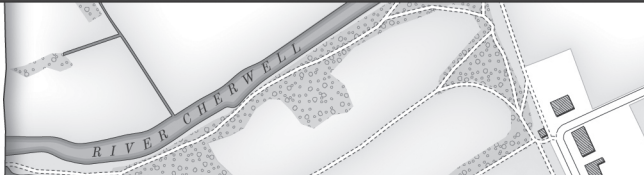
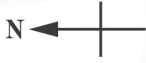


OXFORD

• 1913 •

0 500 1000

Scale in feet



UNIVERSITY
PARKS



SOMERVILLE COLLEGE

BANBURY ROAD

WOODSTOCK ROAD



ST SEPULCHRE'S
CEMETERY

Radcliffe
Infirmary

Somerville
College

Oxford
University
Press

WALTON STREET

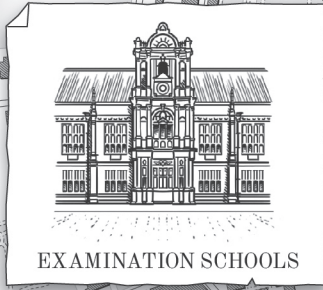
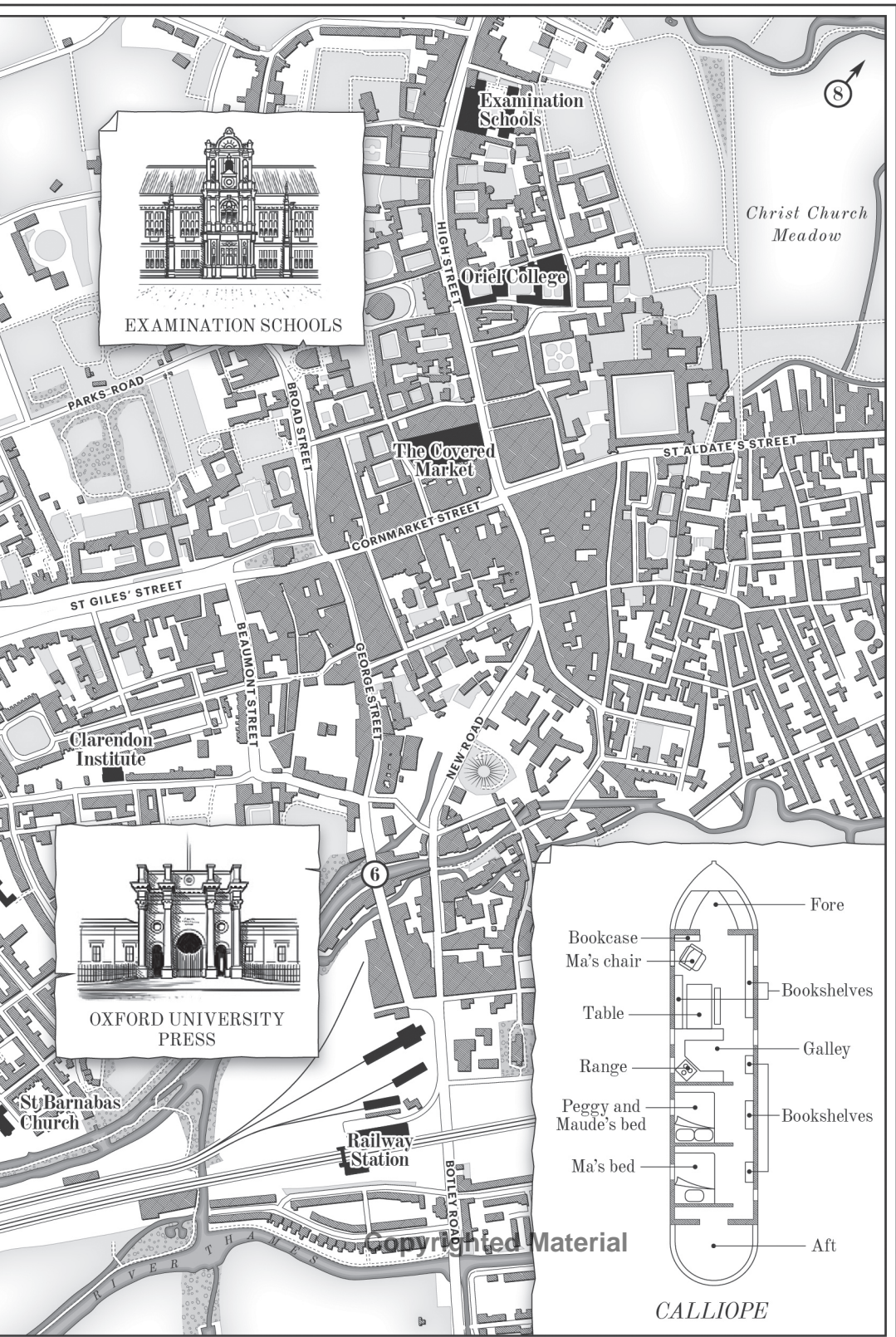
JERICO

St Sepulchre's
Cemetery

- 1 *Calliope's* mooring
- 2 Walton Well Bridge
- 3 The Jericho Tavern
- 4 Prince of Wales
- 5 The Bookbinders Arms
- 6 Hythe Bridge
- 7 Port Meadow
- 8 Cowley Barracks

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Examination Schools

Oriell College

The Covered Market

Clarendon Institute

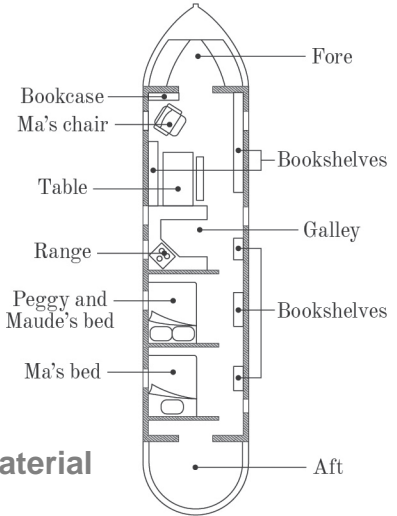
St Barnabas Church

Railway Station

Christ Church Meadow

8

6



CALLIOPE

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Before

Scraps. That's all I got. Fragments that made no sense without the words before or the words after.

We were folding *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* and I'd scanned the first page of the editor's preface a hundred times. The last line on the page rang in my mind, incomplete and teasing. *I have only ventured to deviate where it seemed to me that ...*

Ventured to deviate. My eye caught the phrase each time I folded a section.

Where it seemed to me that ...

That what? I thought. Then I'd start on another sheet.

First fold: *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Second fold: *Edited by WJ Craig*. Third fold: *ventured to bloody deviate*.

My hand hovered as I read that last line and tried to guess at the rest.

WJ Craig changed Shakespeare, I thought. Where it seemed to him that ...

I grew desperate to know.

I glanced around the bindery, along the folding bench piled with quires of sheets and folded sections. I looked at Maude.

She couldn't care less about the words on the page. I could hear her humming a little tune, each fold marking time like the second hand of a clock. Folding was her favourite job, and she could fold better than anyone, but that didn't stop mistakes. *Folding tangents*, Ma used to call them. Folds of her own design and purpose. From the corner of my eye, I'd sense a change in rhythm. It was easy enough to reach over, stay her hand. She understood. She wasn't simple, despite what people thought. And if I missed the signs? Well, a section ruined. It could happen to any of us with the slip of a bonefolder. But we'd notice. We'd put the damaged section aside. My sister never did. And so I had to.

Keep an eye.

Watch over.

Deep breath.

Dear Maude. I love you, I really do. But sometimes ... This is how my mind ran.

Already I could see a folded section in Maude's pile that didn't sit square. I'd remove it later. She wouldn't know, and neither would Mrs Hogg. There'd be no need for tutting.

The only thing that could upset the appplecart at that moment was me.

If I didn't find out why WJ Craig had changed Shakespeare, I thought I might scream. I raised my hand.

'Yes, Miss Jones?'

'Lavatory, Mrs Hogg.'

She nodded.

I finished the fold I'd started and waited for Mrs Hogg to drift away. *Mrs Hogg, the freckly frog*. Maude had said it out loud once and I'd never been forgiven. She had no trouble telling us apart, but as far as Mrs Hogg was concerned, Maude and I were one and the same.

'Back in a mo, Maudie.'

‘Back in a mo,’ she said.

Lou was folding the second section. As I passed behind her chair, I leant over her shoulder. ‘Can you stop for a second?’ I said.

‘I thought you were desperate for the lav.’

‘Of course not. I just need to know what it says.’

She paused long enough for me to read the end of the sentence. I added it to what I knew and whispered it to myself: *‘I have only ventured to deviate where it seemed to me that the carelessness of either copyist or printer deprived a word or sentence wholly of meaning.’*

‘Can I keep folding now, Peggy?’ Lou asked.

‘Yes, you can, Louise,’ said Mrs Hogg.

Lou blushed and gave me a look.

‘Miss Jones ...’

Mrs Hogg had been at school with Ma and she’d known me since Maude and I were newborns. Still, Miss *Jones*. The emphasis on Ma’s maiden name, just in case anyone in the bindery had forgotten her disgrace.

‘Your job is to bind the books, not read them ...’

She kept talking but I stopped listening. I’d heard it a hundred times. The sheets were there to be folded not read, the sections gathered not read, the text blocks sewn not read – and for the hundredth time I thought that reading the pages was the only thing that made the rest tolerable. *I have only ventured to deviate where it seemed to me that the carelessness of either copyist or printer deprived a word or sentence wholly of meaning.*

Mrs Hogg raised her finger, and I wondered what response I had failed to give. She was going red in the face, the way she invariably did. Then our forewoman interrupted.

‘Peggy, as you are up, I wonder if you could run an errand for me?’ Mrs Stoddard turned a smile on the floor supervisor. ‘I’m sure you can spare her for ten minutes, Mrs Hogg?’

Freckly frog nodded and continued down the line of girls without another glance at me. I looked towards my sister.

‘Maude will be fine,’ said Mrs Stoddard.

We walked the length of the bindery, and Mrs Stoddard stopped occasionally to encourage one of the younger girls or to advise on posture if she saw someone slouching. When we got to her office, she picked up a book, newly bound, lettered in gold so shiny it looked wet.

The Oxford Book of English Verse, 1250–1900. We printed it almost every year.

‘Has no one written a poem since 1900?’ I asked.

Mrs Stoddard suppressed a smile. ‘The Controller will want to see how the latest print run has turned out.’ She handed me the book. ‘The walk to his office should relieve your boredom.’

I held the book to my nose: clean leather and the fading scent of ink and glue. I never tired of it. It was the freshly minted smell of a new idea, an old story, a disturbing rhyme. I knew it would be gone from that book within a month, so I inhaled, as if I might absorb whatever was printed on the pages within.

I walked back slowly between two long rows of benches piled with flat printed sheets and folded sections. Women and girls were bent to the task of transforming one to the other, and I had been given a moment’s reprieve. I started to open the book when a freckly hand covered mine and pushed the book shut.

‘It won’t do to have the spine creased,’ said Mrs Hogg. ‘Not by the likes of you, Miss Jones.’



I took my time walking through the corridors of the Clarendon Press.

Mr Hart had a visitor; her words were escaping the privacy of their conversation. She was young, well spoken, with a faint hint of the

Midlands. I lightened my tread so as not to scare the words into silence.

‘And what does your father think?’ asked Mr Hart.

I paused just outside the office door. It was half-open and I could see her fashionable shoes and slim ankles below a straight lilac skirt. A long matching jacket.

‘He was reluctant but eventually persuaded.’

‘He’s a businessman. Practical. He didn’t need a degree to make a success of milling paper. He probably can’t see the point for a young woman.’

‘No, he can’t,’ she said, and I felt her frustration. ‘So I must show him the point by making it worthwhile.’

‘And when will you come up to Oxford?’

‘September. Just before Michaelmas term. I’m coming up to Somerville, so we’ll be neighbours.’

Somerville. Every morning, I imagined leaving Maude at the entrance to the Press and walking across the road and into the porter’s lodge of Somerville College. I imagined the quad and the library and a desk in one of the rooms that overlooked Walton Street. I imagined spending my days reading books instead of binding them. I imagined, for a moment, that there was no need for me to earn an income and that Maude could fend for herself.

‘And what will you read?’

There was an answer on the tip of my tongue, but the young woman stole it.

‘English. I want to be a writer.’

‘Well, perhaps one day we will have the privilege of printing your work.’

‘Perhaps you will, Mr Hart. I look forward to seeing my name among your first editions.’

There was a hush, not uncomfortable, and I knew they were looking at the Controller’s bookshelf, at all the first editions with

their pristine leather spines and gold-leaf lettering. The book in my hand asserted itself. I'd almost forgotten why I was there.

'Give my regards to your father, Miss Brittain.'

'I will, Mr Hart.'

The door swung open and I had no time to step back, so for a moment we stood eye to eye. Miss Brittain might have been nineteen or twenty, twenty-one perhaps, the same age as me. She was my height and just as slender, and she was pretty, despite her mousy hair. Lilac suited her well, I thought, and I wondered what she might think of me. Pretty, no doubt; everyone said so. Hair as dark as the canal at night and eyes to match, like Ma's. Though my nose was different: a little too big. I might not have been so conscious of it except I saw it in profile when I looked at Maude.

It was just a moment, but sometimes that's all it takes – I could see there was something steely in Miss Brittain's expression: a determination. We could be friends, I thought.

She seemed to know better. She was not rude, but there were protocols. She saw the apron of a bindery girl over a plain brown cotton-drill skirt and a wash-worn blouse, sleeves rolled up to the elbows. She smiled and nodded, then walked away along the corridor.

I knocked on the open door and Mr Hart looked up from his desk. I'd been nine years at the Press and never seen him smile, but one now lingered around the corners of his mouth. When he realised I was not Miss Brittain returned, it retreated. He motioned for me to come in but returned his attention to the ledger on his desk.

My ten minutes had run down, but it was not my place to interrupt. I looked beyond Mr Hart and out the window. There she was, Miss Brittain, crossing Walton Street. She stopped on the pavement and looked up at the windows of Somerville College. She stayed there for some time, and people were forced to walk around her. In that moment, I felt her excitement. She was wondering if one of those

windows would be hers. She was imagining the desk overlooking the street and all the books she would read.

And then there was a tightness in my chest. A familiar resentment. Perhaps Mrs Hogg knew the truth of things and I had no right to read the books I bound, or imagine myself anywhere but Jericho, or contemplate for one moment that I could ever have a life beyond Maude. The book started to feel heavy in my hands, and I was surprised I'd been entrusted with it at all.

And then I was angry.

I opened *The Oxford Book of English Verse* and heard the spine crack. I turned the pages – John Barbour, Geoffrey Chaucer, Robert Henryson, William Dunbar, Anonymous, Anonymous. If they had names, might they be Anna or Mary or Lucy or Peg? I looked up and saw the Controller staring at me.

For a moment I thought he might ask what I thought. But he simply held out his hand for the book. I hesitated and he raised his eyebrows. It was enough. I put the book in his hand. He nodded and looked down at his ledger.

Without a word, I was dismissed.

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PART ONE

Shakespeare's England

August 1914 to October 1914

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Chapter One

The paperboys shouted the news all over Jericho; our walk to work was noisy with it. ‘Defend Belgian neutrality,’ Maude repeated. ‘Support France.’ She said it all, just as the paperboys did, over and over.

When we stopped at Turner’s Newsagency to collect our post, the counter was crowded with people buying newspapers.

‘Nothing this morning, Miss Jones,’ Mr Turner said when he finally saw me. I picked up a copy of the *Daily Mail* and handed over a halfpenny. Mr Turner raised his eyebrows; I’d never bought the paper before. *Waste of a halfpenny*, Ma used to say. There were always papers lying around at the Press.

Maude scanned the front page as we walked along Walton Street. ‘*Great Britain declares war on Germany?*’ It was a headline and a question – she was confused by the celebrating of young men and the worry she saw on the brows of their mothers. But was she asking what war would mean for England or what it might mean for us?

‘We’ll be all right, Maudie.’ I squeezed her hand. ‘But some things may change.’ I hoped they would and felt a little guilty, but not a lot. Maude continued to scan the newsprint.

‘*Practical hats at popular prices*,’ she read aloud. It was her habit, ever since she’d learnt to read. It was a skill hard earned, and although she didn’t care to read a book, she loved headlines and cartoons – words already arranged and ready to use.

We joined the mass of men and women, boys and girls, flowing through the stone arch of the Clarendon Press. We walked through the quad, past well-tended garden beds, the copper beech and grand pond, into the south wing of the building – the Bible side, we called it, though Bibles were now printed in London. Once inside, all the vestiges of an Oxford college gave way to the sounds and smells and textures of industry. We stored our bags and hats in the cloakroom in the bindery, took clean aprons from their hooks and made our way through the girls’ side. The tables were piled high with text blocks in need of sewing, and the gathering bench was arranged with sections ready to be collated into books.

The folding benches were arranged in three long rows with room for twelve women along each. They faced tall, undressed windows, and morning light spilled over quires of flat printed sheets and piles of folded sections from the day before. Lou and Aggie were already in their places at one end of the bench directly under the windows. Maude and I sat between them.

‘What have they given us today?’ I said to Aggie.

‘Something old,’ she said. She never cared what.

‘You’ve got bits and pieces from *Shakespeare’s England*,’ said Lou. ‘Proof pages. They’ll take you five minutes. Then there’s his complete works to keep you going for the rest of the day.’

‘The Craig edition, still?’

She nodded.

‘Surely everyone in England has a copy of that by now.’

I pulled the first proof sheet in front of me and picked up Ma’s bonefolder. No one else liked folding proof pages – there were never

enough to get into a rhythm – but I loved them. And I especially loved them when they kept coming back. I'd look for the changes that had been made to the text and congratulate myself if I'd anticipated them. It was a small achievement that kept the monotony of the day from sending me mad. Mrs Stoddard made a point of giving me the proofs, and everyone was grateful.

I cast an eye over the printed sheets from *Shakespeare's England: An Account of the Life & Manners of His Age*. They were chapter proofs and likely full of errors. One I'd seen before – an essay about booksellers, printers and stationers. I'd been caught reading it the last time it came through – 'Your job, Miss Jones ...' – but it was worth the reprimand. It was about us, what we did here at the Press and how in Shakespeare's day it had been dangerous to print a book considered obnoxious to the Queen or the Archbishop of Canterbury. Off with their heads, I'd thought at the time. The other proof chapters were new: 'Ballads and Broadsides', 'The Playhouse', 'The Home'. There were fewer than there should have been. If *Shakespeare's England* was to be ready for the three hundredth anniversary of the Bard's death, all the proof pages needed to be coming through now.

The last printed sheet was the first proper draft of the preface. I looked to see where Mrs Hogg was hovering. She was by the gathering bench, checking that the trays of sections were in the correct order. I brought the preface to the top of the stack of sheets and read a few lines: *Those who want to know what Shakespeare thinks must not neglect what his fools say.*

It was enough to keep me going. I took up the right edge of the sheet and brought it to the left, lining up the printer's marks just so. I ran Ma's bonefolder along the crease to make it sharp.

First fold. Folio.

I turned it. Took up the right edge and brought it to the left. It was double the thickness and there was a slight increase in resistance.

I adjusted the pressure on Ma's bonefolder – instinct, not thought. I made the crease sharp.

Second fold. Quarto.

Ma's bonefolder. I still called it that despite its being mine for the past three years. It was nothing more than a flat bit of cow bone, rounded at one end and with a point at the other. But it was silken smooth from decades of use, and it still held the shape of her hand. It was subtle, but bonefolders, like wooden spoons and axe handles, wear the character of their owner's grasp. I'd taken up Ma's bonefolder before Maude could claim it. I'd wrestled with the way it felt in my hand the same way I'd wrestled with Ma's absence. Stubbornly. Refusing to yield.

Eventually, I'd stopped trying to hold it my way, and I'd let the bonefolder settle into my palm as it had once settled into Ma's. I'd felt the gentle curve of the bone where her fingers had lain. And I'd sobbed.

Mrs Stoddard rang her bell and I let the memory go.

'There's to be a parade,' she said. 'A farewell for the Press men who are in the Territorial Army and others who've managed to volunteer since the announcement was made.'

The *announcement*. She couldn't get her tongue around *war*, not yet.

There were more than fifty of us bindery girls – the youngest twelve, the oldest beyond sixty – and all of us followed Mrs Stoddard through the corridors of the Press as if we were schoolgirls on an excursion. When our chatter became too much, our forewoman stopped, turned and held a finger to her lips. Like schoolgirls, we obeyed, and only then did I understand what this war might mean for us: the print house was utterly silent. The presses had been stopped. I'd never known it to be quiet and was suddenly unnerved. We all felt it, I think, because our chatter didn't resume until we came into the quadrangle. Six hundred men and boys were already gathered there. Mrs Stoddard ushered us forward, and I realised that almost every family in Jericho was represented.

There were machine minders and compositors, foundry men, mechanics and readers. Apprentices, journeymen and foremen alike. They were gathered in groups according to their occupation; the state of their aprons and hands made it easy to recognise them. They filled the spaces between the Bible side and the Learned side, around the pond, between the garden beds and all the way back towards the house where Mr and Mrs Hart lived. We'd never gathered like this, and I was impressed by our number; then I realised that at least half the men were of fighting age, or soon would be. I studied the crowd.

Older men passed the time in quiet conversation; younger men were more animated, some congratulating friends, others boasting that the Kaiser didn't stand a chance.

'It's bound to last more than a year,' I heard one lad say.

'I hope so,' said his friend.

They were barely sixteen.

Two foremen, dressed in the uniform of the Territorial Army instead of their Press aprons, tried to bring the younger recruits into line, but the lads were bursting with details of the night before. Those who'd been outside Buckingham Palace held court. They told of the crowd and the crush, the countdown to midnight, the cheers when it was clear the Kaiser would not retreat from Belgium and that England would go to war. 'It's our duty to defend Belgium,' said one, 'so we sang "God Save the King" at the top of our lungs.'

'God save us all,' said a gravelly voice behind me. I turned and saw old Ned shaking his head. He removed his cap and held it to his chest, his gnarled and ink-stained fingers worrying the fabric. When he dropped his head, I thought it was in prayer.

Then a voice, clear and familiar. Maude singing 'God Save the King' at the top of her lungs.

'That's it, Miss Maude,' shouted Jack Rowntree.

Jack was our neighbour on the canal, an apprenticed compositor. He'd be a journeyman in three years if nothing changed. He stood in the centre of the quad with all the others who'd joined the Territorial Army over the past few months in anticipation. I thought about the picnic we'd had just a few days before. A cake for his eighteenth birthday, a game of charades.

'Don't encourage her, Jack,' I shouted, but he held his hands up as if he had no choice and began to conduct. Maude kept singing and the lads took up the verse. There was the assured voice of a tenor, then a baritone. Soon the rest of the Press choir joined in, and the quad resounded like a concert hall. The foremen gave up their efforts to have the recruits fall into line. They folded their arms until the anthem had been sung to the end. The last notes hung in the cool air for a full minute, undisturbed.

Then one of the foremen shouted to the men to form two lines. His voice was more commanding in the hush, and the men did as they were asked. But it was not as soldiers might. There was quiet jostling and adjusting, and a couple of lads swapped places to be near their mates. Before they'd settled, Mrs Stoddard directed us bindery girls to arrange ourselves on either side of the parade. 'It's a pretty face they want to see when they march out of here,' she said, 'so be sure to keep smiling.'

Lou was the first to sob. Other girls sought out their beaus in the line and blew kisses. Some brought out handkerchiefs to wave or wipe their eyes. The apprentices stood taller. One or two suddenly looked pale. Jack caught my eye and I expected some smart comment, but it didn't come. He just nodded and smiled a little. Then he turned his face forward.

I counted sixty-five recruits. Some were grey at their temples, their faces lined with life. But most were young, and too many were yet to fill out. Mr Hart strode across the quad with Mr Cannan, the Press Secretary, the master of us all. We rarely saw him among the paper and

the ink and the presses, but there he was, scanning the rows of men, calculating, perhaps, what the war might cost the business of the Press. He saw a man he knew and stepped towards him, shook his hand.

‘His assistant,’ whispered Aggie. ‘He’ll have to write his own letters now.’

Cannan stepped back as Mr Hart spoke to one of his foremen. Two puny youngsters were pulled from the parade. They tried to protest, but there was no point. I wondered what adventure they thought they’d miss out on. Then the Controller stood on a box and said something fitting – I can’t recall what. There’d been rain overnight and it clung, here and there, to leaves and stone. It darkened the gravel beneath our feet. I wondered who would make us laugh if Jack went away, who would lug our water and seal our leaks. I wondered who would take over his work in the composing room. If all these men left, *Shakespeare’s England* might never be finished.

The morning sun reflected in a puddle. An old boot splashed it away. I looked up. The men were marching out through the stone archway into Walton Street. Everyone was clapping, calling after them.

‘Come home safe, Angus McDonald,’ a bindery girl shouted, her face wet with emotion.

‘Come home safe, Angus McDonald,’ repeated Maude. Angus McDonald blew her a kiss and Maude blew one back. His sweetheart scowled at my sister, but there was no need. From then on, Maude blew kisses to them all.

When the last of the men had disappeared into the street, we fell quiet. We formed awkward groups around the quad, and one or two foremen looked at their pocket watches, anticipating a late finish. The Controller and the Secretary were talking in low voices, both frowning. Mr Hart looked towards the archway and shook his head.

Mrs Stoddard was the first to mobilise. She clapped her hands. ‘Back to work, ladies,’ she said. Mrs Hogg led the way.

The foremen followed suit, and all the remaining men returned to their jobs: to the machine rooms and type foundry, the composing room and paper store, the reading rooms, depot and the men's side of the bindery. Not one was spared the loss of a well-trained man.

Only the girls' side of the bindery would be fully staffed from now on, I thought. I fell back to walk with Mrs Stoddard. 'Who's going to fill all the vacancies?' I asked.

'Bright young women, if those in charge have any sense and the unions allow it.' She glanced sideways. 'There are no restrictions on women working in administration, Peggy. You could consider applying for something.'

I shook my head.

'Why not?' Mrs Stoddard said.

I looked to Maude.

'Why not?' Maude said.

Because you need me, I thought. 'Because you'll miss me,' I said.

Mrs Stoddard stopped walking and looked me in the eye. 'The door will not stay open for long, Peggy. You must try to slip in while you can.'



I tried to slip in during my afternoon tea break.

The presses had resumed, but the noise faded as I moved along the corridors. Then the smells of machine oil and gas lamps, and the low-tide fishy smell of glue, were replaced by wood polish and a hint of vinegar. I took the letter I'd written from the pocket of my apron and read it. It was neat and without error, a convincing application. But my hand shook as I knocked on Mr Cannan's door.

It was answered by a young woman.

'Can I help you?'

She had the same nose as her father, the same cultured speech. I'd heard she was a poet. She held a bundle of papers in her hand and I

realised she had come to assist. Of course she had. She had the right education and all the time in the world. It made perfect sense.

‘Is that for Father?’ She nodded at my application letter.

I shook my head and backed out. ‘I’m in the wrong place,’ I mumbled as I closed the door.

I ripped my letter in half, turned it, ripped a second time, turned it, ripped a third time. Then I walked back towards the low-tide fishy smell of the bindery.

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Chapter Two

The sense of celebration was still there as we walked home through the streets of Jericho.

‘God save the King,’ someone said as they passed us.

‘God save the King,’ Maude said in return.

We crossed Walton Well Bridge and came down onto the towpath, overgrown and chattering with the buzz and chirp of summer. For a moment I could smell the canal, the cloying stench of waste – human, animal, industrial – but I was used to it and it seemed to fade as we walked towards home, though I could see its rainbow shimmer on the surface of the water. Maude slowed to pick some colour – meadowsweet, willowherb and butterfly bush. ‘A posy for Rosie,’ she said.

There were only two narrowboats moored within sight of the St Barnabas belltower: *Staying Put* and *Calliope*. *Staying Put* was like a carnival, painted with flowers and castles and flourishes of all kinds. Rosie Rowntree kept it clean and bright, and she surrounded it with live blooms throughout the spring and summer. She had geraniums in pots on the roof and she’d planted a verge garden with flowers and vegetables. It extended two boat-lengths along the towpath and was a

welcome mooring for her husband, Oberon, when he was able to stop with his working boat and spend the night.

‘God save the King,’ said Maude as we approached.

‘Good to see you home,’ said Old Mrs Rowntree, Rosie’s mother-in-law. She was sitting among pots of lettuce and sweet pea, the *Oxford Chronicle* in her lap, the page trembling as she turned it. ‘There’ll be carousing tonight. Best you’re out of it.’

Rosie was tending a trellis of runner beans that leant against the hull of *Staying Put*. Her son had marched off to war, and when she turned I saw all the emotion of the day in her face. Her voice tried to contradict it.

‘Over by Christmas, they say.’ She was nodding. Encouraging agreement. Maude held out her posy, untied and leggy, and Rosie took it as a mourner might. I didn’t know what to say.

‘It is what they say,’ said Old Mrs Rowntree.

It was a relief to look upon *Calliope*. She was dark blue with gold lettering, like the binding of an Oxford World’s Classic. She was practically touching *Staying Put*, and the closeness had always felt like a comfort. I held open the hatch for Maude and stepped in after her.

Calliope smelled a little sweet after having been shut up all day. A little earthy. The hatch swung closed behind me and I breathed it in. *It’s the smell of books*, Ma used to tell people when they asked. *It’s the paper decomposing*. They’d screw up their noses and Ma would laugh and say, *I’ve come to love it*.

Ma had brought two books with her when she first moved onto *Calliope*: translations of *The Odyssey* and *The Tragedies of Euripides, Volume II*. They’d belonged to her own mother and were worn from reading. Her collecting had only started after we were born. She picked up books at curiosity shops and fêtes, and sometimes she bought them new – Everyman’s Library editions for a shilling each. Most, though, were from the Press. They were bound but they had defects. Whenever

I asked if she'd been given permission to bring one home, she'd never quite answer. *It's waste*, she'd say. *Not good enough to sell*. Then she'd hand it to me. *But good enough to read, don't you think?* I always said yes, though when I was small I could barely understand a word of them.

Ma stored her books on a row of narrow shelving that ran between the windows, bow to stern. When those shelves were full, Oberon Rowntree built her another row. Soon after that, he built another. When we were ten years old, he told her a fourth row of shelves could not be accommodated, so Ma bought a small bookcase from the bric-a-brac woman at the Covered Market. It had been dragged from the river at low tide and looked worthless, but Ma cleaned it, then sanded it, then oiled it. She placed it beside her armchair, just inside the hatch, then she filled it with her favourite novels and all her Greek myths. *Why do we have so many books?* I liked to ask. *To expand your world*, she would always say.

When she died, my world shrank.

That was when my own collecting began. Unbound manuscripts, parts of books, single sections. Pages with no clue as to the title or author. In three years our shelves had lost their order. *Calliope* became messy with fragmented ideas and parts of stories. There were beginnings with no endings and endings with no beginnings, and I stored them wherever they would fit and in plenty of places they didn't. They were tucked between bound volumes and piled under the table. A few sewn manuscripts with no boards rested in the plate rack above the galley bench.

Finally, there were pages I didn't care for. We cut them square and stored them in an old biscuit tin that we kept on the table. While I cooked, Maude folded them into all manner of shapes. Folding, for her, was like breathing, and she'd been doing it since she was little. For as long as I could remember, her creations had been strung around *Calliope* like bunting.

I removed my hat and put it on the hook by the hatch door. Then I took the few steps to the table where Maude was already sitting, already folding. I removed her hat too.

She was making a fan.

‘Good idea,’ I said. It was warm.

She nodded.

I hung her hat beside mine, then went to the galley and unwrapped the kippers we’d bought on the way home. I revived the coals in the range and, when the plate was hot enough, placed the frying pan on top. I began to sweat.

‘Can I have that fan when you’ve finished?’ I said to Maude.

She passed it across the counter that separated the table from the galley. Everything in *Calliope* was within arm’s reach, and it took no more than a few steps to go from sitting room to galley to our bedroom and then Ma’s. We called them rooms, but they were just spaces defined by their function. I fanned my face.

‘Come home safe, Angus McDonald,’ Maude said.

‘Do you even know who Angus McDonald is?’

She shook her head.

‘Open the hatch,’ I said.

‘Let in some air,’ she finished.

From the galley, I watched her fasten one door open, then pick up *A History of Chess* to hold the other door in place. I waited for her usual comment.

‘Needs fixing,’ she said.

The hatch had needed fixing for a while, but *A History of Chess* seemed more than adequate. And there was something about picking it up, placing it, then removing it when we closed ourselves in. The weight of its nine hundred pages. Knowing Ma had folded some and that we had folded others. That Ma had sewn the text block together and her friend Ebenezer had knocked it back and cased it and covered

it in leather – blue, like *Calliope* – with *A History of Chess* embossed in gold leaf. *It didn't pass inspection*, Ebenezer had said when he handed it to me. I'd thought he might cry, so I'd looked at the book instead. There was nothing wrong with it as far as I could see. Ma had been dead a month.

I opened the galley window and air moved through *Calliope*. A paper bird fluttered. It was Tilda's, the one with the broken wing.

Tilda was Ma's dearest friend. When Ma had died, Tilda stayed – just long enough for me to start crying and Maude to start talking again. She'd made that first Christmas bearable, and that first New Year. She'd left us to cope on our own for the first few months of 1912, then turned up for Easter. A few months later she'd got us through Ma's birthday, and when we'd turned nineteen she'd arrived with a cake. On the anniversary of Ma's death, Tilda had brought soda water and Stone's Original Green Ginger Wine. *Your Ma had a taste for it*, she'd said, then poured us each a glass of soda and added a good splash of the ginger wine. We'd drunk it like it was lemonade. *They're over*, she'd said, filling our glasses a second time – not bothering with the soda. *All the firsts. The first Christmas, Easter, birthday. The first anniversary of her death.* She'd clinked her glass against ours and drunk. *There'll be no more and you can start living without her.* It wasn't entirely true, but I was glad she'd said it. It felt like permission.

Tilda was an actress and a suffragette. She came and went as she pleased or needed, and the last time we'd seen her was last spring, a few days after we'd turned twenty. She hadn't mentioned our birthday, but she'd sat with Maude all evening, folding pages, then she'd hung their paper sculptures from the curtain rail above the galley bench as if she were decorating for a party.

I put my hand to Tilda's bird. Rag paper. Strong. Despite the wing, she'll fly for a while yet, I thought, and I was glad of it.

Maude sat back down to her folding and picked up the conversation where she'd left off.

'Come home safe,' she said. 'Come home safe.'

'Come home safe, Jack Rowntree,' I finished.

'Jack Rowntree.' She nodded. 'Come home safe.'

I took napkins and cutlery from the drawer and put them on the table. Two glasses and the jug. Nearly empty, but enough for the two of us. I'd fill it later. The rain overnight would have topped up the barrel. Maude put her papers aside and fingered the lace around the edge of her napkin. It was stained yellow with age. She laid it flat on the table and folded it in half.

'Granny's napkins,' she said, folding it again, then bringing one corner towards another.

'A wedding present,' I said.

She liked this conversation, and I had stopped resisting it. *Pretend you're on the stage*, Tilda had once said. *Deliver your lines each night with the same enthusiasm. Your audience will be putty in your hands.*

'From old aunt whatshername,' said Maude, folding the napkin this way and that until it was something else.

'A book would have been more useful,' I said.

'Can't blow your nose on a book.'

Ma used to say the last line; now it was Maude's. She picked up a knife and fork and placed them inside the pouch she'd just made. Then she started on the other napkin.

I drained the kippers and fried cold mash left over from the night before.

'Jack Rowntree, come home safe?' she said.

A question I didn't know how to answer. But if I didn't answer, she might repeat it over and over.

'He'll be safe enough while he's training,' I said.

'I'll miss your singing.'

‘Did he tell you that?’

She nodded.

‘Maybe when you think of Jack you can sing one of his favourite songs,’ I said, and immediately regretted it.

‘After the ball is over, after the break of morn ...’

I lifted the fried potato from the pan to our plates and wondered if Tilda had been in London for the countdown to war. I took the plates to the table.

‘Nothing green,’ said Maude.

I’d meant to boil beans. ‘We’ll live,’ I said.

‘Not as long.’ Ma’s refrain.



8 August 1914

Hello Pegs,

What a time! Of course I was in London. It was quite a party, though I’m still not sure why. Some men hardly need an excuse to behave badly and as far as excuses go, war is a good one. I was grabbed by no fewer than six men and three managed to plant a kiss, more or less successfully. They were all young and ready to sign up (which I suppose is why I let the better-looking lads have their way). They were gathering ladies’ favours, like knights of old.

I think it was inevitable that we’d get involved – we’re obliged, after all, and the news from Belgium has been awful – but I couldn’t quite imagine what it would feel like. I’m going to be honest, Pegs, it feels bloody exciting. I’m weary, you see, of our other war. On that front we seem as far from victory as ever. Asquith has become immovable on votes for women and morale is low among the ranks of the WSPU.

But now we have a distraction. Mrs Pankhurst thinks the war could be our Trojan horse and she’s already mobilising her troops. She was furious when Millicent Fawcett declared the suffragists would suspend all political activity for the duration. Panky knows our tactics won’t find many supporters while a real war is raging, but she can’t

abide just giving it up. And it's not in her nature to follow the NUWSS into a polite peace. You wait, Pegs, she'll find a way to keep us in the papers.

Tell Maude I've been practising my folds and am close to perfecting the swan. I have enclosed my latest attempt and though I am proud of it I expect she will be scathing.

Tilda x

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Chapter Three

Over the next few days, Jericho lost the air of celebration but not the anticipation. Small groups gathered outside shops and on street corners, their outrage and fervour echoed in the paperboys' chants. The words fell like snowflakes onto Maude's tongue. *Invasion, barbarians, our duty*, she said. *Poor bloody Belgians*, she said. They stuck for a moment, then were gone. More than one conversation agreed with Rosie Rowntree: *Over by Christmas*, most were saying. *Over by Christmas*, Maude repeated.

On Saturday afternoon we took the motorbus out to Cowley – it would go past the barracks, and I was curious. The motorbus was full of young men, fathers with grown sons, a few couples. I recognised four printers' apprentices as they bounded up the stairs to the top deck. The motor growled as we climbed the hill to Temple Cowley, then it turned onto Hollow Way and slowed.

'Litter, litter everywhere,' Maude said, and I looked out at what she saw.

Not litter. Men. *Kitchener's army*, the papers called them. They were everywhere they shouldn't be. They stood along the verges smoking and talking. Some sat with their heads resting between their knees.

Some slept beneath the hedge. Two were brawling, then a third joined in. The top deck erupted in cheers and encouragements. The closer we got to Cowley Barracks the more littered the road became. It was as if some great wind had swept across Oxfordshire and collected men from fields and factories and high streets, then let them fall like leaves around the keep of the barracks.

We stopped, and the motorbus bounced as the young men from the top deck flew down the stairs. The apprentices passed by our window. They blew kisses to Maude, and Maude blew kisses back. An echo, that's all. Nothing in it. We watched them join the queue of men waiting to enlist. So many were underfed, undersized. They had sallow faces and missing teeth. How could they win a war? I thought. And for the first time, I was anxious.

The motorbus continued on Hollow Way and we saw tents beyond the hedgerow, a man shaving, another with his shirt off, washing.

'They've been here for days,' I said.

'For days,' said Maude.

'But why?'

'Remember Belgium.' A poster she'd seen.

'Half of them have no idea where Belgium is.'

'An adventure,' she said. 'A chance to do something important. My ticket out of this place.' Things she'd heard.



On Monday morning, Maude and I ran late, and by the time we arrived at the bindery, most of the girls were at their stations. I looked around for the freckly frog and braced for a dressing-down. But it was Mrs Stoddard who raised her brows and looked at the large clock that marked the passing of our days. I relaxed.

'Mrs Hogg has gone with Mr Hogg to Cowley Barracks,' she said. 'She'll be back before morning tea. In the meantime, you're gathering

Shakespeare with Louise and Agatha.’ Then she turned to my sister with a gentle smile, conspiratorial. ‘Don’t let her get distracted, Maude.’

Maude straightened. ‘Gather, not read,’ she said.

A frown troubled Mrs Stoddard’s brow. ‘Did you speak to Mr Cannan, Peggy? About the vacancy?’

‘I tried,’ I said, ‘but that door had already closed.’



After lunch I stood on one side of the gathering bench, opposite Aggie. Piles of sections stretched along both sides, along an upper and a lower tier, waiting to be gathered into *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. It was an enormous book, made up of eighty-five sections, give or take, each folded thrice to make sixteen pages.

I fingered the section that brushed my thigh. The front pages. It would be the last I gathered but the first to be read. It included the title page, a list of illustrations and the contents – *The Tempest*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* – the rest of the plays and all the poems. I swiped a section from the top tier onto my left forearm, took a step to the left and swept up the next section, then the next. It took a few moments to get my rhythm – for my body to remember the dance. Then I was moving along the length of the long bench, my legs crossing one in front of the other, my hand a blur as it passed over the piles of sections. The click of my heels and the swish of paper created the music I moved to. The hubbub of the bindery fell away, and if my hips moved more than necessary, well, who could say for sure that the movement didn’t increase my speed?

I swept the front pages onto the pile in my arm – I had half of a single book – and gave the pile to Maude. She tapped each edge against the table, then married my sections to those being gathered by Aggie on the other side.

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I looked to my partner across the gathering bench – the slightest of nods – then off we went for another turn of the dance floor.

Every title section signalled a complete block of text, and Maude piled one atop the other. There were fifteen before I paused to check that she had not been diverted from her task – my sister’s hands also had a habit of dancing, but to a tune all their own. The text blocks were all perfectly neat and tidy, and if nothing interrupted Maude, they would continue to be.

Mrs Hogg had returned and she rang the bell for the first shift to take their tea. We were in the second shift and my rhythm barely faltered. Then she barked a warning for any girl who dared return late. It sounded sharper than usual, and I assumed the army had accepted Mr Hogg, despite his wife’s protests.

I finished my lap and put the pile of sections in front of Maude. I removed my cardigan.

‘It’s warm,’ I said. ‘All this dancing.’

‘Warm.’ She nodded as she tapped the edges. The text blocks were beginning to overwhelm her workspace.

‘Stop for a minute, Maudie,’ I said. I looked for Lou and saw her returning from the sewing machines with an empty trolley.

‘Do you have another load for me, Maude?’ Lou asked.

Maude held up a fan. She’d unfolded the last section I’d gathered – once, twice – then let her fingers dance around until the section was something useful.

‘It’s warm,’ she said, handing Lou the fan.

‘Maudie —’ I began.

‘Just what I need,’ said Lou. She took the fan and moved it in front of her face – enough so we all felt the breeze. Then she passed the fan to me. ‘Sometimes I think you put her up to it, Peg.’ She smiled.

Lou began her check of each new text block – an expert flick through the section. If they were in the correct order and the right

way up, she'd initial the last page and pop it on the trolley headed for the machine sewers.

I looked around the bindery. Mrs Hogg was instructing one of the newer girls, and Mrs Stoddard was in her office.

'Lavatory break, Aggie. If anyone asks.' I picked up the text block that belonged to Maude's fan and walked towards the cloakroom. In truth, I could have taken just the ruined section – the rest of the block was perfect – but what use did I have for just the title and contents?

I put Shakespeare in my bag.

When it was our turn for tea, I went to find Eb in the book repair room on the men's side of the bindery.

Ebenezer was a quiet man, short-sighted and kind. Too kind, it was often said, and most called him Scrooge on account of it. His quiet generosity had spared almost all his co-workers some inconvenience at one time or another – to their pride or to their pocket. He noticed errors before the foreman: just a nod and a word and no one would know. His apprentices were the most competent, and two had risen to be his foreman. Mr Hart had stopped asking Eb to apply for more responsibility. *It's not in my nature to take charge*, I'd heard him say to Ma. When I'd asked her later if that was why they'd never married, she shook her head. *He's asked three times*, she said, *but I don't love him in the right way*. She'd had the courage to say no, but she liked him enough to let him keep loving her.

'Waste,' I said, handing the text block to Eb. 'Could you trim it?'

'Waste, indeed,' he said as he made the text block square on his small guillotine and trimmed away the folds.



Butterflies slowed our pace along the towpath – meadow browns and common blues busy among the tall grass and nettles, the folds of their wings irresistible to Maude. Then I saw a painted lady, her black and

orange markings like an exotic mosaic. We'd had a warm summer and so here she was. She. The painted lady always reminded me of Tilda.

Rosie and Old Mrs Rowntree were sitting on deckchairs in Rosie's verge garden.

'Welcome home, girls,' Rosie said. 'We've been waiting for you.' She pointed to two empty chairs and held up a pot of tea.

Maude stepped between flowerpots and hugged Rosie. She bent to kiss the cheek of Old Mrs Rowntree. Two shaky hands held Maude's face.

'Yours is a smile to chase away woe, Miss Maude.' Then Old Mrs Rowntree patted the chair beside her. 'Tell me about your day.'

Maude offered up fragments of conversation and Old Mrs Rowntree nodded and exclaimed in all the right places.

'I'll join you in a bit,' I said to Rosie.

'Take your time,' she said.

Back on *Calliope*, I took the text block from my bag and went to sit on our bed. I fanned through the pages.

We already had Shakespeare – sonnets, plays – individually and as collections. But we didn't have the complete works. There'd never been the money, or the opportunity. Still, it was so big I needed to inspect it before deciding if it was worth sewing and giving a berth.

I liked the introduction, and when I turned to the sonnets, something about the typeface drew my eye along. I read a few and decided I'd keep the lot. I left the text block beside my sewing frame on the table, grabbed two shawls and went to join the others.

'I lost myself in the fine words of Mr Shakespeare,' I said, to account for the time I'd taken. I put a shawl across Maude's shoulders and sat in the empty chair.

'Which words, Peg?' asked Old Mrs Rowntree.

'The sonnets.'

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'I like the sonnets,' she said. 'More than the plays.'

‘Do you have a favourite, Ma?’ asked Rosie.

‘*Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed, but then begins a journey in my head.*’ She frowned, shook her head. ‘I used to know it by heart.’

‘You would have had cause to recite it when you were younger, Ma.’

‘It wasn’t really about hard work,’ said Old Mrs Rowntree. ‘It was about missing someone you love. About how their face comes to you in the dark and quiet of night and starts you thinking.’

She looked down at the blanket on her knees and tried to adjust it, but her right hand began its violent shake. Maude put her own hand on top of the old woman’s and smiled when the shaking stopped. Then Old Mrs Rowntree placed her left hand on top of Maude’s, and Maude accepted the invitation to play. Rosie and I watched as their hands slipped from bottom to top, getting faster and faster until Old Mrs Rowntree declared Maude the winner.



Night took its time to fall, and Maude refused to go to bed while she could still see what was beyond the windows of our narrowboat. I set up my sewing frame, positioning it so I had one arm on either side, like a harpist might sit with her harp. While Maude folded butterflies, I bound one section after another to the cords.

When I reached *The Taming of the Shrew* I put down my needle and palm shield and massaged the muscle between my thumb and forefinger.

‘I’m weary with toil,’ I said.

‘Haste me to my bed,’ Maude said, not looking up from her folding.

I watched her hands sculpt the paper into a butterfly with wings that slid over each other, as in life.

You are my toil, I thought as I rose from the table. I pulled a section from the pile I had not yet bound, then kissed Maude’s crown and whispered, ‘Haste us to our bed, the world has gone dark.’

Later, when Maude's breath had lengthened into sleep, I took up the loose section of *The Complete Works*. There was light left in the candle, so I read Old Mrs Rowntree's sonnet. Number twenty-seven. The old woman had remembered it right – if not the whole verse, at least the sentiment. And I wondered how many nights the Rowntrees would have to journey in their heads before this war was fought and Jack was home.

The candle guttered and I snuffed it.

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Chapter Four

Summer mornings had no manners; they slipped beneath our curtains and roused a winged chorus, and I was awake long before I wanted to be. But Maude slept on, the trill and coo, the caw and quack no match for the depths of her slumber.

I retrieved the section of sonnets I'd been reading the previous night, but I only read one before I felt the wash of the canal against *Calliope's* hull. It felt like we were being rocked in a cradle.

'Oberon,' I whispered into Maude's ear.

'Caressing *Calliope*,' she said, without opening her eyes. It's what Ma would say when our boat undulated with the tide.

We lay there until the undulations stopped and it was easier to walk around. There was more movement than usual, and I made a mental note to tighten *Calliope's* ropes.

It would take the Rowntrees a little while to encourage *Rosie's Return* into her mooring, but when it was done there'd be coal for our coal bin and bacon for breakfast. While Maude emptied our chamber-pots, I made the bed. Then I set the kettle on the hot plate and measured enough coffee for five into a muslin bag. Maude returned with the pots and put them beside our bed.