
Opening Extract from...

The Iron Necklace

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PART ONE

1

The afternoon was idyllic, the warmth tempered by the faintest breeze, with only the tiniest clouds scudding through the sky. London was looking as handsome as it could. On the way to the church the wedding guests glimpsed the park, the riders in Rotten Row, the great houses on Park Lane, and every window box in Wilton Row was crammed with flowers: the whole city seemed to be celebrating the happy occasion.

As the guests filled the church, you could hardly imagine a mere two families could have so many friends, but the ushers were well prepared. English on the left, Germans on the right. Like two armies. That was the principle, but there were so many more English that after a while the ushers put the bride's friends on the bridegroom's side. 'Let's invade Germany,' the English ushers muttered to one another, amused.

They were the nicest sort of Germans, you could see that at once. Watching the groom's family arriving, the congregation agreed that you'd hardly know they weren't English. Their clothes were almost exactly right: the men's tail coats fitted immaculately, the women's clothes were all they should be, the bridegroom's mother had chosen the ideal hat for a woman of her years, dark blue with a discreet display of ostrich feathers that suited her serene features and her fine black hair. It was evidently a large family, led by the short and undeniably stout but amiable-looking father and this dignified mother. There were at least two brothers and several sisters, and men who must be brothers-in-law. The German ushers had beautiful manners, and spoke excellent English. Only their hair showed they were not English; it was cut unusually, in a straight wave over the head, with precisely delineated edges.

The groom was most presentable, tall and fair. The best man had to be one of his brothers, a slightly shorter, cheerful-looking version of him. They chatted easily to one another. Their morning coats were impeccable and must have been made in London. The bridegroom had apparently spent years in England studying architecture, it was not surprising he understood English ways. Irene Benson could hardly have done better, that was the consensus. It was said the groom's father occupied a position at the Kaiser's court, his mother came from a landed family. How could one believe the stories about war with Germany when one saw such a family?

'They're so like us,' they murmured in the pews.

'And look at our own royal family. . .'

'And our beautiful new Queen Mary, such a fine young woman, and as German as can be.'

On the other side of the aisle sat the Bensons. Mrs Benson – small and slender, her face recalling youthful prettiness, her hair richly auburn – was extravagantly dressed. Her green hat was assertive, its ostrich feathers sweeping dashingly upwards so that when she moved, the upper extremities shook. Her dark green costume opened to reveal a handsomely embroidered blouse secured at the neck with a bronze-coloured neckband.

There was much whispering about her clothes.

'She does look fine, doesn't she? What a beautiful dress, most fashionable. Do you think she found it in Woollands? Or could she have gone to Paris, to Worth, even?'

'It's quite possible. They live very comfortably, you know. They say he is doing very well at the Bar. . .'

'Yes, you're always seeing his name in the papers – big cases. . .'

Mrs Benson gazed ahead, suppressing tears that were not due until later. Her son, a slight-looking young man, came to sit beside her, and there were some aunts and uncles and cousins. Clustered together was a group of young people who must be Irene's artistic friends, the women in

ill-fitting sludge-coloured dresses with fussy embroidery, and soft velvet hats, who surprised the congregation's wandering gaze.

'What odd-looking people. Who can they be?'

'She was at the Slade, you know. She must have met them there.'

'Look at that long hair, some of the men have hair on their shoulders. Artists, yes, I suppose they must be.'

'Not even wearing morning dress. It's too bad.'

'I've heard she refused to be presented at court.'

'Well, at least she agreed to a proper wedding.'

Everyone was set to enjoy the occasion. Why, complete strangers spoke to their neighbours in the pews, so friendly was the atmosphere.

The church was full. Even in St Paul's Knightsbridge with its hundreds of seats there was hardly a spare place. The building trembled with polite rustling, waving of hands, craning of necks, whispering to spouses. The people in the galleries – the Bensons' long-serving maids, clerks from his chambers, that sort of person – stared downwards. The guests below never looked up.

Ten minutes late, there was a bustle at the west entrance. The whispering gave way to an eager hush, the organ burst into a matrimonial march. The west doors were thrown open to admit Mr William Benson, with his daughter on his arm. His saturnine face was as composed as though he were entering a law court – appropriately for a King's Counsel. But at the sight of the silks and muslins and feathers of the ladies spreading among the black morning coats like wild flowers across a ploughed field, the faces in the galleries merging into a single eager countenance, the white lilies in long silver vases, the sunlight transmuted into patterns of blue and pink and striking the face of groom and best man, his features softened. Though many could not see Irene's face, they could all admire her tall slender figure in white satin stitched with pearls, and the lace cascading from the chaplet of flowers. She was followed by two little girls and a taller girl, all in gold dresses, and two

small pages, their soft complexions adorned with drops of sweat, like little jewels.

Thomas Curtius turned and looked down the aisle. He looked concerned; it was a serious moment. The bride, encumbered by the drooping richness of satin, was a long while walking up the aisle. She moved proudly, upright and elegant. When she reached the front of the church she turned towards her family and gave the tiniest wave. Finally she reached the bridegroom. Then she threw back her veil in a bold, careless gesture, the lace tumbling round her, reached her hand towards him, smiled. Who would not be happy to receive such a smile, so frank, trusting, loving? Silently but powerfully, the congregation expressed its approval. They were a beautiful couple. They were clearly destined for happiness.

At St Paul's they celebrated weddings almost every week, and the machinery was faultless. The vicar – handsome, urbane, silver-haired, as much at home in a drawing room as at an altar – assumed the air of kindly dignity, subtly modulated to fit the couple's social status, that he had refined over several hundred ceremonies. The choirboys, hair smoothed, faces shining, rapidly inspected bride and bridesmaids before languidly surveying the congregation. They sang with melting beauty. The best man produced the ring at precisely the right moment. The couple's responses were clear and confident. It was a perfect wedding. Except for the bird.

The bird was only a little bird – a swift, could it be? – but a noticeable one. People became aware of a faint fluttering that turned out to be beating wings. During the exchange of vows, a dark shape flew towards the middle of the church, and for a moment hung in the air. People involuntarily followed its progress round the church. The vicar, while smoothly intoning '. . . let no man put asunder. . .', thought, I told Sturgess not to leave the gallery window open, it really is maddening. Then the bird halted, somewhere. It had not gone. As the organ burst into the 'Wedding March',

it re-emerged and flew towards the chancel, landed on the altar rail to the amusement of the choristers, set out on another flight, its wings beating hard, narrowly avoided the altar, aimed for the east window. As though seeking escape, it flew against the glass, once, and then again, and then once more.

As the bridal pair reached the west door, the bird fell heavily into a mysterious space behind the altar, and did not reappear.

2

'Pandora, darling, I asked you to tea for a reason. I wanted to show you the Golden Boxes. I think we should look at them together.'

'Ah, the famous Golden Boxes. I thought you'd seen them all, with Granny.'

'Only some of them. The history of her life was contained in those boxes, but she thought it best to forget. . .' Dorothea sighs. 'Have you had enough tea? And enough lemon cake? You must take it away with you, I know the young never have enough to eat. . .' She pats the sofa beside her.

'Someone might want to write her biography, I suppose. Could they do that from these boxes?'

'Oh I hope not, at least not while I'm around, it would be too hurtful. Still, let's look at the first box. Mother loved to keep things. . . Will you draw the curtains and turn on that light? And come and sit beside me.' She peers at the fire. 'That is, if you are interested.' Reaching down, Dorothea pulls a piece of silk off a large box. 'Well, here it is. The first of the Golden Boxes.' She dusts it vaguely.

'Does it need dusting, Ma? You're always dusting. . .' And Pandora laughs.

'Oh that's my métier. No, it doesn't need dusting, you're right. The studio was as clean as could possibly be. This box, it's nearly all photograph albums.' She pulls out a large leather-bound album. 'This is Mother's first album. Nicely labelled, you see, 1910. Mother was always precise about such things, she liked to keep her life in order.'

3

Nobody at the wedding reception seemed to read anything into the bird.

His parents had rented a house in Belgrave Square for the reception. They seemed mildly ill at ease in this pretend home, with its white and gold hall and its handsome staircase leading to the drawing rooms. But Mark, who at Cambridge had acquired a taste for uncomfortable grandeur, enjoyed the rooms and wondered if he would ever inhabit such a place himself.

The two families had hurried there for the photographs. There were pictures of the bride and groom on their own, with parents, with attendants, with their entire families. They took a long time to set up, particularly the last picture, which showed all thirty of them, arranged according to etiquette and height. Sophia made a fuss about being photographed, said she looked ugly and fat.

Keen to study the arriving guests, Mark had earmarked a vantage point halfway up the stairs. He loved to be an observer. Up the stairs the guests progressed, chattering like macaws. He supposed that, as a diplomat, he'd attend events like this all the time. He was excited by the idea of the Diplomatic Service. When Sir Ernest had taken him to lunch at the Travellers' Club, it was flattering to be told he seemed wholly suitable. Sir Ernest could drop a word. 'They still listen to me. I have a brief to look out for the right kind of fellow. . . You seem ideal: intelligent, a good First, you say; good background, character. No vicious tastes, I imagine?' They laughed.

His little sister squeezed her way down the stairs, as though in search of something. This turned out to be him. 'Do come out from there. It's too

unreasonable of you to hide. I'm having to work ever so hard and you're a grown-up, you should be helping. Do come, Mark.' He waved her away.

He had no friends of his own here. Of course, when he was married, he'd invite friends by the hundred. Not that he had hundreds of friends yet, but he planned to. If he could participate in the Season, he'd meet people like those glowingly confident young men one met from Trinity and King's. These guests were not the sort of people he had in mind: lawyers and their wives, figures from the City, dons, one or two celebrated authors and several who scraped a living writing initialled reviews in *John O'London's Weekly*, clever women who wrote pamphlets on the poor. And of course his mother's new smart friends like Lady Belfield, about whom she was perpetually talking, though he wasn't convinced they were as smart as she supposed.

In the reception line, Thomas was friendly and brisk. Irene spoke at length to the guests, particularly her artistic set. The Berlin contingent were easily recognisable, with their cultivated faces, different from the mild, untidy Saxons among whom Mark had lived last year. He'd been intrigued by Paul, one of Thomas's brothers, whom he'd met the evening before. Paul was his own age, a student at Heidelberg. He had apparently mastered not only classical and German philosophy and literature, but English philosophy, literature and history as well.

Edward Jenkinson came up the stairs, talking to a dark, striking-looking girl Mark did not recognise. Edward, or Teddy, it was not clear which, was a new phenomenon in their family life. He seemed cheerful: clearly he liked a party. He waved jovially. 'Hello there, not joining in?'

Mark could see his mother gesturing at him. She liked him to be seen, since, as she often told him, he ought to be less shy; he was special, people would enjoy meeting him. It really was time to emerge, into the friendly company of Uncle George and Aunt Lavinia and their children. They were a lively, good-humoured family; their optimism always encouraged him.

The reception was engulfed in vivacious noise. The hospitality was lavish. There was champagne, champagne, champagne, and Mosel provided by Thomas's family, and vast quantities of little sandwiches and cakes from Searcy's. By the time they were ready for speeches everyone was a little tipsy, glowing in the balmy afternoon, the long windows having been opened onto the deep balcony and the plane trees in the square.

Everyone enjoyed the speeches. Mr Benson was characteristically dry. He said he would miss his daughter but at last he'd be able to finish the book he'd been working on for ten years as his younger children were less demanding. He welcomed so many friends from abroad. He thanked his wife, his constant helpmeet. She laughed and cried at the same time.

Friedrich, the best man, apologised for his bad English – 'I want to make better my English,' he stated, 'but not with an audience of five hundred people!' He laughed at his own jokes, it was hard to resist. He said, in capturing Irene Benson, his brother had won Germany's finest victory since Waterloo – 'though the fighting was hardly less violent, and when finally my brother wins the battle, we are all thinking, will he ever win such a battle again? But Thomas adores England – do you know about this? When he is young, he comes to London to study the architecture – always the architecture, he talks about nothing else, except Irene, and maybe one or two other girls, but they are a long time ago, you understand. Then he comes home and we hear always about England, how fine it is, the people are so friendly, the houses so comfortable, the humour so amusing, we are driven mad. We all think he would like to be English, he wants to look English, he has his hair cut by an English barber, he uses English slang, and I have to tell you, someone once actually thought my brother was English – Thomas was delighted, even though this person was blind and deaf and came from Russia. So when I first came to England, I said to myself, I am sure I will not like this country. In Germany we are suspicious, you know. They say it is so old-fashioned and the people are pompous and cold. But after a few days, I realise I am completely wrong!

England is wonderful, and beautiful too! I am a convinced Anglophile, within one week. Now I plan to come and live here and study business, so my English will be better than Thomas's and who knows, I may find an English bride.'

He paused for a moment. 'Of course, I cannot hope to find an English bride as beautiful, as kind, as good, as Irene. Now, with her, Thomas will become not only a fine man, but a fine husband and a fine father. With such a wife, he can face anything. Now, I say a few words in German.' He drew himself up to his full height. '*Und jetzt, meine Damen und Herren, ist es mir eine Ehre auf Sophia und die anderen Brautjungfern anzustoßen*. To the bridesmaids.'

They drank the toast and clapped and even cheered, and the English guests remarked, surprised, how humorous he was.

It was Thomas's turn. This was the man, Mark reflected, who was taking away his sister, but the speech disarmed him. Thomas thanked the Bensons for their kindness and recalled how he and Irene had met. Then he announced that he wanted to speak seriously. 'I apologise, it's our national failing.' He hoped that in an age when Britain and Germany shared many noble objectives – improving social conditions at home, advancing technology and scientific understanding, teaching the arts of civilisation to primitive peoples – they would not forget the gentler friendships and emotions they shared. The British and the Germans were kinsmen, sprung from the same stock, united by years of friendship. He cited the extended connections between the royal families of Britain and Germany. He trusted that his marriage would follow this example. 'Though ours will be a German house, it will also be English. I won't undertake to try to transform Irene into a German, or indeed anything else – I know that, whatever I say, she will behave as she chooses.' They laughed at that. 'But I hope that in our new home we shall succeed to create a household and family that will unite the best of the English and the German traditions, and that our friends from England will feel, when they walk over our threshold, that they are at home.'

And then, rather slowly, he spoke a few words in German, and if they did not understand him, everyone appreciated the warmth and affection behind his remarks. '*Laßen Sie mich mit einem Toast auf meine Braut beenden, an deren Hand durchs Leben zu gehen, mein Glück sein wird. Prosit!*'

The guests raised their glasses and surrendered to the enjoyable emotions appropriate to a wedding. Then Mark saw in the midst of the artistic set a back turned on the bridal couple. So Julian had come, after all. Mark knew that when Irene had told Julian about her engagement, he had shouted, burst into angry sobs, vowed he would never speak to her again. Now here he was, red in the face, wearing a not-too-clean suit.

Other people's lives were mysterious. Mark was thankful that he'd never had an affair, if it led to so much pain. But of course he too would marry one day.

His eyes returned to the new couple as they moved among their guests, Thomas in the lead, Irene a little flushed. He asked himself: this perfect love which means you lose yourself in someone else – was that what Irene felt for Thomas? Mark was sure it was what Thomas felt. But Irene?

There was a stir from the artistic corner, raised voices, jostling bodies. Julian emerged, pushing his way to the middle of the room until he was staring at Thomas, who, always polite, held out his hand to this stranger. Julian glared, moved towards the bride. He thrust aside the man she was talking to, and placed himself in front of her, legs apart.

Julian did not frighten Irene. 'I am happy to see you here.' She held out her hand. He raised it to his lips, kissing it fervently. She pulled it away. 'I'm glad you could come.' She took her husband's arm and they moved away.

Mark was disconcerted when Julian caught his eye. But he only said, 'Mark, hello. Happy occasion, eh? Pleased?' Mark felt sorry for him. Julian was not such a bad fellow, it was just that love made him miserable. 'I love her, you know that, I love her.'

'Yes,' said Mark.

'I always have. You see, Mark, it's not just a romantic dream. I just love her, everything about her, the whole woman. I can't imagine ever feeling like this about anyone else.'

'It might be best to try.'

'I can't.' Then he pulled himself together, looked penetratingly at Mark. 'She loves you very much. She was so angry when I mobbed you up at that party – sorry about that, old boy. She said, whatever I thought about you at first sight, underneath you're as good as gold. You'll miss her too.'

'Yes, I shall.'

Julian was fiercer and yet softer than when they'd met before. He was like a dark hairy animal. For a moment he could see why Irene had liked him.'Will she ever come back?' Julian's eyes glistened.

After a while, people moved downstairs to wave the couple off. Mark held back. In the almost empty drawing room he noticed himself in one of the long mirrors. Well, I suppose I don't look so bad, he thought. Hair fairly much in order, face pleasant if rather flushed, features regular. Move on, Mark, he told himself. Looking at oneself in a mirror is not something a man does. Then he saw, reflected, someone looking in his direction. It was Paul, Thomas's brother.

The two reflections regarded one another, Paul unsmiling but intent. Then Paul said, 'You must be sad, that your sister leaves you, and comes to us.'

They went down the broad marble staircase together and joined the waiting crowd. A moment later, Irene and Thomas appeared in their going-away clothes. Mark kissed Irene goodbye, shook Thomas's hand. Thomas put his arms round Mark. Mark stiffened, immediately regretted it.

As the couple stepped into the waiting Daimler, Mark was overcome by a sense of loss and hopelessness. He could not explain it. But the feeling did not last.

Paul turned to him, saying, 'Will you show me something of London, my new brother-in-law? My new friend, I hope?'

4

Pandora and her mother sit surrounded by albums. But the albums have been arranged neatly, as though they are to be seen in a certain order.

'Honestly, Mum, these wedding photographs are extraordinary. Look at them all, in their silk dresses and their tail coats, lined up like the royal family. When I'm married, if I ever am, I want the event to be about love and commitment, not about showing I belong to a superior social caste.'

'Darling, I'm sure you'll be running around naked celebrating Flower Power and smoking hash. Still, they look happy, don't they?'

'Your father was so handsome.'

'I remember him as handsome when I was a little girl. That's Aunt Sophia, frowning, hating having to wear a bridesmaid's dress.'

'I must go and see her one of these days.' Pandora moves closer to her mother and squeezes her hand. 'It's sweet of you to show me these pictures. I hope it doesn't upset you.'

'These don't upset me, no. The ones of Mother and Father in Berlin when I was a little girl, those make me sad.'

'Who's that young man beside your father?'

'Freddy, that's Freddy. He was the best man. I never knew him. They said Sophia was very fond of him. Two brothers marrying two sisters, what a thing that would have been. And that's another of Father's brothers, and that's my German grandmother, such a wonderful person. All dead now, all dead, except Sophia. At least I suppose the Germans are dead, I really don't know. Shall I turn the page?'

‘Who is this confident-looking person? Cousin Edward, it says?’

‘That’s Edward from Canada. You know all those Jenkinson cousins who’ve made so much money? He was their father. Shall we turn over?’ Pandora looks at her mother enquiringly. Her mother laughs. ‘You look just as you used to look when I was telling you fairy stories.’

‘It’s a pity you never wrote them down.’

‘Oh nobody would want to read anything by me. I remember Edward as large, and limping, and not keen on Germany.’ There was a pause. ‘There were rumours about Edward. . . Will you put some more coal on the fire, Pandora?’

5

One evening a few days after the wedding, Teddy and Mark sat in the drawing room drinking brandy. Dinner had been dull. Mamma had chatted about the wedding and how nice the Germans had been – things she had said already – and gazed adoringly at her nephew. Mark thought ruefully that he had been supplanted, as though Teddy were a long-lost son. Teddy, it seemed, was already making 'contacts', as he called them. He talked and talked, mostly about the shipping business in Canada. What he said was not dull exactly, but somehow crude. Papa had been almost silent, seemed distracted. Sophia occasionally asked difficult questions. Mark was glad when dinner was over.

Brandy was not usually drunk in that house, but now that Teddy had appeared, it seemed everything was possible. Once the others had gone to bed, Teddy sprawled on the sofa, his feet on an arm. His face was rosy to the point of redness but he was not bad-looking. He seemed unwilling to go to bed, pumped Mark for information.

'What are your sports, Mark?'

Mark muttered about doing a lot of rowing at school (which was barely true) and the subject passed. The truth was, he hated playing games, was ashamed of his ineptitude.

Teddy was prone to generalisations about the world, and Canada, and Britain, and whole categories of people. He disliked the French (especially French Canadians), and the idle working classes, and Jews. 'Jews, they're trouble,' he said. 'Best keep out of their way.' He had further aversions. 'One of the problems with this country – thank God we don't have too

much of it in Canada – is you have so many fairies, as I understand. D'you ever come across them?' Mark mumbled something like a negative. 'Can't be doing with them, a danger to the nation, the whole way we live.'

Mark did not comment. What a pain this man is, he thought.

Teddy wanted a job, preferably in shipping, and a wife. 'A good straightforward girl, and if she's got connections, so much the better – I'm a bit of an old cynic.' And he laughed. 'D'you know a lot of girls?' He seemed disappointed when Mark said that at school you met none and at Cambridge very few, and that the girls you came across in a clergyman's family in Dresden were not always electrifying. 'We'll work on it together,' said Teddy. He had some introductions through people in Canada, he'd already arranged to call on a couple of chaps in the City. Clearly his sociability was well planned.

Towards midnight Mark began to feel so tired he could only nod. He wished Teddy would go to bed.

Teddy laughed. 'You look fed up,' he said. 'You look as though you were thinking, who is this stupid colonial, why doesn't he stop talking?'

It was exactly what Mark had been thinking and he laughed.

'I am a colonial, but I'm not completely stupid. D'you know how I was brought up? We kept the whole story quiet, but you'd better know, I think. When Mother died I was ten, and I was taken in by the vicar of our church and his wife. They were kind to me, they had no children of their own, they wanted to adopt me but somehow that was not possible. I was sent to boarding school when I was twelve, a school for the sons of churchmen. The vicar fixed it, Uncle Matthew, as I called him. It was very hard, high-thinking, not much to eat, so cold in winter you'd not believe it, in chapel your breath came out in an icy puff. Then I went to university, money came somehow through Uncle Matthew, he said it came from my father, but – more brandy, old boy? – but I never believed that. When I met my father in Toronto not so long ago he was a broken-down old man, no good to anyone – tried to

borrow money from me, in fact. No one loved me much except Uncle Matthew and Aunt Anne.'

Mark looked at him in astonishment. He was crying. Crying? His big blustering cousin Teddy, crying?

'Sorry, old man,' he said. 'You don't want to hear all this. I must be drunk. I am drunk. Anyway, just remember, I had to keep fighting. Money – I realised how important it is, it's what shapes how we are. Anyway, when Aunt Elizabeth wrote and invited me to the wedding, I thought, well, why not? Why not get to meet my real aunt and uncle? Why not see the Old Country? And here I am.'

'Mamma is delighted you're here. It quite makes up for Irene. She adores you already.'

'A great lady, your mother. She seems like a mother to me. I plan to stay. Anyway, don't mind me if I talk on and on about the French, just a way of carrying on. Germans – Germans I do not like. . . Though they seemed pretty nice at the wedding. I think I'd better be going to bed. Good night, so glad I'm here. . .' And he lurched out of the room, cuffing Mark over the head in a friendly way as he went.

Mark followed him, reflecting as he put out the lights that perhaps Teddy was not such a bad fellow, not so insensitive after all.