Holloway

'IS IT A hanging?' an eager newspaper delivery boy asked no one in particular. He was short, just thirteen years old, and was jumping up and down in an effort to obtain a better view of whatever it was that had created the vaudeville atmosphere. It wasn't much past dawn and there was still hardly any light in the sky, but that had failed to deter a party crowd of motley provenance from gathering outside the gates of Holloway prison. Half of the throng were up early, the other half seemed not to have been to bed yet.

Many of the congregation were in evening dress – the men in dinner jackets or white tie and tails, the women shivering in flimsy backless silk beneath their furs. The boy could smell the tired miasma of alcohol, perfume and tobacco that drifted around them. Toffs, he thought. He was surprised that they were happily rubbing shoulders with lamplighters and milkmen and early shift-workers, not to mention the usual riff-raff and rubberneckers who were always attracted by the idea of a show, even if they had no idea what it might be. The boy did not count himself amongst the latter number. He was merely a curious bystander to the follies of the world.

'Is it? A hanging?' he persisted, tugging at the sleeve of the

nearest toff – a big, flushed man with an acrid cigar plugged in his mouth and an open bottle of champagne in his hand. The boy supposed that the man must have begun the evening in pristine condition, but now the stiff white front of his waistcoat was stained with little dots and splashes of food and the shiny patent of his shoes had a smattering of vomit. A red carnation, wilted by the night's excesses, drooped from his buttonhole.

'Not at all,' the toff said, swaying affably. 'It's a cause for festivities. Old Ma Coker is being released.'

The boy thought that Old Ma Coker sounded like someone in a nursery rhyme.

A woman in a drab gaberdine on his other side was carrying a piece of cardboard that she held in front of her like a shield. The boy had to crane his neck to read what was written on it. A furious pencil hand had scored into the cardboard, *The labour of the righteous tendeth to life: the fruit of the wicked to sin. Proverbs 10:16*. The boy mouthed the words silently as he read them, but he made no attempt to decipher the meaning. He had been press-ganged into Sunday School attendance every week for ten years and had managed to pay only cursory attention to the subject of sin.

'Your very good health, madam,' the toff said, cheerfully raising the champagne bottle towards the drab woman and taking a swig. She glowered at him and muttered something about Sodom and Gomorrah.

The boy wormed his way forward to the front of the crowd, where he had a good view of the imposing gates – wooden with iron studs, more suited to a medieval fortress than a women's prison. If there had been three of the boy, each standing on the shoulders of the one below, like the Chinese

acrobats he had seen at the Hippodrome, then the one at the peak might have just reached the arched apex of the doors. Holloway had an air of romance for the boy. He imagined beautiful, helpless girls trapped inside its thick stone walls, waiting to be saved, primarily by himself.

On hand to document the excitement was a photographer from the *Empire News*, identified by a card stuck jauntily in his hatband. The boy felt a kinship – they were both in the news business, after all. The photographer was taking a group portrait of a bevy of 'beauties'. The boy knew about such young women because he was not above leafing through the *Tatler*s and *Bystander*s that he pushed through letterboxes once a week.

The beauties – unlikely in this neighbourhood – were posing in front of the prison gates. Three looked to be in their twenties and sported plush fur against the early-morning cold, the fourth – too young to be a beauty – was in a worsted school coat. All four were striking elegant poses as if for a fashion plate. None of them seemed a stranger to the admiring lens. The boy was smitten. He was easily smitten by the female form.

The photographer transcribed the beauties' names into a notebook he excavated from a pocket somewhere so that they could be identified faithfully in the paper the next day. Nellie Coker had a hold on the pictures editor. An indiscretion of some kind on his part, the photographer presumed.

'Ho there!' he shouted to someone unseen. 'Ramsay, come on! Join your sisters!'

A young man appeared and was brought into the huddle. He seemed reluctant but gave a rictus grin on cue for the camera flash.

Then, with no fanfare, a small door set into the great gates of the prison was opened and a short, owlish woman emerged, blinking at the oncoming light of freedom. The crowd cheered, mainly the toffs, shouting things like, 'Well done, old girl!' and 'Welcome back, Nellie!' although the boy also heard the cry 'Jezebel!' go up from somewhere in the middle of the crowd. He suspected the drab gaberdine.

Nellie Coker seemed lacklustre and the boy could see no likeness to what he had heard of Jezebels. She was almost dwarfed by the enormous bouquet of white lilies and pink roses that was thrust into her arms. One of the beauties was carrying a large fur coat which she threw around the released prisoner as if she were trying to smother a fire. The boy's mother had done much the same thing when his baby sister had fallen in the grate, her loose smock catching the flames. They had both survived, with only a little scarring as a reminder.

The beauties crowded around, hugging and kissing the woman – their mother, the boy surmised. The younger one clung to her in what in the boy's opinion was a rather hammy fashion. He was a connoisseur of the theatrical, his round took him to all the stage doors of the West End. At the Palace Theatre, the stage doorman, a cheerful veteran of the Somme, let him slip into the gods for free during matinée performances. The boy had seen *No, No, Nanette* five times and was quite in love with Binnie Hale, the luminous star of the show. He knew all the words to 'Tea for Two' and 'I Want to Be Happy' and would happily sing them, if requested. There was one scene in the show where the chorus and Binnie (the boy felt that he had seen her enough times for this familiarity) came on the stage in bathing costumes. It was

thrillingly scandalous and the boy's eyes nearly popped out of his head every time he witnessed it.

As a drawback, in order to gain free entry he had to listen to the long-winded wartime reminiscences of the doorman, as well as admiring his collection of Blighty wounds. The boy had been one when the war began and, like sin, it meant nothing to him yet.

Ramsay, Nellie's second son, was made to relieve his mother of the burden of the bouquet and was caught by the photographer holding the flowers like a blushing bride. To the annoyance of his sisters (and himself too), this would turn out to be the photograph that graced the newspaper the next morning, beneath the heading SON OF NOTORIOUS SOHO NIGHTCLUB PROPRIETOR NELLIE COKER GREETS HIS MOTHER ON HER RELEASE FROM PRISON. Ramsay hoped for fame for himself, not as an adjunct of his mother's celebrity. He started to sneeze in response to the flowers, a rapid volley of *atishoo-atishoo-atishoo*, and the newspaper delivery boy heard Nellie say, 'Oh, for heaven's sake, Ramsay, pull yourself together,' which was the kind of thing the boy's own mother said.

'Come along, Ma,' one of the bevy said. 'Let's go home.'

'No,' Nellie Coker said resolutely. 'We shall go to the Amethyst. And celebrate.' The pilot was taking the helm.

The crowd began to melt and the newspaper boy continued on his way, his spirits lifted by having been a witness to something historic. He suddenly remembered an apple, old and wrinkled, that he had squirrelled away first thing that morning. He retrieved it from his pocket and chomped on it like a horse. It was wonderfully sweet.

The toff with the cigar spotted him and said, 'Good show, eh?' as if he valued his opinion, and then cuffed him amiably on the side of his head and rewarded him with a sixpence. The boy danced happily away.

As he left, he heard someone in the crowd yelling, 'Thief!' It was a term that could have applied to any of them really, except perhaps the man who had been watching the proceedings from a discreet distance, in the back of an unmarked car. Detective Chief Inspector John Frobisher – 'Frobisher of the Yard' as *John Bull* magazine had styled him, although somewhat inaccurately as he was currently on loan to Bow Street station in Covent Garden, where he had been sent to 'shake things up a bit'. Corruption was acknowledged to be rife there and he had been tasked with seeking out the bad apples in the barrel.

John Bull had recently asked Frobisher to write a series of articles based on his experiences in the force, with a view to making them into a book. Frobisher was not a narcissist – far from it – but he had been enlivened by the proposition. He had always been a books man and a literary challenge was something that took his fancy. Now, however, he was not so sure. He had suggested it be called *London After Dark*, but the magazine said they preferred the title *Night in the Square Mile of Vice*. He didn't know why he had been surprised by this when every cheap rag howled with lurid tales of foreign men seducing women into venality of one kind or another, when in reality they were more at risk of having their handbags torn from their arms in broad daylight.

Nothing had yet been published, but every time he submitted something to *John Bull* they asked him to make it racier, more 'sensational'. Racy and sensational were not part

of Frobisher's character. He was sober-minded, although not without depth or humour, neither of which was often called on by the Metropolitan Police.

He was idly following the progress of a couple of women who were stealthily working their way through the crowd, skilfully picking pockets. Frobisher recognized them as subalterns in the female Forty Thieves gang, but they were comparatively small fry and of no interest to him at the moment.

A pair of cream-and-black Bentleys – one owned, one rented for effect – drew up and the Coker clan divided themselves between them and drove away, waving as if they were royalty. Crime paid, fighting it didn't. Frobisher felt his law-abiding bile rising while he had to quash a pang of envy for the Bentleys. He was in the process of purchasing his own modest motor, an unshowy Austin Seven, the Everyman of cars.

The delinquent Coker empire was a house of cards that Frobisher aimed to topple. The filthy, glittering underbelly of London was concentrated in its nightclubs, and particularly the Amethyst, the gaudy jewel at the heart of Soho's nightlife. It was not the moral delinquency – the dancing, the drinking, not even the drugs – that dismayed Frobisher. It was the girls. Girls were disappearing in London. At least five he knew about had vanished over the last few weeks. Where did they go? He suspected that they went in through the doors of the Soho clubs and never came out again.

He turned to the woman sitting next to him on the back seat of the unmarked car and said, 'Have you had a good look at them, Miss Kelling? And do you think that you can do what I'm asking of you?'

'Absolutely, Chief Inspector,' Gwendolen said.

The Queen of Clubs

AT THE AMETHYST, Freddie Bassett, the head barman, presented another oversized floral offering to Nellie. 'Welcome home, Mrs Coker,' he said. No 'Nellie' for him, he never cheapened himself by being anything less than formal with the family. He had his standards. He had trained at the Ritz before losing his post there due to an unfortunate incident involving two chambermaids and a linen cupboard. 'You can imagine the rest,' he said to Nellie when he applied for the job at the Amethyst. 'I'd rather not,' she said.

Nellie disliked flowers, considering them to be too needy. They should be reserved for weddings and funerals in her opinion, and not her own, thank you very much. Nellie wished to leave the world unadorned, as she had entered it, with not so much as a daisy.

Instead of flowers, she would rather be given a box of cakes from Maison Bertaux around the corner in Greek Street – chocolate éclairs or rum babas, preferably both. She had a terrific sweet tooth, acquired from the soor plooms and Hawick balls of her Scottish childhood. The food had been the worst thing about prison. Her daughters had brought boiled sweets for her on visiting days in Holloway. Nellie had

acquired many thoughts on prison reform during the course of her sentence and top of the list would be a tuppence worth weekly allowance of sweets – marshmallows and coconut ice, for preference.

When she entered Holloway six months ago, the staff of the Amethyst had sent her a cornucopia befitting a harvest festival – a large bouquet of flowers and a basket of fancy fruits that had been composed by a Covent Garden trader who was a regular patron of the club. The staff had badged it with the words *Good Luck*, the letters cut out from fancy embossed silver card that had been rummaged from the obscure cupboard that housed the club's New Year decorations.

This extravagance had been removed by a wardress as soon as Nellie stepped inside the forbidding walls, and the exotica of pineapple, peaches and figs had been divvied out between the staff while Nellie dined on meagre prison fare – a regular round of pea soup, suet pudding and beef stew, a rancid dish that had never met the cow it claimed to be acquainted with.

Before Nellie went to sleep that first night, a flower – a rose, a red one plucked from the bouquet – was poked through the hatch in her cell door. It was unclear to Nellie what spirit it had been given in – contemptuous or consoling. Her cell-mate, a Belgian woman who had shot her lover, was less confused. She snatched the rose and stamped it beneath her boots until the petals stained the cold stones of their cell floor.

The club had only just closed and most of the staff had stayed on to pipe their captain back on board, although the band had packed up and gone (they clung stubbornly to their autonomy). They had played 'God Save the King' over an

hour ago, the final heroic survivors of the night swaying to attention. Nellie was strict (her rules were adhered to even more strictly when she was *in absentia*) – no one sat for the King, not even the most inebriated. Now only a couple of regulars lingered, amiably dipsomaniac boulevardiers, adding to the chorus of pages, porters, waiters and the breakfast chef who all echoed Freddie: 'Welcome back, Mrs Coker.'

They had just endured an unusually heated midweek evening when every second person seemed fresh from a rugger match or a Varsity drinking club. A clutch of weary dance hostesses fussed around Nellie. Close up they smelt stale, a cheap infusion of face powder, perfume and sweat, but nonetheless it was a welcome, familiar scent after the noxious air of Holloway and Nellie let them embrace her before shooing them on their way to their beds. The Amethyst deflated with the dawn. It needed the night to come alive, its open maw demanding to be fed with an endless parade of people.

The chef put the burners back on in the kitchen to make breakfast for Nellie. The hens of Norfolk were kept busy supplying the Amethyst with eggs, which came up by the dozen on the milk train overnight. The chef was eager to know about the prison breakfast. 'A lump of bread and margarine and a mug of cocoa,' Nellie informed him. 'I'll add a couple of sausages to your plate, I expect you need feeding up,' he said solicitously. 'I expect I do,' Nellie said.

The family retired to one of the private rooms, where a waiter set a table with fresh linen and silver cutlery and Freddie opened a bottle of champagne for them. Dom Perignon for the family, a lesser brand for the club, bought for seven shillings and sixpence and sold for three guineas. Eight for a

magnum. Was there a happier sound, Nellie said, than the pop of a champagne cork?

'As long as it doesn't come out of the profits,' Edith said, in whose veins Coker blood ran in a fast and furious torrent.

Nellie Coker's progeny in the order in which they entered on to the world's stage. First of all, Niven – unsurprisingly absent from Holloway this morning – followed soon after by Edith. There had followed a hiatus while Nellie attempted to refute further motherhood and then, having failed, she produced in quick succession Betty, Shirley and Ramsay, and bringing up the rear, the runt of the litter, eleven-year-old Kitty, or *le bébé* as Nellie sometimes referred to her, when searching and failing to find the right name amongst so many. Nellie had received a French education, something which could be interpreted in several ways.

There was a father on Kitty's birth certificate, although Edith said she knew for a fact that it was the name of a major who had died at the first battle of the Marne a year before Kitty was born. ('A miracle,' Nellie said, unruffled.)

The three eldest girls were the crack troops of the family. Betty and Shirley had both gone to Cambridge. 'Wear their learning lightly,' Nellie said proudly to prospective suitors. ('Hardly wear it at all,' Niven said.) Sometimes, Nellie was more like a theatrical promoter than a mother.

Edith had eschewed both university and marriage in favour of a course in bookkeeping and accounting. While Nellie was *hors de combat* in Holloway, the Coker ship had been steered by Edith. The Amethyst had been closed down, although Edith reopened it, of course, the day after Nellie

was sentenced, under another name – 'the Deck of Cards' – but to everyone it was still, and always would be, the Amethyst.

Edith was Nellie's second in command, her *chef d'affaires*, and made of the same stern stuff as her mother. She understood business and had the Borgia stomach necessary for it. Money was the thing. They had all known what it was like to have some and then to have none and now to have a lot, and none of them wanted to fall off the precipice into penury again. Perhaps not Ramsay, so much. He wanted to be a writer. 'I despair,' Nellie said.

Ramsay, at just twenty-one, was continually beset by the feeling that he had just missed something. 'As if,' he struggled to explain to Shirley, his usual confidante, 'I've walked into a room but everyone else has just left it.' Niven had gone to war, Betty and Shirley to Cambridge, but Ramsay had been too young for the war and didn't last more than a term at Oxford before being condemned to an Alpine sanatorium for lungs that resembled 'a pair of squeezeboxes', according to his consultant at Bart's. It had been a relief, if he was honest. He was cowed by his fellow students. There were still men at Merton finishing degrees that had been interrupted by the war. They had been through the fire. They were older than the date on their birth certificates suggested, while Ramsay knew that he was younger.

Ramsay seemed transparent to his family; Niven, on the other hand, was an enigma to them all. He had a share in a car dealership in Piccadilly, was a partner in a wine-importing firm, raced a dog at White City, and owned a half-share in a horse that popped up occasionally at a racetrack, unfancied by everyone, before stealing first place. ('Funny that,' Nellie

said.) He knew criminals, he knew dukes. ('No difference,' Nellie said.) He hardly drank at all, yet he went to a lot of parties. He had no time for people who went to parties. He had no time for people in general and didn't suffer fools at all. He never indulged in drugs, as far as they knew, but he used to be in with all the Chinese who sold them and was known to visit Limehouse and could have been found sitting in the notorious Brilliant Chang's restaurant in Regent Street, sharing a pot of chrysanthemum tea with him before he was deported. He would have made a good Wesleyan but he had no time for the church.

Nellie's own ancestral origins were lost in the mists of time – or, in her case, Irish bog fog – but what was known – or claimed – was that her maternal grandmother had been thrown out of Ireland for vagrancy, thereby having the good fortune to miss the Great Famine and establish the beginnings of the dynasty. This woman had washed up in Glasgow, where she peddled 'soft goods' from door to door before migrating eastwards and being taken up – who knew how? – by a well-off laird from the Kingdom of Fife, a second son, elevated to first by the death of his brother in mysterious circumstances. There were some ignorant rumours that he had been cursed.

There was a hasty wedding. Nellie's grandmother was already carrying the secret of Nellie's mother inside her, after whose birth the new laird enthusiastically set about gambling away the family money at the same time as drinking himself to death.

By the time Nellie came along there was little of the family fortune left. When she was still quite young she had been

packed off to France to be educated, at a convent school in Lyons, before being 'finished' (in more ways than one) in Paris. Fresh from the French capital and possibly already *enceinte* with Niven, she returned to Edinburgh and married a medical man from Inverness. They set up a lavish home that they couldn't afford in Edinburgh's New Town and Nellie discovered that her new husband was not only a drinker but a gambler to boot, and when all the money and goodwill had eventually drained away, Nellie took matters into her own hands and yanked her children into a third-class carriage at Waverley and hauled them back out at King's Cross.

All except Niven, her eldest, who had already been conscripted into the Scots Guards in Edinburgh and was serving at the Front. Not volunteered. Niven would not have volunteered for the Army. Or, indeed, for anything. He had been conscripted into the ranks, having refused the officer's commission for which he was eligible, thanks to his attendance at Fettes. The public schools of Great Britain had helpfully provided fodder for the notoriously short-lived junior officer ranks. Niven had harboured no wish to be preferred in this way. He would take his chances in the other ranks, he said. He did, and lived.

Nellie left the rest of them sitting on their trunks on the platform while she went looking for lodgings. One pound a week for first-floor rooms in Great Percy Street, just round the corner from the station. Lacking even the money for the first week's rent, Nellie handed over her wedding ring as a deposit. It wasn't her own wedding ring – that had been lost some time ago (carelessly, some might say) and she had bought a cheap nine-carat one from a pawn shop. A war widow, Nellie told the landlady in Great Percy Street, her

husband killed at Ypres. The children regarded their mother with interest. Betty and Shirley had seen their father only the previous week, spotting him rolling drunkenly around St Andrew Square as they walked home from school.

Nellie expanded on her misfortunes – six children, one (more or less) still a babe-in-arms and one of them fighting on the Front. The landlady's defences crumbled easily and she welcomed them warmly over the threshold. She refused the wedding ring. She was a kindly old soul, still dressed in the fashion of the previous century.

There were four floors to the house. The landlady herself lived below them on the ground floor and above them was a noisy family of Belgian refugees, and in the attic a pair of Russian 'Bolshevists' – very nice men, if rather dirty, who did odd jobs around the house and taught the young Ramsay a little of their language as well as how to play a card game called Preferans. They could play all night, drinking potato vodka they bought in Holborn from an illicit still. Nellie was furious when she found out. Gambling had been the downfall of her family in the past, she said, and she would not let it be their downfall in the future.

The girls were delighted with their new lodgings because the landlady had a big dark-furred cat called Moppet and they spent a good deal of time fussing over him – dressing him up in Kitty's smocks and bonnets and brushing his splendid coat until poor Ramsay thought his lungs would implode. Nellie herself brought in a little money from taking in sewing; she was an excellent plain needlewoman, having been taught by nuns in her alma mater in Lyons. The landlady had a Singer treadle that she no longer used. The Bolshevists heaved it up from her quarters to the Cokers'.

Nellie's purse strings were tightly drawn. The soles of their shoes were mended with liquid rubber solution, their white collars were rubbed with lumps of bread to clean them, and they dined on liver soup and eel pie. Nellie was an excellent economist. All the while that she was saving, pennies here, pennies there, she was hatching a plan.

The children would have been happy to remain in Great Percy Street, but the landlady died a few months later and her son, who lived in Birmingham and never visited, wrote to say he had decided to 'sell up' and move to America on the proceeds. Nellie had grown fond of the landlady in the course of the time they had lived there, sometimes taking tea with her in the afternoon. The woman was a keen baker, her repertoire based on the Be-Ro recipe book – rock buns, drop scones, queen cakes, all much appreciated by Nellie.

Nellie was accustomed to hearing the little sounds of everyday life from the landlady's domain – water running, doors closing and so on. It had dawned on her slowly during the course of the day that all was silence below and she went down to investigate. She had read the landlady's cards the night before and had seen 'a great change' coming, but nothing about death.

When there was no answer to her knock, she had opened the landlady's door, knowing it to be always unlocked. The rooms felt empty, the dust of silence sat heavily. Nellie was saddened but not surprised to find that the landlady had never risen that morning and was still in her bed, sleeping the eternal rest.

Nellie tidied the place up a little. Shelves and drawers: putting things away, taking things out. There was cash, she knew, in a caddy, a commemorative one for the Coronation

of Edward VII. The money was truffled out and slipped into the pocket of her apron. Beneath the high brass bed on which the corpse was serenely reposed, Nellie spotted a rather rusty metal box, like a large cash box. Nellie hooked it out from beneath the bed with the old lady's walking stick. It was locked; it took a good deal more rummaging to come up with the key that was hiding in a little pot-pourri vase.

Nellie had been expecting dry, dusty papers. A lease, a will. She had not been expecting a treasure trove. A queen's ransom. Diamonds, rubies, sapphires, opals and garnets. Rings and brooches, bracelets and bangles. Cuffs and chokers, an emerald tiara in the Russian style, a five-strand pearl necklace. Cameos, corals, a pair of fine aquamarine chandelier earrings, a many-stranded opal bracelet set with rubies and diamonds.

What kind of a secret life had the unassuming landlady lived to have garnered such prizes? Nellie chose not to speculate. It was only later that she learnt that the kindly old landlady had in fact been a fence for the London gangs and the jewellery had already been stolen several times. Nellie couldn't help but be impressed by the landlady's quiet duplicity. It was a lesson in disguise.

As far as her own guilt was concerned, Nellie reasoned to her inner judge that the landlady might have given her the jewellery freely if she had known she was about to die. An unlikely but comforting narrative. Nellie's tread on the stair was remorseful as she made her way back up to her own floor, where she sent Edith to fetch a doctor for the landlady. 'Is she ill?' Edith asked. 'Very,' Nellie said.

Later, Nellie wondered if she had been reading her own cards, not the landlady's, for a great change did come to their

lives. They said goodbye to the Bolshevists, who set off back across Europe to their revolution, and left Great Percy Street before they were turned out by the son and before the landlady's criminal friends could come looking for their looted goods. For many years, perhaps even now, Nellie would look over her shoulder in the street, wondering if the thieves had found out that she had stolen their booty and were about to wreak vengeance on her.

They proceeded to rent a mildewed, mice-infested basement in Tottenham Court Road. They took Moppet with them and he turned out to be an excellent mouser, more than earning his keep. Penitentially, Nellie chose to sell her favourite piece – a magnificent early-eighteenth-century amethyst necklace – to a pawnbroker she was acquainted with, beating him up to the grand sum of fifty pounds. Nellie was an expert haggler. The rest she put away to be sold, piece by piece, as necessary. Nellie was parsimonious where business was concerned. One endeavour, she believed, should finance the next. Business begat business.

Nellie had spotted an advertisement in the *Gazette*, from someone called Jaeger. He was a coarse, weaselly little man but he seemed to have some idea of what he was doing. He had been holding 'tango teas' during the war in a basement in Fitzrovia, but the fashion for the tango had passed and he was looking for someone to go into partnership with him, to hold *thés dansants*. Together, Nellie and Jaeger found a basement – a cellar, really – in Little Newport Street, near Leicester Square, and spent a fair amount of money doing it out, after which they sold subscriptions for two shillings a night for dancing and refreshments. 'Jaeger's Dance Hall,' they called it.

The Savoy – the champagne and orchids trade – charged

five shillings and Nellie supposed they served dainty food. Jaeger's Dance Hall provided a more robust *thé* – iced cakes, sandwiches, lemonade and something called 'Turk's Blood' which was bright pink: lemonade, Angostura bitters and some extra cochineal. No liquor licence, of course. At first, they abided by the law, but if they didn't serve drink someone else would. So they did.

As a help in this move into illegality, Jaeger acquired the services of the law, in the shape of a policeman – a certain Detective Sergeant Arthur Maddox, who worked at Bow Street police station. Maddox was a helpful sort of policeman who, for a sum of money every week, would turn a blind eye to the licensing laws and tip Jaeger and Nellie off if he heard that a raid was imminent.

Jaeger's Dance Hall took off like a rocket, people jazzing and foxtrotting to a ragtime band until they dropped. It seemed that people wanted nothing more than to enjoy themselves during the convulsion of war. It was the spring of 1918 and people everywhere were sick of attrition.

It was an eye-opener for Nellie. She couldn't fail to notice that many of the men went home at the end of the night with a dance hostess who had been a complete stranger to them a handful of hours earlier. 'The young ladies get very good tips for that,' Jaeger said phlegmatically. 'Can't blame 'em, can you?'

On Armistice night there had been couples – again strangers to each other – actually fornicating in the shadows in the dance hall. Outside in the streets an orgy was taking place. 'Copulation,' Jaeger said, even more phlegmatically. 'Makes the world go round, don't it? And better than killing each other. Fucking's natural, innit?'

Nellie recoiled from the word, but she had to agree, if

reluctantly. So many had been lost in the war, she wondered – attempting to put a veneer of refinement on the base vulgarity of the proceedings – if they weren't following some instinctive compulsion to restock the human race. Like frogs.

She supposed she should come to terms with the concept of 'fun'. She didn't want any for herself but she was more than happy to provide it for others, for a sum. There was nothing wrong with having a good time as long as she didn't have to have one herself.

One of the dance hostesses – Maud, an Irish girl – had died that night of an opium overdose. It was Nellie who had found her, slumped behind the bar in the hour before dawn.

Jaeger was nowhere to be seen, so Nellie mobilized a couple of rough Army privates on furlough to carry the girl out, paying them with a bottle of whisky each to get rid of her. 'Where?' one of them asked. 'I don't know,' Nellie said. 'Use your brain. Try the river.' With any luck, the girl would meander through the Essex marshes and eventually be washed out to sea. Nellie never saw the soldiers again and had no idea if they followed her suggestion. 'Out of sight, out of mind' was one of the useful epithets that had guided her life.

Jaeger was merely a stepping-stone to Nellie's future, an apprenticeship. She was hatching a grander plan. After the Armistice, she sold her share in the dance hall to him for five hundred pounds. Afterwards, he was raided on several occasions, found guilty of 'selling intoxicating liquors' and allowing the dance hall to be the 'habitual resort of women of ill-repute', with a three-hundred-and-twenty-five-pound fine on each occasion. After the fourth raid in a row, he admitted defeat and left the nightclub business.

With her profits from Jaeger's Dance Hall, Nellie started a cabaret club ('*Cabaret intime*,' as she referred to it) called 'the Moulin Vert' (or 'the Moolinvurt', as those with no French called it), inspired by nostalgia for the Paris of her younger years.

Taking the lease on a filthy cellar in Brewer Street, Nellie transformed it into a palace – gilded fittings and a sprung dance floor, little café tables *à la Montparnasse* around the edge of the room. A vision – 'A *mise en scène*,' she said to the veteran of the Artists Rifles she engaged to paint the place. He obliged with murals in the style of Renoir. You could imagine you were on a Parisian street, Nellie said, and in an out-of-character gesture she gave him an extra five pounds in gratitude.

The Twenties roared in and the Moulin Vert opened with a bang. There was dancing between the cabaret acts – culled from all the West End theatres – and nearly the entire chorus from the Gaiety pitched up after midnight. Nellie hired a Tzigane orchestra – not French, it was true, but foreign enough for the crowd that inhabited 'the Moolinvurt'. Liquor flowed freely and so did the money. They were rarely raided; Sergeant Maddox had continued to work for Nellie.

A few months after they opened, Nellie heard that the artist who had painted her murals had shot himself. He wasn't the first soldier unable to cope with the peace. Nellie and Edith raised a glass to his memory after hours.

After a couple of years, Nellie had an offer that was too good to refuse and she sold the club. She marked the occasion by buying each of the girls a single strand of the new Ciro pearls with little diamanté clasps.

With the money from the Moulin Vert, Nellie bought the

premises for her new club. Looking for a name, she thought of the hoard of glittering jewels that she had taken from Great Percy Street. She considered 'the Diamond'. 'The Sapphire'? Or perhaps 'the Ruby'? And then she thought of the necklace that had given her a start in London. And, like Goldilocks, she found the name that was just right. The Amethyst.

Currently, Nellie's empire comprised five nightclubs – the Pixie, the Foxhole, the Sphinx, and the Crystal Cup were the others. But the jewel in the crown had always been and always would be the Amethyst.

Before Holloway, Nellie could be found most nights in the little draught-proof cashier's box at the entrance to the club. She ruled her kingdom from there – settling bills and accounts at the end of the evening, handing change to the waiters, taking entrance fees. One-pound entry. Members only. Paying the pound made you a member. The club took a thousand pounds a week. It was better than a goldmine.

No one got in for free, not even the Prince of Wales. Last week, Rudolph Valentino had been here, the week before it was the young Prince George. He had no money on him, of course – these people never had cash and his companions had to scrabble in their own pockets for the fee. Nellie had a way of making people feel she was doing them a favour by giving them entry to the Amethyst. That was just the beginning of the fleecing. You couldn't even leave without handing over a shilling to the cloakroom girl if you wanted to retrieve your coat at the end of the night. Plus a tip, of course. The Amethyst ran on tips. The dance hostesses were paid three pounds a week, but on a good Saturday – the Boat Race or the Derby – they could go home with as much as eighty

pounds in their purses. No one ever asked for a raise. No one dared.

The Amethyst did not have pretensions to the *haut monde* like the Embassy club, nor was it scraping the gutter for custom like some of the flea-ridden dives of Curzon Street.

The London gangs who all streamed into the club from time to time treated it like a battlefield. The Elephant and Castle mob, Derby Sabini's roughs, Monty Abrahams and his followers, the Hoxton gang, the Hackney Huns, the Frazzinis. Luca Frazzini, the Frazzinis' chieftain, was a neat, dapper man who was often to be found sitting quietly at a table in the corner of the Amethyst, a glass of (free) champagne sitting on the table in front of him, barely touched. He could have passed for a stockbroker. There was an *entente cordiale* between himself and Nellie. They went back a long way, to the days of Jaeger's Dance Hall. They trusted each other. Almost.

'Ordinary' members of the public and gang roughs rubbed shoulders with royalty, both those in exile and those still in possession of their thrones, Americans rich beyond measure, Indian and African princes, officers of the Guards, writers, artists, opera singers, orchestra conductors, stars of the West End stage, as well as the chorus boys and girls – there was nowhere else in England, possibly in the world, where so many different estates could be found together at one time, not even in Epsom on Derby Day. Unlike many – indeed, most – Nellie harboured few prejudices. She did not discriminate by colour or rank or race. If you had the money for the entrance fee, you were allowed ingress to her kingdom. In Nellie's view, money was the measure of a man – or woman.

Once you had negotiated the Cerberus-like presence of Nellie at the entrance, you passed through a bamboo curtain

and progressed down a dimly lit, narrow flight of stairs as unprepossessing as coal-cellar steps. It added to the 'drama' of it all, Nellie said. Everyone wanted drama. At the bottom of the stairs, you were greeted by another doorman, this one liveried with frogging, epaulettes and so on, a costume that would not have looked out of place on a rear admiral in an operetta. This individual, Linwood, who was much given to bowing and scraping (he made an astonishing amount in tips), was a disgraced butler from one of the royal households. Nellie believed in second chances, she herself had benefited from several. It was amusing to see the startled expressions on the faces of some of the club's more regal patrons if they recognized Linwood (as was the way with butlers, he had no other name), for he was the keeper of many of their more *outré* secrets. Of course, although most servants will recognize their masters, few masters will remember the faces of their servants. Then Linwood would draw back the heavy black bombazine curtain that shrouded the entrance and you were finally granted entry. A *coup de théâtre*.

Ta-dah – welcome to the Amethyst!

The bacon and eggs arrived, along with the promised sausages for Nellie and sweet milky coffee, and Keeper, Niven's German shepherd, nosed open the dining-room door, heralding the arrival of Niven himself.

The dog was the only creature on earth that Niven seemed to have respect for. He still referred to him as a 'German shepherd', not an 'Alsatian', immune – or indifferent – to the enemy connotations of the name. Like many men in the trenches, Niven had known dogs like Keeper, working dogs, but that was one of the few pieces of information about his

time in the Scots Guards that he was prepared to share with anyone. At no point in the war or after, including the Armistice and the Peace, did Niven ever think anyone had won.

He no longer had the patience for people's foibles. No patience for people at all. No time for religion, no time for scruples, no time for feelings. Niven's heart appeared adamantine, fired in the crucible of the war.

He had been a sharpshooter, picking off Germans in their trenches with his Pattern 1914 Enfield. To level things up, the Germans did the same. One morning during the battle of Passchendaele, a corporal spotting for Niven had his head blown off next to him. In the afternoon, the same thing happened to another spotter. Understandably there was a reluctance to spot for Niven a third time. Snipers and spotters generally took it in turns and the next time Niven was on duty he chose to spot, to demonstrate, if nothing else, the laws of chance. He wasn't killed. Perhaps he had been lucky or perhaps he was simply good at knowing when to put his head above the parapet and when it was better to stay down.

He had been closer to the dining room than they thought, in one of the club's storerooms, listening to a tale of woe from one of the dance hostesses amongst the crates of beer and champagne and the boxes of kippers that came down by train from Fortune's in Whitby every week to fuel the Amethyst's breakfasts. He'd put an end to the tale of woe by giving the girl enough cash to make her 'problem' disappear. There was a woman in Covent Garden whom the girls all seemed to know about. The solution was often worse than the problem, but 'you take your chances', the girl in the storeroom said. Her problem was not of Niven's making. He was careful to leave no trace of himself in this world.

He sauntered into the room now and, kissing Nellie lightly on the cheek in the continental fashion, said, 'So, Mother, the jailbird has been set free from her cage, has she?' He pinched a rasher off Betty's plate and tossed it to a surprised Keeper.

The kiss disturbed Nellie. It felt more like Gethsemane than filial affection. 'Time we were all in our beds,' she said sharply.

Niven saluted his mother, managing to make the gesture appear both impeccable and subversive at the same time, a talent honed in the war. '*Sofort, mein Kapitän*,' he said. Nellie frowned at him. She may not have known German but she recognized the language of the enemy when she heard it.

Bow Street

'IT'S YOUR DAY off, sir,' the desk sergeant on the early-morning shift said, alarmed at the sight of Frobisher steaming through the doors of Bow Street station.

'I know that, sergeant, I'm not in my dotage yet.'

'Never thought you were, sir.'

The desk sergeant was still easing into the day with an enamel mug of strong, well-sugared tea and was unprepared for action. It was his custom to be sensitive to the new Detective Chief Inspector's state of mind. Frobisher had been in Bow Street not much more than a week now and the desk sergeant was still getting acquainted with his daily character. This morning he cautiously gauged optimism and said, 'Make you a brew, sir?'

'No, thank you, sergeant,' Frobisher said briskly.

Frobisher had omitted to tell Miss Kelling that today was his day off. Nor had he told his wife, but then Lottie took little interest in his comings and goings. He was here to do a job, to clean a mired house. Dirt never slept, so neither would Frobisher until he had swept it away. He was a man inclined to a metaphor.

Bow Street was not a quiet place. Frobisher could hear the

metallic clanging and banging of the cell doors and the overnight prisoners' voluble protests at their incarceration. The cries of the damned rising from Hades, Frobisher thought, although the cells in Bow Street were not below but on ground level. He caught a high keening from the women's cells up on the floor above – grief or madness, it was hard to say. A fine line divided them. He thought of his wife.

He had been up at an unearthly hour to go to Holloway and his empty stomach felt sour. It needed to be lined with a good breakfast. Frobisher's thoughts turned to porridge, with honey carved from the comb and cream straight from the cow, and perhaps an egg fresh from beneath a fat-feathered hen. Unlikely on all fronts. Frobisher had enjoyed a rural childhood. He was into his forties now but he had never exorcized Shropshire from his soul. They had had chickens when he was young, free to roam, and it had been his job when he came home from school at the end of the day to search out the eggs, each discovery a small triumph, the pleasure of which had never palled. No egg had ever tasted as good since.

'What's the night's tally, sergeant?' he asked.

'Full house, sir. It'll take all day for the Magistrates' Court to get through them.'

'The usual?'

''Fraid so. Run-of-the-mill stuff – solicitation, thieving, intoxication, assaults. A full tank of drunks stewing in their own misery. A murder in Greek Street—'

'Oh?' There had been a spate of baffling murders across London over the past few months. Unexplained random attacks on innocent passers-by. Of course, there were some superstitious fools, encouraged by the scandal sheets, who

blamed the curse of Tutankhamun. Frobisher had been working with the murder squad in Scotland Yard and knew at first-hand how vexing these killings were, as there seemed to be no rhyme or reason to them. He could only conclude that they were the work of a madman.

'Nothing special, sir,' the sergeant said. 'Just a pair of intoxicated gentlemen trying to batter the living daylights out of each other. The Laughing Policeman's on it.'

'Sergeant Oakes? I wish people would use his real name.' God, how Frobisher hated that stupid Charles Penrose song.

'Yes, sir. Oakes is a cheerful sod though, you have to admit. Always sees the funny side of things.'

Oakes was experienced and, if nothing else, he seemed to Frobisher to be a safe pair of hands, although his constant jocundity was already beginning to grate. 'Is Inspector Maddox on duty today?' he asked.

'Still on sick leave, sir.'

'Still?' Maddox had been on leave from the day that Frobisher had started at Bow Street. Frobisher was convinced that the canker at the heart of the station, the most rotten of all the apples in the barrel, was Arthur Maddox. 'What in God's name is wrong with the man? Is he a malingerer?'

'He has a bad back, I believe, sir.'

A bad back didn't stop a man doing his job, Frobisher thought irritably. 'Well, if by any chance he comes in this morning, tell him that I'm looking for him.'

Maddox, promoted to inspector after the war, was thought to be in the pay of the very people he should be pursuing. He lived above his salary – a large semi-detached house in Crouch End, a wife, five children. (Five! Frobisher couldn't imagine having even one.) A car, too, a Wolseley Open

Tourer, the kind of car a well-off man owned, the kind of car a man negotiating for an Austin Seven felt envious of. Not to mention a summer holiday for the whole family in Bournemouth or Broadstairs, not in cheap boarding houses but in good hotels. Frobisher was certain that Maddox was in collusion with Nellie Coker, that he protected her from the law, but what else did he benefit from? Maddox was as sly as a fox and Nellie kept a henhouse, the queen of the coop. Did she also give Maddox free access to her chickens? (Yes, prone to extended metaphors.)

At the mention of Maddox's name, the desk sergeant inhaled and stood up straighter, actions that caught Frobisher's attention. He had become interested lately in what could be referred to as body language or 'sub-vocal thinking', whereby a man betrays himself with the slightest of indications. Of course, he was willing to concede, the desk sergeant may just have been straightening out a twinge in his back. He would concede the occasional twinge, but not a whole week off work, for heaven's sake.

Frobisher sniffed the air. The ambrosial scent of frying bacon wafted towards him from somewhere. His stomach growled with envy. He frowned. Did they *eat* when he wasn't here? Bacon *sandwiches*? What else did they get up to in his absence? He experienced an odd sense of disappointment, as he had done when he was younger and had been left out of the other boys' pursuits. He had been an awkward, reticent child. Now he was an awkward, reticent man, but better at disguising it with a stiff carapace.

He frowned at the desk sergeant and the desk sergeant, sensing that his bacon was at risk, saved it literally with a swift change of subject, saying, 'I heard Ma Coker got out this

morning.' The desk sergeant was only too well aware – the whole station was – of Frobisher's fixation on the Cokers, particularly Nellie.

'She did,' Frobisher said.

'Did you go, sir?'

'I did.'

Frobisher didn't elaborate and the desk sergeant didn't push his luck by asking him to. Frobisher had no small talk, he never had done. It meant that he was a much misunderstood man, presumed to be stand-offish, arrogant even. He had tried, God help him, to chat and prattle about the weather or horse-racing, even films, but he ended up sounding like a poor amateur actor. (*Well, constable, how's that allotment of yours coming on?*) His real passions were esoteric, of little interest to the common man or his colleagues in Bow Street, certainly not to his wife – the Berlin Treaty between Germany and the Soviets (how could that end well?) or a demonstration of a 'televisor' to the Royal Society by a chap called Baird (like something from an H. G. Wells novel). He had an enquiring mind. It was a curse. Even sometimes for a detective.

At home in Ealing, he was saved from the rigours of small talk by mutual incomprehension. His wife was called Charlotte – Lottie – although she had no birth certificate to prove that and Frobisher had his doubts. The detective in him would like to have investigated further, the husband in him thought it wise to leave the subject alone. She was French, or Belgian, she seemed unsure, certainly borderline, plucked from the blighted remains of Ypres at the end of the war with nothing but a bulb of garlic in her pocket, and had no papers to elucidate, and did not care to remember on account of what the doctors called 'hysterical amnesia'.

When younger, Frobisher had imagined many qualities in his future wife, but he had not anticipated hysterical amnesia. Lottie's story was tragic and complicated – again, something he had not predicted in his future wife.

A woman, screeching her innocence, was hauled in through the door by two constables, saving Frobisher from further thought.

'Dolly Pargeter, accused of pickpocketing on the Strand,' one of the uniformed constables who was trying to control her said to the desk sergeant.

'You're out and about early, Dolly,' the desk sergeant said amiably. 'Let's get you checked into the Ritz, shall we?' His nose twitched, he was being kept from his bacon, but to tend to it would be admitting its existence to Frobisher.

'I'll be off, then,' Frobisher said reluctantly. He preferred the police station to his Ealing terrace, which said much about the Ealing terrace. As he turned to go, the desk sergeant said, 'Sir, I forgot – a girl washed up, fished out from the pier at Tower Bridge. She's probably still in the Dead Man's Hole. Thought you'd want to know.' Frobisher took an almost unhealthy interest in dead girls, in the opinion of Bow Street.

'Thank you, sergeant,' Frobisher said, grateful to be reprieved from Ealing. 'I'll take a look.'

'It's your day off, sir,' the desk sergeant reminded him.

'Crime never sleeps,' Frobisher said testily. He sounded priggish, he knew. 'By the way, sergeant—'

'Yes, sir?'

'I think your bacon's burning.'

Frobisher couldn't help smiling to himself as he made his

way out of the station. That would serve them right for not including him, he thought.

As he crossed the road, he was forced to do a neat quick-step to avoid an approaching motorcycle. An Enfield, the rider anonymous behind goggles and leather helmet. How easy it would be to be killed on the streets of London. By accident or design.

An Awkward Age

EVEN BEFORE THE Cokers were piling into their Bentleys outside Holloway, fourteen-year-old Freda was awake, roused by the shouts and tuneless singing of the night porters in Covent Garden market as they unloaded the lorries that started rumbling in at midnight from all over the country – apples from Evesham, mushrooms from Suffolk, exotica from all over the world.

Since running away from home, Freda – Alfreda Murgatroyd – had been renting an attic room in a dingy boarding house in Henrietta Street, so close to the market that she could swear she could smell the rotting cabbage leaves trodden underfoot. Freda had come to London to find her fortune, to become a star of the West End stage. She had not yet been discovered, but her courage had held and this Saturday she was to have an audition. Her life, she was sure, was about to change.

Although small, Freda looked older than her years. For a pretty girl, she was surprisingly lacking in vanity about her looks, which she considered to be more a matter of chance than anything else. Or God-given, if you believed that God gave beauty as a gift, which seemed unlikely. It was more like

the kind of trick that the Greek gods played on people – a curse rather than a gift. One of the few books Freda had read was an illustrated anthology of Greek myths (*A Child's Guide*) that she had found abandoned on the seat in a train carriage when she was ten years old. It was hardly a helpful primer for life.

Freda had been on display since she was able to sit up unaided and had a battery of photographs that catalogued her progression, from appearing in Bonny Baby competitions to playing the locally sourced Clara in a professional touring *Nutcracker* the previous Christmas. Her mother, Gladys, once the chronicler of her daughter's looks, had recently lost interest and transferred her energy into finding a new husband to sponsor her indolent lifestyle. Gladys had, in the past, exploited Freda's looks for an income, but the investment was no longer paying off. 'You've lost your bloom,' she said to Freda. Freda frowned. She felt she still had a lot of blooming ahead of her.

It was her talent rather than her looks that gave Freda cause for pride. The hours she had put in spinning, turning, tapping, pointing and *chassé*-ing. Since the age of three she had attended a dance school from which, every year, the Theatre Royal harvested the best pupils to swell its pantomime chorus, as did the touring ballet and opera productions that came to York, hence her Clara (*Girl from the Groves charms in role*). The Groves was a district of York, but Freda liked the way that (to her mind) it made her sound like a wood nymph, rather than someone who lived in a shabby end-of-terrace in the hinterland behind Rowntree's factory. They used to live in a much better house on Wigginton Road, right opposite the factory where Freda's father had worked

when he was alive, but they had been bundled out by the bailiffs three years ago.

In the short span of her years, Freda had acquired an extensive repertoire playing cats, dogs, baby bears, snowflakes, fairies and an assortment of 'village children' (yet somehow always the same), who danced and sang and skipped around maypoles. No Christmas pantomime, it seemed, was complete without a scene in a village square. Freda was a dainty child and took instruction well; it made her popular with adults.

Freda believed that there was nothing in the whole wide world that was better than standing on a stage. There was a grandeur to it that transcended the otherwise humdrum world. Her heart soared in her chest at the very thought of it.

Between the ages of seven and thirteen, Freda had modelled hand-knitted garments for a yarn manufacturer. And not just for the photographs on their paper patterns – posed in a chilly attic studio in Manchester – but also in mannequin parades that toured parts of the north, hosted by local wool shops, who sold the patterns and needles and balls of wool with which to make the garments on display.

These sporadic little cavalcades took place mostly in dispiriting church halls, and mostly to an audience of women still worn out and raw from the bereavements of war. And always in winter, for some reason. 'That's the nature of wool, I suppose,' Vanda said.

They were a team, Vanda said. There were three of them, Duncan, Vanda and Freda, plus Adele, who 'worked for the company' and was responsible for their travel and accommodation, clutching her Bradshaw's in one hand and with the other lugging a suitcase full of 'the Knits' as she called them

(indisputably a capital letter) from one smoky third-class train carriage to the next. None of them, not even Adele, knew how to knit anything beyond plain and purl, although Duncan claimed he could do French knitting. Vanda laughed and said, 'Don't be filthy.' He had been a sailor in the war. Sailors were fond of knitting, apparently.

They were always being asked questions when they were demonstrating the wares – *What kind of a selvedge is that?* Or *Is that a wishbone stitch?* Vanda had a way of turning these questions into flattery. *Oh, you noticed that, clever you! What kind of stitch do* you *think it is? I expect you're the expert.* And so on.

Their 'costume changes', as Adele referred to the swapping of one knitted garment for another, took place invariably in a dimly lit annexe at the back of the hall that was used as a storage area for hymn books and crumbling Nativity mangers and other neglected church paraphernalia.

In the hall, they did not walk on a stage, if there was a stage, which there often wasn't, but proceeded individually down the aisle between the lines of rackety old chairs occupied by their audience. When they reached the back of the room, they did a measured twirl and then returned to the front. 'The slower the better,' Adele counselled. 'They haven't come out on a wet Wednesday evening for the knitting, they've come for the occasion.'

Freda modelled a variety of intricately patterned cardigans and sweaters and three-piece outfits with pleated skirts and Shetland tammies. Pom-poms abounded. 'You look very coveted able,' Vanda said.

Freda had quickly grown accustomed to gazing straight ahead and smiling serenely while members of the audience reached out and plucked a sleeve or pinched a rib-stitch hem

or, occasionally, Freda herself – nipping the back of her hand or patting the calf that rose firm and inviting above her white socks and black patent shoes, shoes that were removed immediately afterwards, in case they got scratched, and replaced with her plain brown leather Oxfords.

Freda often received a smattering of applause which had nothing to do with the Knits but rather was on account of the way that she shone with the promise of a future, a future that would surely be better than the past. It sanctified her in the eyes of the audience. If they could have kept a piece of her as a relic – a finger bone, a lock of hair, even a pom-pom – they would have done.

Vanda was tall and raw-boned, with hair the colour of ginger nuts. Glamorous in a rather seedy way, she was always doused in Molinard's Habanita, which could knock your socks off if you got too close. She even dabbed the perfume on the Sarony cigarettes that she smoked continually and that made her Teesdale accent as 'hoarse as a crow', as Duncan liked to say. Vanda was always offering Freda one ('Go on, treat yourself, pet'), her hacking, phlegmy cough announcing her presence long before she became visible.

Duncan, who before the war had 'trod the boards', had once shared a stage with an ingenue Edith Evans at the Haymarket – 'spear-carrying stuff', he said dismissively. This entire sentence had been incomprehensible to Freda, but she learnt by a kind of osmosis and often things said one day made more sense the next. She thought 'spear-carrying' sounded rather noble.

It was Duncan's job to sport the pullovers, cardigans and waistcoats, many in complex Fair Isle patterns and often with the accessory of an unlit pipe to make him seem more manly.

Even at her young age, Freda had been able to discern that manliness was not necessarily a quality Duncan strove for. He had a funny accent that was 'posh Liverpool', according to Vanda, which Freda rather liked and spent a good deal of time trying to imitate.

Vanda was a seasoned performer, too, having been on the stage herself once, in the music halls, as a magician's assistant, levitated on a nightly basis.

'It's not real, pet,' she said to Freda when she expressed admiration. 'It's a trick.' But that was even better than real!

Vanda paraded 'women's fashion items', words, she said, that covered 'a multitude of sins' from boleros to sweater dresses to matronly cardigans. Babies and toddlers were short-changed, although Vanda occasionally carried a large doll in full matinée fig. The doll appeared mysteriously from nowhere – too big, surely, for Adele's suitcase. It was called Dorothy. 'Nearest I'll ever get to being a mother,' Vanda said, in triumph rather than sorrow, as she adjusted the ribbons on the inanimate Dorothy's bonnet.

Unlike her mother, more ramshackle by the month, Freda was an exceptionally neat and tidy child. ('Fastidious,' Duncan said.) Every night before bed she tied her hair in rags and rubbed bicarb on her freckles as someone had told her once that it would make them fade. Before getting into bed, a bed often shared with Vanda, she would fold all her clothes and place them pyramidically on a chair – skirt at the bottom up to knickers at the top, coped by her socks, all ready for the next day when the pyramid was dismantled in reverse. 'Aren't you good!' Vanda said admiringly. They shared a bedroom in a variety of boarding houses. Vanda, like Freda's mother, was slovenly, clothes dropped where they were removed, face

powder spilt everywhere. Freda made no judgements. She was learning about womanhood. You take it where you can, as Duncan would say.

Freda was very good at packing, too, she could get twice as much in her little suitcase as Vanda did in her big one. Sometimes she took over Vanda's packing for her. It was all in the folding. Like geometry, Duncan said. Freda's understanding of geometry, or any branch of mathematics, was lamentable. Sometimes she wondered if she shouldn't be in school more often.

'Don't worry, pet, you only need to be able to count to eight if you're going to be a dancer,' Vanda said.

Vanda owned a coat that she claimed had been given to her by an admirer and was stitched from the pelts of thirty-six ermine. It was like a great snowy cloud and Freda often found herself asleep on Vanda's fur-clad shoulder in one train carriage or another. It was made from rabbits, not ermines, Duncan said. Freda had no idea what an ermine was. An animal, she knew that much, although her acquaintance with any kind of animal was limited. She had never owned a pet, never visited a farm or a zoo. Cows and sheep were merely ornaments that dotted the landscape of the north as it rolled past the train window. Although embarrassed by her ignorance now, she had been astonished when Vanda explained that sheep were the origin of the Knits.

In the evenings, in the boarding houses, Duncan would take a bottle out from his suitcase. He was never without one. He always offered Freda a 'tipple'. She always refused. She had tried it once and it had made her insides heave. 'Old Navy rum,' Duncan said. 'Strip the paint off a battleship. That's where I got a taste for it – in the rum old Royal Navy.'

Sometimes on these occasions, Vanda (who preferred port) said, 'Tell us some of your war stories, then, Duncan,' with a strangely vulgar leer on her face, and Duncan would laugh and say, 'Oo, will I buggery, love?' but then would proceed to regale them with the tale of how he'd gone down on HMS *Formidable* in 1915 in the English Channel before 'popping back up again like a cork'. What was vulgar about that, Freda wondered? She presumed that the cork story was a joke of some kind, or a magic trick. Duncan rarely mentioned the five hundred or so sailors who didn't pop back up with him. The war was history, and history didn't interest Freda, she'd had no part in it. She was vibrant with the present and hungry for the future.

Vanda had 'lost her man' early in the war. Freda thought he must have been killed in battle, but Duncan said he'd run off to Barnsley with a barmaid. 'Alliterative adultery,' he said.

'Big word,' Vanda said.

'Which one?' Duncan said.

On these companionable boarding-house evenings, sometimes in 'the public lounge' in front of a hissing gas fire, but more often than not in the bedroom that Vanda and Freda shared, Duncan taught Freda to play cards, the pack laid out on the bedspread. He taught her how to cheat as well, which was even better – 'cold stacking' and the 'third card deal' as well as many other 'tricks', as he called them. She was a natural, apparently.

'Nimble little fingers,' Duncan said appreciatively. Freda was precocious, he told Vanda. Freda thought he meant 'precious'. They played for matches. By the time they all parted company for the last time Duncan was heavily in debt to Freda. He would need to raid one of Kreuger's warehouses to