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The Penny Bangle

Written by Margaret James

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The Penny Bangle

Margaret James

The final novel in the trilogy:
The Silver Locket
The Golden Chain
The Penny Bangle

Extract

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Chapter 1

January 1942

'Miss, you've dropped your knickers!'

'He means you, love,' said a middle-aged woman, tapping Cassie Taylor on the shoulder and glancing back towards the ticket office.

Cassie turned to see an army corporal in crumpled, grubby khaki grinning and pointing at the station platform. She realised her granny's ancient shopping bag had split, all her bits of underwear were poking out of it, and her most disreputable pair of lock-knit drawers were lying on the dirty paving slabs of Birmingham's New Street station.

Red-faced, she scooped her knickers up, shoved them in the pocket of her coat, and trudged off down the platform to her train. She wished she had a proper suitcase, even a second-hand cardboard one would do, even if she'd had to tie it together with bits of string.

But of course there was a war on, and so you couldn't get anything you needed, unless you were a tart or knew a spiv. If being hard up and looking like a rag bag were both virtues, like Father Riley reckoned, when the bomb that had her name on knocked her on the head, she would be going straight to heaven.

Or maybe not. She'd have sold her soul for a decent pair of fully-fashioned stockings. These cheap cotton horrors, which were all she could afford, sagged and bagged around her knees and ankles, and made her look grotesque.

'Come on, you lot, make your mind up, are you getting on or not?' the guard demanded, as Cassie pushed her way past married couples frantically embracing, soldiers kissing girls goodbye, and fat old mothers saying fond farewells to lanky sons.

'You just hang on a moment!' She gave the guard a cheeky grin, and then she glanced behind to make quite sure she hadn't left any more underwear lying around on Platform 4. After all, she thought, I can't afford to lose my winter vests.

Jerking open a compartment door, she climbed into the carriage.

The train was full. She couldn't get a seat. They'd all been nabbed by servicemen, and nobody stood up for women these days, unless they wore fur coats and looked like film stars, and Cassie knew she didn't look like a film star, that's if you weren't counting Jackie Coogan in *The Kid*.

The journey took all day, stopping and starting, hanging around in sidings to let the troop trains through, and there was no heating and no refreshment carriage, not that she had any money to buy refreshments, anyway. She'd eaten her packed lunch of brawn and mustard sandwiches and drunk her bottle of Tizer soon after they'd left Cheltenham, and now she was starving.

'Do you fancy a cheese and pickle sandwich, love?' A woman who'd been standing next to Cassie since Devizes offered her a greasy paper bag. 'Go on, my darling, take one,' she said kindly. 'Take a couple, eh? You look like you could do with building up.'

'Thank you.' Cassie smiled and took a sandwich, biting into it with hungry relish.

'Where are you going, then?' the woman asked.

'Dorset,' Cassie told her though a mouthful of hard cheese.

'Ooh, it's pretty, Dorset. I've got relatives in Bridport, and my mother came from Portland. There's a lovely beach at Weymouth, too.' The woman glanced at Cassie's well-stuffed shopping bag, and grinned. 'But most folks don't choose January to take a little holiday at the seaside.'

‘I don’t suppose they do.’ Cassie leaned against the window, chewing her cheese sandwich and gazing at the frozen winter landscape flashing by.

This might be her first trip to the seaside, she thought grimly, but it wouldn’t be a holiday. It wasn’t as if she’d wanted to leave Birmingham at all, and if certain people hadn’t carried on, then carried on some more, she’d still be there.

By the time she got to Charton Minster, a tiny station in the wilds of Dorset, she was so chilled she couldn’t feel her feet, and both her hands were purple-blue with cold.

She knew she shouldn’t have listened to her granny, who’d blethered on about Cassie being her only flesh and blood, about how if she stayed in Birmingham and working in that factory, cycling home at night after her shift and getting caught in air raids, she was going to be killed.

‘I should have joined the ATS,’ she muttered crossly to herself, as she got off the train. ‘Then, I could have learned to type or cook, or I might have even driven a lorry.’

But her granny didn’t approve of women being in the army, of women wearing uniforms, of women helping shoot down German planes. Of women doing anything that God made men – and only men, apparently – to do.

So, worn down by Lily Taylor’s tears, Cassie had joined the Land Girls, even though she didn’t know a turnip from a parsnip, even though she was terrified of horses, even though she’d never seen a cow. She’d never been out of Birmingham, so she had never seen a wood or field.

At the local Labour Exchange, where they’d been holding interviews, she had fibbed her socks off. She’d told the WVS lady she was good with horses, didn’t mind getting up at crack of dawn or several hours before it, and she fancied living the healthy, outdoor life. Yes, she knew she’d earn a pittance, half what she was getting at the munitions factory. But she thought she’d like a change, she’d said. She needed some fresh air.

So now she was in the middle of nowhere, wishing she had a warmer coat – a full-length mink or sable would do nicely – and feeling sick and scared.

‘I need to get to Melbury,’ she told the elderly man who came out of a sort of wooden hut to take her ticket, and peered at her in the gathering gloom.

‘Why would you want to go to Melbury, then?’

‘I’m g-going to work there,’ Cassie told him, teeth a-chatter.

‘I don’t think so, miss.’ The ticket collector gave her a just-escaped-from-somewhere-have-you look. ‘Yes, there was a house there once, and that I’ll not deny. But it’s a ruin now. They had a fire about ten years ago. The place is falling down, and ferns grow out of it.’

‘I’m going to work for Mr and Mrs Denham,’ insisted Cassie, fighting down her panic. She rummaged in her bag. ‘I’ve got the forms they sent me from the Ministry of Labour, and a letter from Mrs Denham. Look, the address is Melbury, Charton, Dorset.’

‘Ah, then you’ll want the bailiff’s cottage, maid! Mr and Mrs Denham, they used to live in the big house at Melbury. But after it burned down, the family moved into the cottage.’

The station man grinned broadly, and then he began to pat the pockets of his jacket.

‘Let’s find a bit of paper and a pencil, and I’ll draw a map for you – show you the shortest way. There’s a road, but it’s the long way round, so you’d be best off in the lanes. But first, you come and have a cup of something nice and hot. I’ve got my can of cocoa on the stove, and there must be a couple of biscuits somewhere.’

As she sat in the ticket collector's hut, drinking bitter cocoa and eating home-made oatmeal biscuits, Cassie thawed a little. Ten minutes later, she thanked the ticket collector for his kindness, and set off through the silent, snow-bound village.

She walked along a gravelled road which soon lost all interest in being a proper road and became a narrow country lane, muddy and full of ruts. Luckily the mud had frozen hard, so she didn't keep sinking into it. Although it was only five o'clock, the moon had risen already, and was shining on the snow piled up in pillowed drifts against the banks.

As she made her way along the lane, Cassie saw the looming, shadowy outline of what looked like a castle from a book of fairy tales. It was built of pale golden stone, it had tall, twisted chimneys, fancy turrets, and its small, dark windows all glittered in the moonlight.

But afterwards, there was nothing – just hedges, trees and fields. Or anyway, she thought they must be fields. They didn't look like the parks she'd seen when she had gone on outings with her granny, with swings and ducks and flowerbeds and ponds, even though there were trees.

Later, she passed the ruins of a house, its fire-stained walls and rotting timbers pointing drearily at the winter sky, but softened by a muffling of snow. Someone should come and level it, she thought, and make use of the bricks.

She went on down the lane, following the map and hoping she was nearly there, afraid she was going to freeze to death in this white, empty wilderness.

The cottage loomed up suddenly as she came around a bend. This too looked like something from a children's picture book, one she'd had when she was five or six. Long and low, with tiny latticed windows and a mossy, gabled roof, it was the sort of place where naughty children got made into pies.

She dumped her shopping bag in the front porch, flexed her frozen fingers and, after looking in vain for any sort of bell or knocker, banged a bit too loudly on the door, which could have used a lick or two of paint.

As she was despairing of anybody being in, a tall, middle-aged woman came from round the back, carrying two white enamel buckets. Cassie took in her muddy rubber boots, her hessian apron underneath a man's old army trench-coat, and her long dark hair escaping from a tartan scarf which had worked loose.

'Mrs Denham?' Cassie asked, and wondered if this woman had a mirror.

'Yes, I'm Rose Denham.' The woman put down one bucket, and then held out her hand and smiled. 'You must be Miss Taylor,' she continued. 'Miss Sefton from the WVS said we should expect you about five o'clock today. I hope you had a pleasant journey?'

'It was all right, thanks,' said Cassie, shaking Mrs Denham's hand, and wondering why she lived in such a tiny little cottage and dressed in army trench-coats when she talked so posh?

'Come in, why don't you?' Mrs Denham added, kicking off her Wellingtons in the porch. 'I'll put the kettle on.'

The place was better once you got inside. It smelled of wood smoke, baking bread and Mansion polish.

The kitchen was very warm and welcoming, with a scrubbed pine table in the middle of the room, and a dresser full of pretty china taking up one wall. There was a smell of something cooking, too – something with a bit of meat in it, and Cassie's mouth began to water.

Mrs Denham put a big black kettle on the hob. 'Sit down by the range,' she said. 'I'll make us both some tea. There might be a bit of seed cake, too. Or there was this

morning, anyway.' She took down a cake tin, opened it and looked inside. 'Yes, there's still some left.'

Cassie sat, and soon she had her hands curled round her cup, warming them blissfully. She sipped her tea and ate her cake. Eventually, her toes and all her other frozen bits began to thaw.

She glanced at Mrs Denham, who was standing at the sink and peeling something – vegetables for supper, she supposed. Now she'd taken off her awful coat and tartan scarf, Cassie could see her new employer was a pretty woman with a slim, attractive figure and a handsome profile, too.

Cassie had never liked her own snub nose and, if she'd had a choice, she'd have had a nose like Mrs Denham's, straight and elegant above a generous, well-shaped mouth.

If she had her hair cut, Cassie thought, if she wore some lipstick, she'd be beautiful. Some pale silk stockings and some nice high heels would set her off a treat.

'I'm sorry, I'm neglecting you,' said Mrs Denham suddenly, making Cassie jump. She smiled, and Cassie noticed she had near-perfect teeth. 'Do have another piece of cake, and pour yourself more tea.'

'Thanks,' said Cassie, wondering if she was dreaming this, and if she was going to wake up at her workbench in the factory any minute now.

'This will be your room,' said Mrs Denham.

She had shown Cassie all around the ground floor of the cottage, which consisted of the homely kitchen, a small, stone-flagged scullery full of pickles and preserves, and a cosy sitting room, in which there were comfortable armchairs, a well-polished modern sideboard on which there were lots of photographs in silver frames, mostly of some glamorous blonde, and a glowing grate. There were also shelves of books and piles of magazines. The place looked like a library.

Then she'd taken Cassie up the stairs, where it was absolutely freezing, and shown her to her room.

'It's rather small, I know,' she added, as she edged round Cassie's little bed. 'But it's the warmest in the house. It's right over the kitchen, and the heat collects up here.'

I bet, thought Cassie sceptically, looking round.

The room was tiny, containing just a chest of drawers and a small iron bedstead, thankfully piled high with quilts and blankets and topped off with a fat, pink eiderdown. The ceiling sloped down at an angle almost to the floor, and there was a little dormer window.

I'll have to be careful I don't brain myself when I get out of bed, she thought, looking up to see if this room had electric light? She hadn't noticed what was in the kitchen, and wondered if they had just oil lamps, out here in the wilds?

She put her bag down on the bed and looked at Mrs Denham. 'What shall I do now?' she asked.

'I beg your pardon?' said Mrs Denham, frowning.

'Work, I mean,' said Cassie.

'Oh, we'll talk about your work this evening, when we all have supper together, shall we?' Then Mrs Denham smiled again, and Cassie saw that her grey eyes were kind. 'So which part of Birmingham do you come from?'

'Smethwick,' said Cassie shortly. 'Do you know it?'

'I'm afraid I've never been there.'

'You ain't – I mean, you haven't missed much,' said Cassie. 'It's mostly scrap-

yards, tanneries, factories and tiny little houses, and lots of them's been bombed to bits by Jerry.'

'You people from the cities are so brave,' said Mrs Denham, looking as if she meant it. 'Does your whole family live in Smethwick?'

'Just my granny, and she's all the family I've got.' Cassie shrugged her shoulders. 'She's getting on for eighty, and she says she's had her life, so she doesn't care if Hitler and his merry men go flattening all of Brum. But she wanted me to get away.'

'Mm, that's understandable, poor lady.' Mrs Denham sighed, then shook her head and flicked her long, dark hair out of her eyes. 'Well, I expect you're hungry. My husband and the boys should be in soon, and then we'll have our supper.'

'Boys?' repeated Cassie nervously, hoping Mrs Denham hadn't got half a dozen teenaged kids. Young ones she could manage, just about. All you had to do with them was cuff them round the head if they got out of line. But fourteen-year-old hooligans…

'Robert and Stephen, they're both in the army, in the Royal Dorset Regiment. At the moment, though, they're both on leave,' said Mrs Denham. 'I think I just heard someone coming in. Let's go back downstairs.'

The man downstairs was in his early twenties, Cassie guessed. Dark haired and six feet tall at least, he had to duck under the beams to walk across the kitchen.

He looked a mess, she thought. His trousers had great tears across the knees. His old tweed jacket was all frayed along the cuffs and seams. 'Mum,' he said, 'I'm starving. When will supper be?'

'In half an hour or so,' said Mrs Denham, and then she turned to Cassie. 'Robert, this is Miss Taylor. She's kindly going to help us on the farm.'

'Really?' said the man.

He looked her up and down. Quite rudely, Cassie thought, although now she noticed that his eyes were the most striking she had ever seen. They were large and dark, with long black lashes, rather like Clark Gable's, she decided – you could drown yourself in eyes like these.

'Good evening, Miss Taylor,' he managed to grunt at last.

'Hello,' said Cassie, still staring back at him.

He was quite good-looking, she supposed. Well-made, broad-shouldered, with a head of black or dark brown hair to match his equally dark eyes. Yes, he was very attractive – if you liked that sort of thing.

But, holy Mother of God, the face on him – as long as from Castle Bromwich to Halesowen! He must have lost a quid and found a farthing.

He grumbled off upstairs to change his clothes. Or that was what she thought he'd said. Just like his mother, he talked as if he was a member of the Royal Family.

But what they had to swank and be so posh about, when they lived in this tiny little house, Cassie couldn't imagine.

They heard him clunking round above them. But then he stuck his head back round the door.

Cassie glanced up. The clunking was still going on, together with a bit of cursing now.

She frowned at him, perplexed.

He came into the room and smiled in welcome, holding out his hand. 'Hello, I'm Stephen Denham,' he began. 'You must be Miss Taylor, our new land girl?'

'Yes, that's right,' said Cassie. She looked up at the ceiling once again.

'Oh, didn't Mum say?' asked Stephen, and he grinned. 'I'm sorry, there are two of us. We're twins.'

Chapter 2

Mrs Denham sent Cassie to her room to get unpacked and, as she emptied out her shopping bag, she heard the twins discussing her in the hallway at the bottom of the stairs.

'She's very skinny,' muttered one of them – she thought it was the grumpy twin. 'I reckon she's a slum kid. She looks pasty-faced and feeble. I'll bet you she'll be useless, worse than Frances, and she'll be bone idle, too.'

'Mum will fatten her up and crack the whip,' his brother told him, making Cassie shudder. Then they went into the kitchen. After she had put away her things, tidied her dark blonde hair a bit and dabbed some powder on her pasty face, Cassie went downstairs.

'This is my husband, Alex,' Mrs Denham said, smiling at a man who had grey streaks in his dark hair, and who had obviously just walked in, because he still had snowflakes on his shoulders.

'It's Miss Taylor, isn't it?' The man held out his hand, and Cassie sighed – another toff, she thought. But she took Mr Denham's hand and shook it firmly. At least he smiled nicely, and – just like his wife's – his eyes were kind.

Mrs Denham helped him take his coat off. She brushed the snow out of his hair with gentle fingers, and then she took his hands in hers and rubbed them, to warm them up again.

'How are you feeling, Alex?' she enquired, and Cassie heard concern, or it might have even been anxiety, in her voice.

'I'm fine, my dear,' said Mr Denham.

'You're better than you were this morning, then?'

'Yes, much better, thank you.'

'Good,' said Mrs Denham, but she didn't sound convinced, and Cassie wondered why.

Then they started supper, and it was a nightmare. Mrs Denham filled Cassie's plate with stew, and this was mostly orange lumps – carrots, she supposed, or maybe they were swedes or turnips, who could tell – and chunks of dark brown, chewy meat.

There was a dish of baked potatoes, and these didn't taste too bad, even though they were full of scabby bits. She couldn't eat the skin. It was too tough. She didn't know human beings could eat potato skin. At home, they gave their peelings to the scrawny chickens Mrs Gray across the road kept in her yard.

She sighed and thought how much she fancied a plate of fish and chips. A couple of bangers, or a nice pork pie.

The whole plate swam with gravy, and if there was one thing Cassie hated, it was gravy. Its slimy, greasy oiliness always made her feel like throwing up. But now she had to try to force it down. What was this disgusting greyish-yellowish-whitish stuff floating round in it, she wondered, poking at it crossly. It looked like lumps of snot.

Rose Denham saw her prodding it with her fork. 'I hope you like pearl barley,' she said briskly. 'It's nutritious and it's very filling. We use a lot of it in soups and stews.'

'Yes, it's nice,' said Cassie, feeling sick.

'You should eat your potato skin,' chimed in the grumpy twin, who was gnawing at his own and talking with his mouth full. 'It's full of vitamins. It's good for you.'

Cassie gave the grumpy twin her meanest, dirtiest look.

He responded with a sort of grin, and a comment to the effect that he supposed it could go into swill for Mr Hobson's pigs.

'Who's Mr Hobson?' Cassie asked him.

'A smallholder in Charton,' Stephen said, when Robert didn't bother to reply. 'He keeps pigs and goats and chickens, too. He and Mrs Hobson have a dozen children. The ones who live in Charton all work on the smallholding. Mr Hobson likes to get away from family life occasionally, and sometimes works for us.'

Somehow, Cassie managed to eat the horrid stew. The pudding which followed wasn't quite so vile. Jam roll boiled in a linen cloth, red and white and served with yellow custard, it didn't look particularly inviting, but didn't taste too bad.

She'd have loved a square or two of Cadbury's Dairy Milk, the chocolate which her granny had always bought her on her birthday when she was a child.

'Rob and I going out tonight, Miss Taylor. Do you want to come?' asked Stephen, as she worried a back tooth with her tongue, attempting to dislodge a shred of meat.

'Where are you going?' Cassie asked him.

'Stephen, darling, give the girl a chance to settle down.' Mrs Denham gathered up the dishes and took them over to the Belfast sink.

'But she'll need to get to know her way around the district,' Stephen told his mother. 'You can't send her out tomorrow morning and assume she'll find the stables and the paddock and the road into the village by herself.'

'I suppose not.' Mrs Denham shrugged. 'But please wash the dishes before you do go out, and you must wrap up warm. It's freezing hard again tonight. I've never known a January like it. There's snow six inches deep in the top field. You'd think we were on Dartmoor, not in Dorset.'

Robert stood up and slouched towards the sink. He picked up the black kettle, poured hot water into the bowl of dishes, added a lump of soda from a jar and started scrubbing energetically.

Cassie took a tea-towel from the range. She dried the plates and dishes, and then the other twin put them away, making up for his brother's silence with a stream of chatter.

'Why did you choose to come to Dorset?' Stephen asked, as he stacked the plates in wooden racks.

'I didn't choose,' said Cassie grimly. 'I told the recruiting office woman I'd go anywhere.' She shrugged. 'My granny was going on at me to leave the factory, and to get out of Brum. So I took the first job they offered me.'

'You've worked on farms before, though, haven't you?'

'No,' admitted Cassie.

'In a market garden, then?' asked Stephen.

'What's one of them when it's at home?'

'We asked for someone with experience.' Mrs Denham frowned. 'Miss Taylor, what exactly – '

'I had to get out of Smethwick, Mrs Denham!' Cassie met Rose Denham's gaze, and reddened. 'All right, I admit it. I don't know the first thing about farming. But I'll be quick to learn, I promise you. I do know how to work. I've spent the past two years in factories, doing twelve hour shifts, filling shells and making bits of aeroplanes and tanks. You'll get your money's worth.'

'My dear Miss Taylor, I intend to do so.'

But then Rose Denham smiled, and there was warmth and humour in her smile. Cassie decided, she's a tough old bird and she might talk like Lady Muck, but she'll be fair and decent.

So, fingers twisted, it would be all right.

'What's your first name?' Stephen asked. 'If you're going to live here for a while, we can't call you Miss Taylor all the time.'

'It's Cassie.'

'Cassie – that's unusual,' said Rose Denham, her dark eyebrows raised in arched enquiry.

'Yes, well.' Cassie shrugged. She wasn't going to tell them all the story of her life, or not yet, anyway. 'It's just a name.'

The twins and Cassie put on coats and scarves and hats and gloves, and then set off across the frozen fields. Stephen told her they were going to the nearest pub, which was in Charton, where she'd got off the train.

While they had been eating, there had been another fall of snow, covering all the footprints to the cottage, and making the whole world look new again. The clouds which must have gathered had blown away again, and now a round white moon shone from a purple velvet sky.

'It's so pretty!' Cassie cried, as she gazed delighted at the moonlit meadows, at the cotton-wool-topped hedges, and the stands of stark black white-rimed trees. 'We don't get snow in Birmingham. Well, that's a lie, we do, but it soon goes all mucky and it turns to slush. It's – '

'It's a bloody nuisance,' Robert growled, and glared at Cassie. Then he stomped off ahead, into the night.

'Holy Mother, what have I said now?' demanded Cassie.

'Nothing, Cassie.' Stephen sighed. 'I'm sorry, but Robert's been like this for ages, and we can't do anything with him. He wishes he was in the Western Desert, fighting Jerry – and so do we all.'

'How much longer will he be on leave, then?'

'I don't know,' said Stephen. 'But he has a medical next week, and I sincerely hope he passes it.'

'Me too,' murmured Cassie, but only to herself.

'The trouble is, he's bored,' continued Stephen. 'We've been at home too long.'

'So why *are* you at home?' asked Cassie.

'We've both been on sick leave since we copped it at Dunkirk. When we came out of hospital, they sent us back to Dorset. We've been here ever since. We help around the farm. Well, Robert does his bit, and more. But I must admit I'm not much use.'

'What happened to you?' asked Cassie. 'If you don't mind my asking,' she added hastily.

'I don't mind,' said Stephen. 'My mother's bound to tell you anyway, in vivid detail. It's her way of coping, droning on. But – in a nutshell – we were with the British Expeditionary Force. We got shot up in France. Then we were evacuated. We came home in separate boats, but both of them got hit by German planes.

'Robert had a broken arm, a bullet in his shoulder, and a piece of shrapnel in his chest that just missed his heart, but pierced his lung. Now, he's nearly fit, so he'll soon be going back to get blown up again. Me – well, I'm resigned to having a desk job.'

'Why?'

'I can't go back on active service. I got hit on the head, and now I have blackouts and epileptic fits.'

'We had an epileptic kid at school,' said Cassie, nodding. 'He had funny turns. He'd be standing next to you one minute, chatting away as natural as ninepence, but then he'd fall down, jerking. Sometimes, he'd wet himself. I was our class monitor, so I

always had to get the spoon to stick between his teeth, to stop him biting off his tongue.'

'I wish you'd been here last Wednesday, then,' said Stephen, looking grave. 'I had a turn myself. When I came round again, the cat was curled up on my lap, purring and chewing something.'

'You're kidding!' Cassie cried in horror.

'So keep your spoon at action stations, yes? In fact, I feel a little strange right now.'

Cassie began to panic. But then she saw his grin. She pushed his shoulder, grinning back at him. This bloke might be a nob, she thought. But, like his mother, Stephen Denham was all right.

'How long have you lived in Dorset?' she enquired.

'Since I was ten,' said Stephen. 'In those days, there were five of us, my parents and my brother and my sister.'

'It must have been a bit of a squash while you were growing up, with all of you crammed into that small cottage?'

'We haven't always lived there. When we first came to Dorset, we lived in Melbury House. It was my dad's ancestral home, and it was big enough for half a dozen families. But we had a fire there, and we had to move into the cottage.'

'So that burned-down place I passed, when I came along the lane – that was *your* house, yes?' asked Cassie, shuddering. 'It must have been horrible for you, to lose your home like that?'

'Yes, it was rather rough on Mum and Dad, but the actual fire was exciting.' Stephen's dark eyes glittered in the moonlight. 'It's quite something, Cassie, to see a huge, great place go up like that, like some enormous funeral pyre. As it was burning down, the fire made great, red caverns – whole new worlds of scarlet, black and gold – and I remember wondering, what would it be like, to walk in fire?'

'You're giving me the shivers.' Cassie trembled. 'I hate it when the sirens go, and bombs start coming down, and you see the flames and know that some poor bugger's bought it.'

'Well, now you can relax a bit,' said Stephen, and he smiled. 'We don't get raids in Dorset. Or not here in the sticks, at any rate – believe you me.'

Robert couldn't believe it.

They had asked the Ministry of Labour for someone with experience. Someone who had worked on dairy farms. Someone who could turn her hand to anything. Someone who could take over from him when he was recalled to active service.

So who had turned up?

Some idiot girl who looked about fifteen. A skinny little creature, round-shouldered and with sparrow legs in wrinkled cotton stockings, who didn't look as if she would be able to lift a bag of flour, let alone a sack of cattle feed.

She had a sweet and very pretty face – he'd noticed straight away. So soon she would be smirking, flouncing, flirting all around the villages, making eyes at anything in trousers, at teenaged boys and fathers who hadn't been called up. She'd be annoying girlfriends, sisters, wives. She would be getting herself in trouble. She –

Stop that now, he told himself, as he ground his teeth and as the snow got in his boots, melting in chilly puddles in his socks. She's just a girl, an ordinary girl, and you don't know anything about her, perhaps she goes to church three times on Sundays and leads a blameless life.

She might be stronger than she looks.

I doubt it, said his other self. She'll be a liability, you'll see. We'll need a depth charge to get her out of bed these winter mornings. She won't be any good at milking, and she won't be any use with chickens. She'll be afraid of horses, and she won't be able to drive the pony trap.

She'll just get in the way.

He stumped into the pub and glowered at the barman. He wished he had the time and money to get drunk tonight.

Cassie enjoyed the walk across the fields.

The moonlight shining on the freshly-fallen snow made the whole place look like fairyland. Stephen told her silly jokes and helped her clamber over stiles and jump across the ditches. He caught her when she stumbled, which she often did.

When they reached the village, they were cold but glowing and went straight into the pub. As they pushed through the cosy, smoky fug, Cassie was still giggling at something he had said.

Stephen's brother was sitting at a table in the corner with his back to them, and from the shaking of his shoulders she thought he must be laughing. A dark-haired girl of maybe twenty, Cassie guessed, was sitting sideways on to him.

They turned to look at Cassie and their smiles froze on their faces. 'Come on, Cassie,' Stephen whispered, as he pushed her forward. 'Rob's a miserable so-and-so, but he doesn't bite.'

Cassie saw the girl was wearing navy corduroy slacks, a soft, white jersey that had clearly cost a lot of money, and she had a gorgeous string of pearls around her neck. She wore bright scarlet lipstick which didn't really suit her, and was smoking, flicking ash on to the table top instead of in the ashtray by her side.

'This is Frances Ashford,' Stephen said, drawing up a couple more chairs and motioning to Cassie to sit down. 'This is Cassie Taylor, Fran. She's come to work for us.'

'Golly, how exciting.' Frances flicked some more ash off her glowing cigarette and stared at Cassie balefully. 'She doesn't look the bucolic type to me.'

'Come again?' said Cassie, thinking, holy Virgin, are they *all* nobs round here? 'What do you mean by that?'

'You're tiny, and you don't look fit and strong enough for farm work.'

'I might be small,' said Cassie. 'But I've worked in factories making Spitfires, and I'm very strong.'

'How old are you, anyway – thirteen, fourteen, fifteen?'

'I'm nineteen,' muttered Cassie, thinking – what a cow. 'How about you, then – thirty, forty, fifty?'

'Ladies, ladies, please!' Stephen patted Cassie's shoulder. 'How about a drink? Cassie, I'm afraid it's gin or beer – or lemonade.'

'Gin,' said Frances promptly. 'Thank you, Steve.'

'A half of best,' said Cassie, who had never tasted gin. In Smethwick, only crones and tarts drank gin.

She scowled at Frances, who was muttering something to Stephen's grumpy brother. Obviously, she hadn't been brought up well enough to know that whispering was rude.

'Come on, sweetheart, smile. You'll need to get along with Frances,' Stephen murmured, as he brushed past Cassie. 'She's the other land girl at Melbury, you see.'

To be continued …..

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