The Magic Hour

Charlotte Bingham

Part One
THE PAST THAT WILL NOT GO AWAY

England Before World War II

A Mess of Pottage

Betty Stamford was a tall, big-boned woman with tightly knotted grey hair and an expression of unremitting sobriety, as befitted a widow of some long standing. Just at this moment her expression was unusually severe, even for her, which was hardly surprising, since her only son John had recently informed her that he was marrying a London girl. No matter what the girl's social standing, this news had come as a rude shock to John's mother, for in common with their country neighbours, the Stamfords regarded London at best as a foreign city, at worst as a centre of all that was bad in English Society.

To any other family perhaps, Laura Anne Millington might have seemed a catch, but to Betty Stamford, her future mother-in-law, Laura seemed flighty, suspiciously patrician, and not likely to take to the country life that the farming Stamfords all knew and loved.

'My dear, such a day! So wonderful for you!'

Betty's best friend Janet Priddy beamed at her over the top of her rose-patterned teacup. Betty nodded automatically, something that she found she had taken to doing all too often since the Millingtons had posted the announcement of Laura's engagement to her John in the Daily Telegraph.

'What a joy a son is to be sure, for you will have nothing to do with the wedding arrangements, it will all be up to the bride's side, and so all that has to be done is to sit back and buy a hat.'

'The reception is to be at her brother's house at Knighton Hall.'

'And a tiara will be worn, perhaps?'

This time Betty shook her head.

'No, the Millingtons have no family tiara.' Betty straightened her back. 'They are county, not aristocratic, Janet,' she reminded her friend with some asperity, and then she sighed.

What her son John, always such a sober-sides, could see in a social butterfly such as Laura Millington, she had no idea, but there it was. It must be borne.

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'Such a pretty girl, she will be sure to make a beautiful bride.'

Betty nodded yet again, and put her teacup down. No one seemed to realise that because your future daughter-in-law came from a well-to-do family that did not mean any wealth passed on to her future husband's family. Laura Millington had no dowry to speak of, and little jewellery besides, and while her future husband's family, the Stamfords, might be land rich, they were certainly not cash rich. They worked for their money, tilled the fields and harvested, and grazed their animals, and always had, and always would, please God.

'Would you like another cup of tea, Janet dear?' Betty asked her childhood friend in a flat voice.

Janet nodded, but as she dutifully handed Betty her pretty cup and saucer with its accompanying apostle teaspoon, Betty raised her eyes to hers for the first time. Janet gave a sharp intake of breath, for in Betty's eyes she saw reflected nothing except misery.

* * *

John Stamford was besotted with Laura, as well he should be. A stocky, stout young man with a florid complexion, he could hardly believe his luck when Laura Millington set her cap at him, making it quite plain that she thought he was the handsomest man who had ever come into her life, and quite the most witty. She seemed to find anything and everything that he said funny, laughing inordinately at his attempts at humour, and even extolling his seat on his horse.

'How could you?' Laura's best friend Jenny asked her. 'I mean to say, Lala, look at him, would you?'

They were both seated at the window watching the hunt meeting in front of the Stamfords' solid, square, eighteenthcentury house, observing the polished hunters, their breath steaming the air, their assorted bridles, double or single reins, snaffle or curb bits, betraying their tractability, their tightly held mouths indicating the nerves of their riders - for who knew who would come back from that day's hunting on the hard frosty ground in the English winter?

Laura stared down at her fiancé. She had become engaged to John Stamford knowing full well that she neither loved him nor saw anything remotely attractive in him. He was, to her mind, a poor sort of creature, the kind of young man who could never attract a full-blooded girl such as herself; but, as one of her aunts had told her, 'a gel must get married', and so marry him she would. She was after all twenty-two, and quite sure that she was about to gather dust on the shelf, about to become an old maid, and this despite always finishing up the last sandwich on the plate, as the old country superstition dictated.

'I just don't know how you could tell John that he looked divine on his horse. I mean, look at him!' Jenny started to shriek with laughter. 'Oh, do look!'

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Laura too started to laugh, but as she did so, her hand flew up to her mouth to stop a sudden sob as she remembered how divine Gerald Hardwick had looked on his magnificent grey hunter, how elegant his figure in his beautifully cut hunting coat, how handsome the set of his head on his slim shoulders. Her eyes filled with tears at the memory. To cover this she turned quickly away, but happily Jenny was still swaying from side to side mimicking a farmer's seat. What on earth was she doing marrying John Stamford, a thick-boned son of a country bumpkin? But it was too late now.

It was a late spring afternoon in Knightsbridge and the trees in the London parks were beginning to paint the town landscape with that fine fresh green that Londoners so enjoy to see. Ellen Millington, wife of Laura's uncle, Staunton Millington, was taking tea with Laura's former fiancé's mother, Sally Hardwick. Not a happy occasion for either of them, but something upon which Ellen, for the sake of her husband's family, had insisted, for in her view the Hardwicks could not and should not be allowed to what she called 'get away with it'.

Laura might be hitched to someone else, but nevertheless salt must be rubbed into several people's wounds or she and Staunton would not be able to retire to the South of France with clear consciences.

'Of course, Ariel did actually steal Gerald from Laura, you know that, don't you, Sally?'

'Yes, of course.'

Sally Hardwick sighed inwardly. She knew exactly why Ellen Millington had called round to take tea with her at her London house. She also knew that whatever her punishment, it must be borne, as it was thanks entirely to her son Gerald. A young man breaking off an engagement was always scandalous, but when the young man happened to be your son, the backwash was constant, and humiliating.

'So what's to be done now, do you think, Sally? After all, it is plain to see that Gerald and Ariel are about as unsuited to each other as it is possible to be. This is a right mess of pottage, to be sure, wouldn't you agree?'

'I could not but agree, Ellen, but what's to be done with the young when they are too old to tell? Gerald is a sweet-natured boy, but weak. And Ariel is such a very beautiful creature. He had his head turned by her. It does happen, you know, really it does.'

'Too feeble-minded, your generation, that's what's wrong with you, too feeble-minded. Not strict enough. If you can't tell the young when they're taking a wrong turning you will bring up a generation of weaklings, mark my words. In our day we children were never married to whomsoever we chose, our parents went to the begat book and they chose for us. They knew better than us, and we knew they knew better than us. But what can one say? With the present Prince of Wales besotted with

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an American divorcée and heaven only knows what else going on, what can one say?'

'Well, quite, I do see, and I must say Laura has behaved awfully well and now she is safely married and settled - not too much of a trial, after all.'

'Believe me, Gerald will live to rue the day,' Ellen stated with some satisfaction. 'Ariel is not steady. In fact, I would say that Ariel is a bolter if ever I saw one.'

'She has been a bit flighty in the past, but such a beauty.'

'I tell you if Tasha Millington, if Laura's sister-in-law had had her way Laura would have sued for breach of promise, but no, she was off seconds later, on the rebound as gels who have been hurt so often are; pinging off the nearest lump of beef; in this case poor John Stamford, and all of it just to show Gerald. What a catastrophe. If Gerald had not been sent to Germany on some footling mission for his regiment the moment he became engaged to Laura, and if Ariel had not been visiting some grand friends at some schloss or another, Laura and Gerald would now be happily married, with at least one brat on the way.' Ellen paused to sip her tea before resuming. 'But as it is she has settled for marrying down, and doubtless is generally making a hash of everything. Laura will not be suited to country life,' she went on relentlessly. 'A large working farmhouse is not the kind of house that will satisfy a gel like Laura. She will be forever standing in the milking sheds with the cows because the dairy maid is off; but there you are, it's all spilt milk now - and bite on the bullet she must.'

Sally found herself frowning vaguely at nothing much, probably because she was becoming a little confused with all the talk of milk and bullets.

'At least Laura is married, Ellen. That at least is something.'

'Exactly. And when all is said and done both Ariel and Laura have made their beds and now they must lie in them, and that's all there is to it.'

'Yes, of course, quite right. That is all there is to it.'

Laura looked over at her new husband. Her honeymoon had been bad enough, and it was no good anyone saying that shutting your eyes and thinking of England took your mind off being made love to by an oaf, because it jolly well didn't, and now she was about to give birth she regretted the honeymoon even more. What had she been thinking marrying John Stamford? But too late now to think. She gave a sudden gasp.

John watched his beautiful young wife disappearing through the bedroom door out onto the landing, prior to trying to find her way down the dark corridor to their only bathroom.

'Why are you going to the bathroom, my love?'

'Because I'm having a baby, that's why, John. Why do you think?'

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Laura was gone before John's next thought, which, not unlike the sturdy steam engine that chugged into Knighton station, gradually did the same into John's head. Could it be, might it be, that Laura, his wife, Laura, was giving birth? He sat up straight in his bed. Laura was calving! He stepped out of the old oak bedstead and tripped down the corridor to his mother's room.

'Mother? Mother? Laura's having the baby. In the bathroom. I think she's calving in the bathroom.'

Gerald Hardwick allowed his best man to smooth down the back of his morning coat, and smiled at himself in his dressing mirror as he did so. His wedding day had been a long time coming, but at last it seemed it was here and he was greatly looking forward to it.

'You're better than a valet, you know that, Eddie?' he murmured to Edward Foster, and his bright blue eyes reflected his satisfaction with his handsome appearance as his old friend's long-fingered hands anxiously smoothed his beautifully tailored morning coat.

Gerald had to feel pleased with himself. He was tall and handsome, and he was marrying Ariel, who was not only beautiful, but so fascinating that he couldn't wait for the whole wedding fandango to be over, and for them to be alone.

'I'm afraid that was really rather a quiet do for a stag night, Edward,' he went on. 'But you know how it is, I did promise Ariel that I would not fetch up on my wedding day as so many bridegrooms do, hung, drawn and quartered from the night before, as it were.'

Edward nodded, checking his immaculate appearance yet again in the mirror. He really did not mind not having a hangover, and they had enjoyed a jolly good dinner at the Savoy with some fine wines, which now seemed just the job.

Edward and Gerald had been through school together, done National Service with the same regiment, and were now well set up as stockbrokers in the City having fun with their relatives' not inconsiderable fortunes. Not content with that, both young men had become engaged at the same time - although Gerald did have to go through the small matter of getting un-engaged to Laura before becoming engaged to Ariel. That had been a bit of a messy business, until you met Ariel, and then you understood, because Ariel was an absolute cracker. Not Edward's sort, actually, because he himself could never even begin to manage such a spirited girl as Ariel. Too much to handle for a simple chap like himself. You needed to have a real way with women, such as Gerald undoubtedly had, to have the slightest chance with someone like Ariel.

'Come on, time to face the firing squad.'

Gerald turned reluctantly from his satisfyingly handsome image and smiled at his old friend.

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'I think I can hear the wedding bells of St Mary's, Eddie, calling me to my beauteous bride.'

Edward stepped back from the bridegroom, admiring his appearance. Gerald really did look every inch the eager groom.

'Time for the off, Gerald, time for the off. You know weddings always remind me of my confirmation, all that preparation and then everything seems to tear past one.'

The two young men made a handsome sight, and of course they knew it, as they made their way down the steep London staircase of the tall Knightsbridge house. It was as they were passing the first-floor drawing-room door that Gerald paused on the stairs, and reversed back up the last two he had just taken, while glancing at his wristwatch.

'I say, let's have a glass of champagne for the road, Eddie, shall we? Just the one. After all, you deserve it, and I'm damned sure I need it. Besides, we can drink to the old days, to the days of our youth, which are about to end. What do you say?'

Edward glanced at his watch. It was true, they were early, and St Mary's was only a step after all, only a step or two away.

'These are the only drinks I really enjoy, do you know that, dear boy?' Gerald mused as he lifted a champagne glass to his lips. 'Drinks with one's best friends, they're the best.' He opened a silver box and offered Edward a cigarette.

There was a short silence as both men drank and smoked in appreciative silence, a silence finally and annoyingly broken by the sound of the front-door bell.

'What the hell is that? You don't think Ariel's backed out on me, do you?' Gerald lifted one eyebrow at Edward. 'See who it is, dear boy, can't speak to the grocer or whoever, really I can't, spoils the moment.'

Edward leaned over the side of the banisters, halfway down the stairs, and peered at the top of the glass door.

'Looks like someone in uniform,' he called back to Gerald. 'I don't like it at all. Don't like people in uniform, not unless it's someone from one's own regiment,' he joked.

'If it's the police tell them they can't arrest me until after my honeymoon,' Gerald replied.

'No, it's not the police, I think it's a boy with a telegram,' Edward shouted up to his old friend as he took the small envelope from the nattily dressed boy and opened the front door.

'Thank you, sir.'

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The boy saluted smartly and jumping on his bike he bicycled off, disdaining the use of his saddle, his bottom staying high above it, the sunshine glancing off the metal of his handlebars.XX

Edward glanced at the addressee on the envelope.

'Captain Gerald Hardwick. It's obviously a congratters telegram for you, old thing.'

He smiled and handed it over to Gerald to open, picking up his drink and happily finishing it off, as Gerald stubbed out his cigarette and picking up a paper knife from the table slit open the envelope.

'I hate this tradition that's growing up of sending one rude messages on one's wedding day,' he confessed. 'And then all that reading them out at receptions . . .'

'It does seem a ghastly waste of time, time better spent in swigging the in-laws' champagne, I would have thought,' Edward agreed.

He looked over to Gerald who was frowning.

'Anything the matter, Gerry?'

Gerald held up a hand.

'Got to read this again.'

'Some people's jokes one just doesn't get first time, does one?'

'No, this is not a joke, Edward. At least if it is, which it can't be, it's a pretty poor one.'

'Well, go on, try it out on me, I might get it, you never know.'

Gerald shook his head, speechless, and sat down suddenly on the velvet-covered chair behind him.

'It's Laura.'

'A telegram from Laura? I say, that's pretty decent of her - considering.'

'No, no, it's not from Laura, it's about Laura.'

Edward suddenly noticed that Gerald was a great deal paler, and he was yet again reaching into the pocket of his waistcoat and taking out his slim silver cigarette case, from which he proceeded delicately to extract one of his special mix of Fox's cigarettes and slowly light one with a shaking hand.

'It's from her brother, from Jamie Millington. It seems Laura died in childbirth - this morning.'

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'I say, a bit much telling you now - doesn't he know you're getting hitched today?'

Gerald stared from the telegram to Edward's appalled face and then down at the telegram again.

'Yes, I think he does, Edward. I think he must know that all too well.'

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