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The Chilbury Ladies' Choir

Written by Jennifer Ryan

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The Chilbury Ladies' Choir

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The Chilbury Ladies' Choir

Notice pinned to the Chilbury village hall noticeboard,
Sunday, 24th March, 1940

As all our male voices have gone to war, the village choir is to close following Cmdr Edmund Winthrop's funeral next Tuesday.

The Vicar

Mrs Tilling's Journal



Tuesday, 26th March, 1940

First funeral of the war, and our little village choir simply couldn't sing in tune. 'Holy, holy, holy' limped out as if we were a crump of warbling sparrows. But it wasn't because of the war, or the young scoundrel Edmund Winthrop torpedoed in his submarine, or even the Vicar's abysmal conducting. No, it was because this was the final performance of the Chilbury Choir. Our swan song.

'I don't see why we have to be closed down,' Mrs B snapped afterwards as we congregated in the foggy graveyard. 'It's not as if we're a threat to national security.'

'All the men have gone,' I whispered back, aware of our voices carrying uncomfortably through the funeral crowd. 'The Vicar says we can't have a choir without men.'

'Just because the men have gone to war, why do we have to close the choir? And precisely when we need it most! I mean, what'll he disband next? His beloved bell ringers? Church on Sundays? Christmas? I expect not!' She folded her arms in annoyance. 'First they whisk our men away to fight, then they force us women into work, then they ration food, and now they're closing our choir. By the time the Nazis get here there'll be nothing left except a bunch of drab women ready to surrender.'

'But there's a war on,' I said, trying to placate her loud complaining. 'We women have to take on extra work, help the cause. I don't mind doing hospital nurse duties, although it's busy keeping up the village clinic too.'

'The choir has been part of the Chilbury way since time began. There's something bolstering about singing together.' She puffed her chest out, her large, square frame like an abundant field marshall.

The funeral party began to head to Chilbury Manor for the obligatory glass of sherry and cucumber sandwich. 'Edmund Winthrop,' I sighed. 'Only twenty and blown up in the North Sea.'

'He was a vicious bully, and well you know it,' Mrs B barked. 'Remember how he tried to drown your David in the village pond?'

'Yes, but that was years ago,' I whispered. 'In any case, Edmund was bound to be unstable with his father forever thrashing him. I'm sure Brigadier Winthrop must be feeling more than a trace of regret now that Edmund's dead.'

Or clearly not, I thought as we looked over to him, thwacking his cane against his military boot, the veins on his neck and forehead livid with rage.

'He's furious because he's lost his heir,' Mrs B snipped. 'The Winthrops need a male to inherit, so the family estate is lost. He doesn't care a jot about the daughters.' We glanced over at young Kitty and the beautiful Venetia. 'Status is everything. At least Mrs Winthrop's pregnant again. Let's hope it's a boy this time round.'

Mrs Winthrop was cowering like a crushed sparrow under the weight of Edmund's loss. *It could be me next*, I thought, as my David came over, all grown up in his new army uniform.

His shoulders are broader since training, but his smile and softness are just the same. I knew he'd sign up when he turned eighteen, but why did it happen so fast? He's being sent to France next month, and I can't help worrying how I'll survive if anything happens to him. He's all I have since Harold passed away. Edmund and David often played as boys, soldiers or pirates, some kind of battle that Edmund was sure to win. I can only pray that David's fight doesn't end the same way.

The war has been ominously quiet so far, Hitler busy taking the rest of Europe. But I know they're coming, and soon we'll be surrounded by death. It'll be like the last war, when a whole generation of men was wiped out, my own father included. I remember the day the telegram came. We were sitting down for luncheon, the sun spilling into the dining room as the gramophone played Vivaldi. I heard the front door open, then the slump of my mother's body as she hit the floor, the sunshine streaming in, unaware.

Now our lives are going into turmoil all over again: more deaths, more work, more making do. And our lovely choir gone too. I've half a mind to write to the Vicar in protest. But then again, I probably won't. I've never been one to make a fuss. My mother told me that women do better when they smile and agree. Yet sometimes I feel so frustrated with everything. I just want to shout it out.

I suppose that's why I started a journal, so that I can express the things I don't want to say out loud. A programme on the wireless said that keeping a journal can help you feel better if you have loved ones away, so I popped out yesterday and bought one. I'm sure it'll be filled up soon, especially once David leaves and I'm on my own, thoughts surging

through my head with nowhere to be let out. I've always dreamt of being a writer, and I suppose this is the closest I'll get.

Taking David's arm and following the crowd to Chilbury Manor, I looked back at the crumbling old church. 'I'll miss the choir.'

To which Mrs B roundly retorted, 'I haven't seen you instructing the Vicar to reverse his decision.'

'But, Mrs B,' David said with a smirk. 'We always leave it up to you to make a stink about everything. You usually do.'

I had to hide a smile behind my hand, waiting for Mrs B's wrath. But at that moment, the Vicar himself flew past us, trotting at speed after the Brigadier, who was striding up to the Manor.

Mrs B took one look, seized her umbrella with grim determination, and began stomping after him, calling, 'I'll have a word with you, Vicar,' her usual forthright battle cry.

The Vicar turned and, seeing her gaining pace, sprinted for all he was worth.

Letter from Miss Edwina Paltry to her sister, Clara



3 Church Row
Chilbury
Kent

Tuesday, 26th March, 1940

Brace yourself, Clara, for we are about to be rich! I've been offered the most unscrupulous deal you'll ever believe! I knew this ruddy war would turn up some gems – whoever would have thought that midwifery could be so lucrative! But I couldn't have imagined such a grubby nugget of a deal coming from snooty Brigadier Winthrop, the upper-class tyrant who thinks he owns this prissy little village. I know you'll say it's immoral, even by my standards, but I need to get away from being a cooped-up, put-down midwife. I need to get back to the old house where I can live my own life and be free.

Don't you see, Clara? Soon I can pay back the money I owe, like I promised, and you'll finally realise how clever I am, how I can make up for mistakes of the past. We can put everything behind us, and never mention what happened with Bill (although I always say I saved you from him). Then I'll buy back our childhood house in Birnham Wood,

all fields and cliffs beside the sea, and we can live safe and happy just like before Mum died. I'll be finished with births and babies and nasty rashes in people's nether regions, people bossing me about and laughing behind my back. I'll be back to being my own person, no one watching over me.

But let me tell you about the deal from the beginning, as I know how you are about details. It was the funeral of Edmund Winthrop, the Brigadier's despicable son who was blown up in a submarine last week. Only twenty he was – one minute a repulsive reptile, the next a feast for the fishes.

The morning of the funeral was cold and wet as a slap round the face with a fresh-caught cod. We might have been in the North Sea ourselves for the ferocious winds and grisly clouds, a monstrous hawk circling above us looking for a victim. 'Rather fitting,' I heard someone murmur as we plunged headlong with our umbrellas through the bedraggled graveyard and into the dim, musty church.

Packed to the rafters, the place was buzzing with gossipy onlookers. At the front, the Winthrops and their aristocrat friends were sitting all plumed and groomed like a row of black swans. A splatter of khaki and grey-blue uniforms appeared as per usual, uniformed men thinking they're special when they're just plain stupid. More like uninformed, I always say.

The rest of us locals (mostly wool-coated women these days) had to crowd around behind them, listening to the thin excuse of a choir, a few off-key voices hazarding 'Holy, holy, holy.' The posh women of the village are upset at the choir's closing, but after a performance like that I'd rather hear a cats' chorus.

Throughout the dreary service, the dead soldier's mother snivelled into her hands, quaking under her black suit. She's pregnant again, late in life – although she's still in her late thirties. They say her nasty father forced her to marry the Brigadier when she was barely sixteen, and she's been terrorised by him ever since.

She was the only tearful one though. The rest of us weren't so blind to Edmund's brutish, arrogant ways – just like his father. I'm sure there were even a few present who felt a justified retribution at his early demise.

Hardly attempting to look sad, the two sisters, now eighteen and thirteen, sat dutifully beside their grieving mother. The older one, Venetia, with her golden hair and coquettish ways, was more interested in batting her eyelashes at that handsome new artist than in the funeral. Young Kitty, gangly as a growing fawn, glanced around like she'd seen a ghost, her pointed face like a pixie's in the purple-blue glow of the stained-glass window towering over the altar. Beside her, that foreign evacuee girl looked petrified, like she'd seen death before and a lot more besides.

The Brigadier glared on like a domineering vulture, the burnished medals and his upper-class prestige ranking him above everyone else in the church. He was rhythmically thwacking his silver-tipped horsewhip against his boot. His violent temper is legendary, and no one was going to cross him today. You see, not only had he lost his only son, he'd also lost the family fortune. The Chilbury Manor estate must go to a male heir, and Edmund's death has plunged the family into turmoil. The Brigadier would be branded a fool if the family fortune was lost under his watch. But I know his type. He won't take this lying down.

After the gruelling service, we grabbed our gas mask boxes and traipsed gloomily through horizontal daggers of icy rain up to Chilbury Manor, a Georgian monstrosity that some past Winthrop brutally erected.

I puffed up the steps to the big door, hoping for a glass of something and a big comfy sofa, but the place was already crammed with damp-smelling mourners and wet umbrellas. It was noisy as King's Cross, what with the marbled galleried hallway echoing with ladies' heels and noisy chatter. The Winthrops are an old, wealthy family, and the locals are scavenging toads, all hanging around in case they can get their grubby hands on some of the spoils.

And me? I already have my hand in their pocket, and that makes it my business to keep track of events around here. You see, the Brigadier has already been paying me to keep my mouth shut about his affairs, including that unwanted pregnancy last year, and his nasty son spreading disease around this village faster than you can say 'the clap'. This war means opportunity for me. Any midwife worth her salt must realise the potential such a situation can bring, especially with the likes of these smutty gentry who think they're beyond reproach. They're easy prey for extortion – twenty here, forty there. It all adds up.

As I entered, my eyes caught a pretty twist of a maid, standing on the stairs to avoid the rush, a tray of sherry glasses balanced on one hand, her long neck elegant but her mouth sour as curd. She came to me with gonorrhoea she'd got from Cmdr Edmund last year, just like half the bleeding village. She told me he'd promised to marry her, promised her money, freedom, love, and then he'd vanished into the Navy as soon as war broke out. I felt sorry for her,

so I told her about his other women – the previous maid, the gardener's wife, the Vicar's daughter – all with the same condition. I treated them all, and Edmund too, the disgusting beast. Elsie was the maid's name. I think she was a bit unsettled that I told her everyone's secrets, worried about her own, no doubt. But I told her it was because we were friends, her and I.

I smiled at her in a conspiratorial way, and took a glass of sherry from her tray. You never know when these people could come in handy.

I joined the condolence line behind gloomy Mrs Tilling, nurse, choir member, and deplorable do-gooder. 'He will always be remembered a hero,' she was saying with immense feeling. She is so excruciatingly well-meaning it makes me want to plunge her long face into a barrel of ale to perk her up.

'Never should have happened,' snapped Mrs B, another member of the choir, all upright with traditional upper-class fervour, the insufferable next to the insupportable. Her full name is Mrs Brampton-Boyd, and it exasperates her that everyone calls her Mrs B.

As I came to the front, Mrs Tilling sucked her cheeks in with annoyance. She's never approved of me. I've stepped into her nursing territory, become too close to her village community. She may also have heard about some of my less orthodox practices. Or the payoffs.

'It's so terribly tragic,' I said in my best voice. 'He was taken so young.' Planting a closed-lipped smile on my face, I swiftly moved away to the side, standing alone, people glancing over from time to time to wonder what business I had there.

Just as I was thinking of opening a few doors and having a little nosy around, a hunched goblin of a butler directed me into the drawing room, where I was rather hoping to partake of some upper-class funeral fare but found myself alone in the big, still room.

The distant clang of someone banging out the *Moonlight Sonata* on a piano clunked uneasily around the ornate ceiling as I ran my fingers over the crusted gold brocade couch. Then I picked up a bronze sculpture of a naked Greek, heavy in my fist like a lethal weapon. The opulence of the room was dazzling, with the floor-length blue silk drapes, the majestic portraits of repulsive forebears, the porcelain statues, the antiquity, the inequity.

I couldn't help thinking that if I had that sort of cash I'd do a much better job, cheery the place up a bit. It smelt like death, as old as the dead men on the walls, as fusty as the eyes of the disembodied deer watching from the oak-panelled wall, the settle of dust and ashes. I was reminded of the last war, the Great War, when all the money in the world couldn't buy an escape from mortality. It was the one great leveller. Funny how things went back to normal again so quick – the rich in charge, us struggling below.

I pulled out my packet of fags and lit one, the sinewy smoke meandering into the drapes, making itself at home.

A gruff voice came from behind. 'May I have a word?' A hand grasped my elbow, and before I knew it I was being pulled to a door at the back of the room. I turned to see the Brigadier, purple veins livid on his temples – he must have been at the Scotch late last night. He shoved me into a study, thick with male undercurrent, lots of leather chairs

and piles of papers and files. The tang of cigars mingled unpleasantly with the dead-dog smell of rank breath.

As he twisted the key in the lock behind him, I knew this was going to mean money.

'I'm sorry for your loss,' I said, surveying the surroundings, trying to cover up any trepidation. The Brigadier's a bigwig, an overpowering presence, officious and rude and unlikeable, yet powerful and ruthless. He's one of the old types, the ones who think the upper class can still bluster their way through everything. The ones who think they can boss the rest of us around and act like they own the country.

'I knew you'd come,' he muttered in an irritated way, his voice slurring from drink. 'Which is why I had Proggett put you in the back drawing room. I have a service for you to perform. Time is of the essence.' He sat down behind his vast desk, all businesslike, leaving me standing on the other side, the servant awaiting instruction. I considered pulling over a chair, but fancied this act of rebellion might lose me a few bob, so I just plonked my black bag on the floor and waited.

'Before I begin, I must know I have your full confidence,' he said, narrowing his eyes as if this were an official war deal, when I knew outright it was going to be nothing of the sort.

'Of course you have it, like you always do,' I lied, glowering at him for even doubting my integrity. He didn't scare me with his upper-class military ways. 'I'm a professional, Brigadier. If that's what you mean? I'm never surprised by what is asked of me. And I always keep my mouth shut.'

'I need a job done,' he said brusquely. 'I've heard you're willing to go beyond the usual services?'

'That depends on what the service in question is,' I said. 'And how much I'll be paid.'

A gleam came to his eye, and he sat up. I was speaking the language he wanted to hear – more interested in the money than the nature of the deed. 'A lot of money could be yours.'

'What exactly do you have in mind?'

By now I'd guessed he was about to come out with something big, something that would line my pockets well and good. My bet would have been another affair gone wrong (perhaps a high-profile woman involved, maybe someone from the village), so *shocked* doesn't describe how I felt when he came out with it.

'Our baby must be a boy.'

There was a pause as I wondered what he meant. He took in my reaction, his eyes scrutinising me, debating whether I had the requisite bravery, deceit, greed.

'Ours is not the only birth to happen in the village this spring,' he continued, acting like he was giving complex orders on the front line. 'And ours must be a boy. If there were a way to ensure that this might be the case—'

The penny dropped. It was outrageous. He wanted me to swap his baby with a baby boy from the village, if his was a girl. I sucked in my lips, working hard to keep the ruddy great smile off my face. I'd take him to the bank for this! But I had to keep calm. Play it for all it was worth.

'I think it would be a tremendous risk, as well as an immense personal compromise,' I clipped.

He leant forward, dropping his façade for a moment, his eyeballs shooting out, bloody and globular. 'But could it be done?'

'Possibly,' I said elusively. But I knew I could do it. I have a vicious herbal potion that induces babies to come forth very promptly, and the village is small, you can get from one house to another in minutes.

'Anyone who could help that to occur would certainly be well compensated,' he said evenly, his fingers toying with his moustache as if it were a battlefield conundrum.

'How well?'

There was a scuffle from outside the door that made him pull back. 'We can discuss that at another time and place.' He stood up and went to the window. There was a French door that overlooked a muddle of fields and valleys down to the English Channel, grey and churning like dirty dishwater.

'We'll meet the Thursday after next at ten in the outhouse in Peasepotter Wood,' he said in a low voice.

'I'll be there,' I whispered.

'You may leave now,' he added. Then his head shot round and his eyes dug into me with threatening revulsion. 'And mention this to no one.'

Only too happy to get away, I spun round and bolted for the door, fiddling with the key in the lock and then closing the door gently behind me, before sallying out into the thronging hall. My stride widened as I swooped in and out of the black-clad mourners, the uniforms, the nosy neighbours. I marched straight out of the front door without so much as bye your leave. People were still arriving in the expansive driveway, so I had to refrain from skipping for joy as I trotted briskly back to the village.

Once I was at my drab little home, I gave a well-earned cheer, throwing my arms up into the air and laughing with utter delight. This is going to work.

I'll show you that you can forgive me for what happened with Bill, and for taking the money when we ran off. How was I to know he'd grab the cash and vanish as soon as he could?

We can be happy again, you and me, like when we were young. Funny, you never think how lucky you are until it's all whisked away, first Mum dying, then staying with disgusting Uncle Cyril when Dad was in jail, shut in his attic like slaves. But enough of that. We'll put the past behind us, Clara.

It's time to gird our loins. There are two other women in the village who are expecting around the same time as Mrs Winthrop. Droopy Mrs Dawkins from the farm is on her fourth, so that should be simple. Less easy would be the goody-two-shoes school teacher Hattie Lovell, whose husband is away at sea. Hattie is chummy with that niggling nurse, Mrs Tilling, who's done the midwifery course and sees fit to poke her nose into my birthing business. Every time I go round to Hattie's, she's there, hanging around like a superior matron, saying she's going to be midwife at the birth. She doesn't understand. This village is only big enough for one midwife.

I'll write again after the meeting with the Brigadier. Who would have known such an upper-class gentleman could stoop so low? I'm going to tap him for the biggest money he's ever known. I won't let you down this time, Clara. You'll get the money I owe you, I swear.

Edwina