave bid for high spirits which all too clearly, and understandably, had deserted her.

'What wizard roses, Lorna! Sweet of you.' Bunty bent to sniff the roses appreciatively. 'I'll unpack after tea, shall I?'

‘Absolutely. Bags we go down right away. I’m dying for a cup of tea, so I’m sure you must be, too, after that gruesome journey.’

They fell spontaneously into the old schoolgirl idioms of their days at St Hildegard’s.

They went down to the garden. ‘Father’s had his tea and is taking things quietly indoors,’ said Lorna as they seated themselves beside the tea table. ‘He finds this hot weather pretty exhausting.’

‘How is he keeping?’

‘Much the same. He has his ups and downs. He just about manages to walk with the help of two sticks, and he’s always very tired by the end of the day. What he calls a dot-and-carry existence.’

They sipped their tea and ate a slice each of Mrs Cuthman’s sponge cake. ‘Any news of Violetta?’ enquired Bunty.

‘Yes, I had a letter from her, at long last, yesterday morning. I’ll show it to you afterwards. All about her ATS training centre. You heard from her yet?’

‘Only that first postcard, saying she’d write when she was allowed a spare moment to write in.’

‘She says it’s just like being back in boarding school.’ Lorna cut them each another slice of cake. ‘Still, I’m sure she did the right thing; the powers that be wouldn’t have let her carry on doing secretarial work for her parents. No hope of that being called helping the war effort!’

‘And, speaking of letters,’ said Bunty, ‘we’ve heard from Ivo; saying, thank God, he’s well, and we’re not to worry about him. He’s asked me to tell you that he’s written to you in reply to yours; poor boy, he’s afraid that we mightn’t get his letters, in the same way that he believes he doesn’t receive all of ours. He says he feels so cut off.’

Just three years Bunty’s senior, and a Cambridge undergraduate when Bunty and Lorna had been at St Hildegard’s, Ivo had joined up immediately war broke out and had been captured by the

enemy at the time of Dunkirk. He and Lorna, introduced to one another by Bunty, had become, in Bunty's terminology, 'more than somewhat smitten' by each other; Ivo had invited Lorna to Cambridge in May Week, in that last carefree summer before the war, and during the months of 'phoney war' had dated her every time he could get away from the Officer Cadet Training Unit. Though they had never actually become engaged, there had been an implicit understanding that Lorna would be waiting when he returned from France, where he had been sent just before the 'phoney war' had exploded into hideous reality.

Lorna said: 'That must be the worst thing – feeling cut off. I write to him regularly, even though I hardly ever hear from him. I agree with Ivo; I suspect that most of the letters we exchange never arrive. But I keep on writing in the hope that some will reach him; even the occasional letter must be for him better than none at all.'

'Same here. I write to him every week. So does Ma.' Bunty added: 'He's been a prisoner now for – let's see – two years. Grim.'

'And no sign of the war coming anywhere near to an end yet,' sighed Lorna dismally. Then she remembered her duties as hostess and pulled herself together. 'More tea?'

It had never been any surprise to Bunty that Ivo should have fallen for Lorna. She was pretty enough to expect to attract plenty of young men. Slight and elegant in figure, with delicate features, a real English rose complexion, and interesting eyes of a light aquamarine blue which contrasted with her sandy-gold hair, she had seemed, at St Hildegard's, to be all set for a future of capturing hearts galore. She herself was given to joking that her nose was slightly crooked, and when you came to look at her closely so it was; but not enough to mar her appearance – perhaps, indeed, it even added character to her face.

The Lorna of St Hildegard days had been made further appealing by a most engaging, open and spontaneous smile, often

followed by a happy and unrestrained laugh. But this smile and the happy laugh had gradually become extinguished during the war years, under the succession of blows rained upon her. The Lorna Washbourne contemplated by Bunty now across the tea table was not really the same Lorna of the old days of St Hildegard's, any more than the Bunty at whom Lorna gave reflective looks was the old Bunty who had practised gurgling like Gertie Lawrence.

Their tea over, the girls lit cigarettes and sat listening to a black-bird who had suddenly started to sing in a pear tree. 'Gosh,' broke out Bunty after a few moments. 'How marvellously peaceful it is here! You'd never know there was a war on.'

'I don't know about that,' rejoined Lorna wryly, 'but I suppose it is a bit different from London.'

'It all seems pretty out of this world to me,' said Bunty, gazing round her at the garden, and at the fields beyond in their mid-summer glory of buttercups.

Lorna replied slowly, gazing round her, too: 'It's been a simply beautiful spring and summer this year. I don't think I've ever seen things look more marvellous. Somehow, though, I can't bear to look at it much, because the contrast between all the countryside being so beautiful and the circumstances of our own wartime lives is just too terrible and sad.'

She broke off, wondering how she could be so tactless as to voice these thoughts aloud, since they must only be horribly painful to Bunty. For a moment or two Bunty said nothing, and Lorna felt increasingly miserable and embarrassed by her own thoughtlessness. Then Bunty said: 'I knew it couldn't last, you know – our marriage. David knew it, too. I mean, nobody can be lucky thirty times running! To survive his tour, he would have had to be lucky thirty times running.' She paused for a moment, and then went on: 'I promised him I wouldn't mope if the time came when he didn't come back. He said – and I agree, though it's not easy to keep it

up – that the show must go on. That’s what I’m trying to do. But you know about that as well as I do, Lorna. You’ve been through it, too.’

‘Brothers are a bit different from a husband, Bunty. You’ve lost your husband.’

‘Maybe in some ways you losing your brothers was worse than my losing a husband. You’d known your brothers all your life; they’d been part of your life ever since you could remember. David and I hadn’t known each other any time at all really. I mean, we were terribly in love, but it seemed to be over before it had really begun. And we never even started that baby!’ She added sadly: ‘Perhaps we weren’t in the right frame of mind for starting a baby. I reckon there’s more to a baby than you think.’

Lorna, not knowing what to reply, reached out across the tea table and took Bunty’s hand in a sympathetic squeeze.

‘Well,’ said Bunty rather chokily, after a few seconds of clinging to Lorna’s hand in wordless acknowledgement of the feeling between them, ‘I’d say it’s time for me to go upstairs and unpack.’

As they walked across the lawn back to the house, a passer-by in the nearby lane waved a cheery greeting to Lorna over the hedge.

‘Who’s that?’ asked Bunty.

‘Our neighbour, Jeffrey Bosco, the vet,’ replied Lorna. ‘Fearfully hearty type. Old rigger blue, and all that. As broad as he’s tall and as thick as he’s broad. Has the loudest voice in the world and an even louder laugh.’ She added wistfully: ‘That was the lovely thing about Weldon Court – you didn’t have neighbours right on top of you.’

‘I don’t see any neighbours right on top of you,’ said Bunty, gazing round at the trees and open fields. ‘Where does he live?’

‘Who? Jeffrey? Up the lane about a hundred yards. The Firs. And on the other side we have Titus.’

‘Titus?’

‘Titus Swann, the village sexton. Never stops talking. Holds you with his glittering eye, like the Ancient Mariner, and teaches you his tale. He mows the grass for us and does the vegetable-gardening, and as no one here encourages him in his gossiping I don’t think he carries too much tittle-tattle away from The Warren; nor do we show the slightest interest in getting tittle-tattle out of him.’

‘What about the threatened Yanks? Have they arrived yet?’

‘No, but they’ll be here any time now.’ Lorna shuddered as she spoke. She added with vehemence: ‘When they do turn up, I, for one, intend having nothing to do with them.’

III

While Bunty was unpacking, Lorna read her Violetta’s letter. It was written in violet ink, which she always affected, to match her name:

Dearest Lorna,

News at last from the Front Line!

I’m in a Victorian barracks (mustn’t say where! TOP SECRET!) taken over as an ATS training centre. Far from comfortable – intended for rude soldiery. About seven hundred young things come in here at a time, all bright-eyed and bursting with enthusiasm, and emerge three weeks later pretty well *crawling* on hands and knees! We drill and march, much in the style of the chaps, and have lessons in a classroom on a variety of subjects about which I won’t bore you; and, what with the uniforms and the sleeping in dorms and the discipline and being among swarms of fellow females all the time, it’s so much like being back at boarding school I’m starting to feel like fifteen all over again.