THE GOOD PILOT
PETER WOODHOUSE

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A Wartime Romance

Polygon

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THIS BOOK IS FOR

Michael and Angela Clarke

ONE
TINNED PEACHES

❖ 1 ❖

The farmer taught her to avoid blisters by spitting on her hands.

He looked at her in that sideways manner of his, and she noticed that his nose had veins just visible under the skin, forked and meandering, like tiny rivulets marked on a map. She knew that she should not stare at his nose; she had been taught by her aunt that she should never pay attention to any obvious physical feature. *People come in different shapes and sizes*, Annie said. *Don't make it awkward for them.*

She wrested her gaze away from the farmer's nose and looked into his eyes, wondering what age he was. She was nineteen – twenty in a couple of months – and it was still difficult for her to judge the age of those even a decade older than she was. He was in his late fifties somewhere, she thought. His eyes, she noticed, were grey, and clear too; they were those of one who was used to the open, to wind and weather, to open spaces. They were a countryman's eyes, accustomed to looking at things that were really important: sheep, cattle, the ploughed earth – things that a farmer saw, and understood. She spotted these things; she may not have had much formal education – she had left school at sixteen, as many did – but she saw things that other people failed to see, and she understood them. They said at school that she could have gone much further, as she was of above average intelligence – a "thoughtful, articulate girl", the principal had written; "the sort of talent this country wastes so carelessly". University, even, had been a possibility, but there had not been much money and she had found the thought of going away was daunting.

"Spit on your hands, Val," he said. "Like this, see."

He spat on his right hand first, then the left. "Then you rub them together," he continued. "Not too much, mind, or it won't work. You try now. You show me."

She smiled, and looked down at her hands. They were already dirty from salvaging hessian sacks in one of the barns to stack them ready for use – nothing was wasted these days, old string, rusty nails, scraps of wood – everything could be put to some use. Her hands were still soft, though, and he had noticed.

"You don't mind if I call you Val?" asked the farmer. "It would be a bit of a mouthful to call you Miss . . ." He trailed away, looking momentarily embarrassed.

"Eliot. Miss Eliot. No, Val is who I am."

"And you should call me Archie. Full name Archibald, of course, but nobody ever used that – apart from my mother. Mothers usually call their sons by their proper names. I knew a lad at school who was called Skinny by everybody – he was that thin – but his mother always called him Terence." He shook his head at the memory. "Not much of a name, Terence, if you ask me. A town name, I'd say."

She laughed. "My aunt sometimes calls me Valerie. Same thing, I suppose." She paused. "So I should spit on my hands when I'm picking things?"

"Yes, if you like. But mostly when you're using a spade. The handle can be hard on your hands. I've seen young lads get blisters the size of a half-crown from spades."

She promised to be careful, and to remember to do as he said. There was so much to learn: she been on the farm for only three days, and she had already learned eighteen things.

She had written them all down in her land girl's diary, each one numbered, with its explanation written in pencil. Eighteen new pieces of information as to how to work the land; about how to be a farmer.

They had been standing in the yard, directly outside the larger of the two barns. Now the farmer suggested that if she came to the farmhouse kitchen he would make tea for both of them. She should take a break every four hours, he said. "Take fifteen minutes to get your breath back. It's more efficient that way – at least in the long run. A tired man . . . sorry, a tired girl too . . . gets less done than one who's well rested. I've always said that. I told young Phil that. He was a one for working all hours, but I told him not to."

He had mentioned Phil on the first day. He had explained that he was his nephew, the son of his older brother, who had helped him on the farm for almost a year, and had gone off to join the army two months earlier. "He saw through Hitler," he said. "Even when he was a nipper, fourteen, fifteen, he said 'Hitler's trouble'. And he was right, wasn't he? Spot on. Look where we are now. Hitler sitting in all those countries – France, Holland, them places – and if it hadn't been for the Yanks coming in we'd be on our knees, begging for mercy."

He had welcomed her, because with Phil gone he would not have been able to cope. The farm was not a large one – eighty-five acres – but it was intensively cultivated and it would have been too much for him to manage by himself. That was where the Women's Land Army came in: they said they would send him one of their land girls, and they sent her, riding on her bicycle from the village six miles away. She lived there with her aunt Annie, the local postmistress. Archie knew Annie slightly,

as the local postmistress was friendly with everybody. He must have seen Val about the place too, but had not noticed her. He did not pay much attention to women and girls; he was a shy man, who had never married, and tended to feel awkward in female company. But he liked Val; on that very first day he had decided that here was a well brought up girl who knew her manners and was not going to be afraid of hard work. She would earn her two pounds four shillings a week, he thought. It was a decent wage if you did not have to give up some of it for board and lodging – and he assumed she did not have to pay Annie for lodging, although she probably contributed something for her food. She might even be able to save – if she stayed the course, which he had a feeling she would do. If they had sent him somebody from town, it could be a very different story. He knew somebody who had been allocated a land girl from London and she barely knew that milk came from cows; there was no work in her, he had been told, just complaints about mud and requests for time off every other day. He would not have a girl like that about the place; he would refuse, and they couldn't make him take her, even with their powers to tell you to do this and that, as if the Ministry of Agriculture knew how to run a farm.

"So, Val Eliot," he said as he poured her mug of tea. "Tell me a little more about yourself. Where are your mum and dad?" He immediately regretted the question. He should not have asked her that, and he became flustered.

He was relieved that she did not seem upset. "My dad went to Australia," she said. "That was twelve years ago, when I was seven. My mum died five years ago."

Well, at least she was not an orphan; that would have made

his question all the more tactless. "I'm sorry about your mum," he said.

"My aunt is her sister," said Val. "She took me in. My dad sends money, sometimes, or did until last year, when I turned eighteen. But my aunt was all right with that. She says that my dad isn't a bad man; he's just not the sort to settle down. He moved around in Australia. He's a roofer. They have a lot of tin roofs out there." She paused. "You want to see a photograph of them? Of my mum and dad?"

He nodded, and she crossed the kitchen to the peg where he had told her she could hang the jacket and scarf she wore when cycling from the village. She took out a purse, and extracted from it a small photograph. The photograph had been posted onto card for protection.

"That's them," she said. "Before he left for Australia."

He looked at the picture of the man and woman standing outside a shop front. They were holding hands, dressed in their Sunday best, the man with one of those stiff, uncomfortable collars, the woman with a blouse that buttoned up to her neck.

"She has a kind face," he said. "I like her smile."

"My aunt says that my mum always smiled. All the time. She said that even when she felt low about something, she still smiled."

"That's the attitude," said Archie. "No use being down in the dumps. That never makes anything any easier."

"I think that too," she said.

Archie looked at her with admiration. If he had ever had a daughter, she would be something like this girl, he thought. That fellow who went off to Australia – he didn't deserve a daughter like this.

She was still working at six, when Archie told her she could stop.

"You should be getting home now," he said. "Lots of light still, but you'll be needing your tea."

She stood up, brushing the earth from her fingers. She had been weeding a line of cabbages and her knees and her back were sore from the bending.

"I don't have a watch," she said. "It broke."

He smiled. "No need for watches on a farm. There's the sun. It comes up and you know that's morning. Goes down and you know it's night. Simple, really."

He walked back with her towards the farmhouse. While she collected her scarf and coat, he made his way into a shed and emerged with a basket.

"I've got three eggs here for you," he said. "Fresh today. The hens are laying well. I think they like you."

She had fed the hens that morning and they had pecked and fluttered about her feet, desperate for the grain; silly creatures, she thought, with their fussing and clucking about nothing very much. Now she peered into the basket; he had wrapped each egg in a twist of newspaper, but she could see they were of a generous size. The ration was one egg a week for each person, and here were three.

"You're very kind," she said, taking the basket. "I'll bring the basket back tomorrow."

He nodded. "You say hello to your aunt from me."

"I shall."

"And ride carefully down that lane. Those trucks from the base sometimes come this way and they don't know how to drive, half of them."

"I'll be careful."

It took her forty minutes to reach the village. There were no cars – not a single one – and no trucks. This was deep England, far away from any big town, a self-contained world of secret, hedge-marked fields and short distances. Wheeling her bicycle into the back yard, she leaned it against the wall of the shed. Then she went inside, the eggs her trophy, proudly held before her.

Annie kissed her. "Clever girl," she said. "You must be working hard for him to treat you to those."

"He's a kind man, Auntie."

Annie agreed. "Everyone speaks highly of Archie Wilkinson." She began to unwrap the eggs. "They say he wanted to get married but never did. Too much work to do. Never got away from that farm of his." She paused. "It could still happen, of course. But look at these eggs: lovely brown shells. Look."

Val examined one of the eggs. "Made so perfectly, aren't they? So smooth."

"One each," said Annie. "Coddled? A coddled egg is hard to beat."

Val nodded. "Is Willy in yet?"

Willy was a relative – a distant connection by marriage – who had been staying with Annie for the last year. He was working on the land, too, although the farm to which he had been sent, a farm that belonged to a man called Ted Butters, was further away, and by all accounts very different from Archie's place. Not that they heard much about it from Willy, who was not very bright and forgot things easily. He was two years older than Val and had never been able to have a proper job. He had come to live with Annie when he had been sent to work on the farm, which was more or less all he could do.

"There's no danger of the army coming for Willy," Annie had observed. "Poor boy, but at least he's not going to have to put on a uniform. He'd never cope with army life."

Val got on well with Willy – it would be hard not to. She liked his openness, and his innocent, generous smile. "He's very gentle," she said to a friend who enquired about the rather ungainly young man she had seen coming out of the post office. "Willy wouldn't hurt a fly. But there's not much he can do really. He can pick potatoes and things like that, and precious little else."

Now Annie said, "Willy will like this egg. He loves eggs, doesn't he? I bet that farmer up there will not be giving him much. Mean piece of work."

Half an hour later they sat down at the kitchen table. Annie served the coddled eggs with pieces of bread on which she had scraped a thin layer of dripping.

"This is a real feast," said Val.

Willy beamed with pleasure. "I like eggs," he said. "Always have."

Val washed up, with the wireless on in the background. She listened to the announcer with his grave, clipped voice. Bad news given in measured tones could even sound reassuring. Willy, of course, only half grasped what was happening. "The desert's very dry," he remarked. "Where do they get the water for the tanks?"

"Oases," said Annie. It suddenly occurred to her that he might be thinking of water tanks, rather than armoured tanks. "But don't you worry about that, Willy."

"That's where camels go," he said. "That's so, isn't it? Them oases have wells and palm trees that give you those things, those nuts."

"Dates," said Val.

"The Americans are here, anyway," said Willy. "I saw some. Big fellows. They had one of those jeeps."

Val gazed out of the window. She did not mind the fact that her life was like this, with not very much going on; with Willy saying these odd, unconnected things, and her aunt with her knitting; but sometimes you wondered – you could not help yourself – you wondered whether it would be like this forever.

❖ 2 ❖

Ted Butters' farm, where Willy was now working, was large enough to be quite profitable, but was badly run. Ted was a mean-spirited man, and lazy too. A glance at a farmer's fields will tell you all you need to know about his character: a well-kept farm, with fences in good order and well-cared-for livestock, is a sign of a hard-working farmer who understands the notion of stewardship. Badly drained fields, rank grazing land on which weeds have gained the upper hand, a farmyard littered with malfunctioning machinery; these all betray the presence of a farmer who has given up, or who drinks, or who simply does not know what he is doing. People knew what Ted Butters was like, and it was only a matter of time, some thought, before he was dealt with by the local War Agricultural Executive Committee. It would sort him out, they said; it would put him off the land and let somebody else take over.

The committees had been given wide powers. They could order unproductive land to be ploughed up; they could tell farmers what crops to grow; and, if defied or disobeyed, they could order the offender to quit his farm. Such powers were justified by the emergency of the moment: the country needed food, and every square inch of ground would have to be used – and used well – if the land were to yield crops to its capacity. Nobody could argue with that.

Ted Butters was exactly the sort of farmer who might be expected to fall foul of the local War Ag committee. And he would have done so, were it not for the fact that in spite of his sloppiness and the dereliction of his land, he managed –

against all the odds – to produce good harvests. And perhaps even more important, there was something between him and the chairman of the committee. The chairman would listen to rumblings about Ted but would never comment on what he heard. Nor would he act. "Ted has something over him," people whispered. "He owes Ted money, I shouldn't wonder."

"Unfair, isn't it? Others get booted out of their farms and Ted gets away with it."

"One of these days they'll catch up with him, so they will."

"Don't hold your breath."

The worst consequence of Ted Butters' negligence was the state of his livestock. His farm was mostly arable land, but he kept a few animals because his father had always kept them and Ted could not be bothered to do anything differently from his father. These animals included two cows, a flock of just under thirty sheep, and two dogs.

"You any good with animals?" Ted asked Willy when he first arrived, brought to the farm by a Ministry of Agriculture official. The official remained silent; he was watching. He had not thought that Willy would be up to this job, but he had been overruled.

Willy nodded enthusiastically. "God loves them," he said.

Ted looked at him. "Cows? You know how to milk a cow?"

Again, Willy nodded. "You pull . . . you pull those things. The milk comes out. It goes into the bucket."

"Bright lad this," whispered the official.

Ted had accepted him grudgingly, but he had his suspicions. "You'd think they'd send me a couple of those girls," he remarked. "Those land girls. Do they send them my way? None of it. I get the dolt. Maybe he's somebody's eyes and ears – who knows?"

Willy was keen. He was taught to milk the cows and gradually mastered the technique. He was good at muck-spreading – pitching the manure from the cart over the fields, spreading it with his fork, indifferent to the stench.

"That stuff's good for plants," he said to Annie. "They grow like crazy."

"I can imagine it, Willy," said Annie. "You're learning so much, aren't you?"

"Could be," said Willy.

Willy was in charge of bringing the cows in for milking but did not have much to do with the sheep because the sheepdog would not listen to him if he tried to give commands.

"The dog senses that he doesn't know what he's doing," confided the farmer when the committee came to inspect the farm.

"You're doing a good deed, keeping that boy," said the chairman.

Ted shrugged. He had regarded Willy as a nuisance, but now he was satisfied that the young man was harmless – and was useful enough, in his way. "He doesn't seem to know very much," he said. "But he knows how to pull weeds and he's handy enough with a bale of hay. Can't complain, I suppose, though some places have got three, even four, land girls. Why not me? The government think there's something wrong with me?"

Willy noticed things. For all that his conversation followed its own idiosyncratic path, for all that he would turn away in the middle of an exchange and start doing something else, he could see what was going on. He noticed the occasional

visits of the two men who drove up to the farm in a small green van, loaded boxes, and then drove away again without going into the farmhouse. He knew that the boxes contained chickens that Ted had slaughtered in one of the barns amidst great squawking and clouds of feathers. He knew that meat was precious and that you could not buy chickens off the ration. But the farmer had said to him, right at the beginning, "Anything you see around here, my boy, you keep to yourself, understand? No poking your nose into things that don't concern you." And had accompanied this with a gesture that Willy correctly interpreted as somehow threatening him, a ringing motion, as if he were strangling a chicken.

Ted need not have worried about Willy's reporting anything of that; the young man was not interested in such matters. But what did interest him was the condition of the animals, even if he had no idea that anything could be done about it. He noticed that the cows were lame; somebody had explained to him that hooves needed to be trimmed and if this were not done regularly, could be painful for the animal. He pointed this out to Ted, who was indifferent. "They can walk, can't they? Nothing wrong with those cows."

Willy was responsible for the feeding of the two sheepdogs, Border collies, who were housed in a small shed at the back of the barn. These dogs were mother and son, Willy having put the mother to a dog owned by another farmer down in Somerset. He had done so to sell the puppies, of which there were four; good prices would be paid for a good-looking sheepdog, and he disposed of three of them within a few hours at the local market. He kept the fourth, because the mother was getting on and he would need a dog to train up to take her place.

Willy wondered why the dogs got no meat, but were given a plain porridge topped up with a few unidentifiable kitchen scraps. It was the sort of food one gave to pigs, he thought, rather than dogs. Why not give the dogs rabbit? There were enough of those on the farm and Ted could easily shoot a few for the dogs' pot. It was unkind, he thought, to deny a dog meat and to keep it tethered for days on end, as Ted did, in that darkened shed.

The dogs liked Willy and whimpered as he bent down to stroke them.

"You poor fellows," he said, allowing them to lick him on the arms, on the face. "Someday things will get better for you. When the war's over, maybe. Maybe then."

He watched Ted as he tried to train the younger dog. He used a stick, a branch he cut from the patch of willows near his pond, and he wielded this with a vicious determination. He beat the mother dog too, who cowered when he approached, scraping the ground with her belly, rolling over in the classic canine pose of submission, her legs cycling in the air as if to defend herself from impending blows.

"Bite him, bite him," muttered Willy under his breath.

He told Annie about this. "Ted Butters beats the dogs," he said.

She raised an eyebrow. "Oh yes? When they do something wrong?"

Willy shook his head. "Just for being dogs. He beats them because they're dogs."

Annie looked at him. He had an odd turn of phrase, that boy, she thought; sometimes he said things that made you stop and think. "For no reason?" She shook her head. "He's not a very nice man, that Ted Butters. Never was."

"With a stick," said Willy.

Annie sighed. It was too small a wrong to make a fuss about, and nobody would interfere with the way a farmer treated his dogs. For most people, that was the farmer's business. "Lots of people are unkind to dogs, Willy." She paused. "He doesn't lay a finger on you, does he?" You had to be careful; Willy was not much more than a boy, really, and there were some men who had to be watched when it came to boys.

Willy looked at her blankly. "Me?"

"He doesn't beat you? Or anything?"

He laughed. "No, I said that he beats the dogs, not me. He beats them."

Val had overheard this conversation. She had been sitting in a corner of the kitchen with a magazine. There was very little to read, because of the paper shortages, but she had obtained this from a friend on the promise that she would give it back. It had pictures of the king and queen inspecting a house that had been bombed. They were not worried about bombs, said the report. They carried on with their duties in spite of everything that Hitler could throw at them.

She looked up. "I hate people who mistreat dogs," she said. "That man . . ."

"They should run away," said Willy. "Dogs can run away, I think."

Val turned a page of the magazine. 'Sometimes they do," she said.

Willy was watching her. He knew that Val would be kind to dogs. They would love her, those dogs at the farm; they would lick her just as they licked him. They would appreciate somebody like Val.