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Opening Extract from...

The World is a Wedding

Written by Wendy Jones

Published by Corsair

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THE WORLD * IS A * WEDDING

In Which the Unexpected Nature of Reality Surprises Mister Wilfred Price

WENDY JONES

corsair

This book is dedicated to Solly,
who thinks it should be dedicated to J. K. Rowling.

Constable & Robinson Ltd.
55–56 Russell Square
London WC1B 4HP
www.constablerobinson.com

First published in the UK by Corsair,
an imprint of Constable & Robinson Ltd., 2013

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A copy of the British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78033-379-3 (hardback)
ISBN: 978-1-47210-478-6 (ebook)

Printed and bound in the UK

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

‘The world is a wedding.’

The Talmud

‘And the man said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And Jacob said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.’

Genesis xxxii.26

1

The Secret of a Happy Life

Narberth, late summer 1925

Wilfred Price, undertaker, purveyor of superior funerals, was up with the larks and off for his morning constitutional. And no time, today, for a cup of tea first. Wilfred strode out of his house, put his hands on his hips and breathed in the watery Welsh air that smelled of turned earth. He felt affection for Narberth, the small town – green as a bean – five miles from the crinkly coast of Pembrokeshire, where he had lived all his life.

'Morning, Jeffrey,' he called to his friend above the sound of a cleaver splitting a rib in half, as he passed Lloyd the Butcher. 'Sunny day, today.'

'Talking sense you are, Wilf.'

'Good morning to you, Mrs Evans,' he greeted Mrs Annie Evans,

who was heaving a sack of oatmeal on her tiny back up the steps of the Conduit Stores.

'Beautifulest funeral yesterday,' she replied.

'Wonderful funeral,' Wilfred agreed. It had been the simplest of funerals yesterday for Mrs James – as it often was for elderly ladies. Half the time the whole town had been expecting them to kick the bucket for decades. But some old ladies were surprisingly enduring; they could be very determined about not dying, despite a whole host of ailments, including sugar diabetes. Though when they finally fell off the perch, the family were prepared, and simple grief made for simple funerals.

'And *beautiful* weather it is for you today,' Mrs Evans added. Wilfred raised his hand in acknowledgement.

In the High Street, Willie the Post, carrying his bulging mailbag, waved at Wilfred cheerfully. Mrs Cadwallader was singing opera in her steamy bakery. Wilfred heard Handel Evans, the organist, playing Bach in the Bethesda Chapel as he did every morning of the week, crashing chords and hitting harmonies. Meanwhile, no doubt, the Reverend Waldo Williams MA (Oxon.) sat hunched at the lectern beneath the organ, suffering perturbations over the Psalms in the big black King James Bible he so earnestly studied. Shiny-faced schoolboys scampered around Wilfred, and outside Dai the Mint's a baby in a broken perambulator cried.

Wilfred climbed the hill to Narberth's ruined castle, flattening the dewy grass with his feet as he walked. He stood between the roofless towers and the vaulted cellar, gazing over the hushed and splendid land where Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed, was said to have struck his bargain

with Arawn, Lord of the Underworld. Wilfred saw the fields of barley; St Andrew's Church, where the gravestones stood like wonky gentlemen; and the wide circle of trees surrounding Narberth, tree after tree with great, round crowns, standing like a chapel congregation, neither ostentatious nor afraid to be what they were.

He rested on an ancient stone wall, listening to the wind, then took the *Narberth & Whitland Observer* out from under his arm and glanced at the front page.

Popular Narberth Wedding
MISS DAISY PRIOR AND MR J. HEATH

The Tabernacle Chapel was the scene of a pretty wedding on Saturday morning . . .

He was eager to read on, couldn't help wondering what was inside the newspaper. There would be births, deaths, marriages, scandals, and the umpteen things in between of which he knew nothing and would be surprised to learn about. And there would be news of the prime minister in London, Mr Stanley Baldwin, along with an account of Mrs James's funeral. But there wasn't time to read – or to think, much as he loved to. He must go straight home to 11, Market Street right this moment and prepare himself. He folded the paper in half and set off across the hummocky grass. There wasn't time to read the newspaper, not today.

'It's mighty tidy in here,' Wilfred announced confidently, arriving back in the house and looking around the scully. But as Wilfred and

his da stood in the cosy kitchen they'd shared for twenty-nine years, both had the same thought: the kitchen didn't cut the mustard.

'Let's get rid of that old flour sack,' Wilfred suggested, lifting up the frayed sack on the floor to reveal tea-leaves, grit, bits of grass and a dog-eared playing card.

'*Ach-y-fi*. Didn't you sweep under the rug?' Wilfred's da asked.

'No,' admitted Wilfred. 'It didn't occur to me.'

'Well, quickly then – get the brush.'

Wilfred collected the dustpan and brush from the yard next to the cabbages where it had been left a few months ago and swept the floor, but the brush kept shedding bristles and he had to sweep up those as well.

'That dustpan and brush,' his da said, watching, 'was a wedding present from Auntie Blodwen for your mam and me. Long time ago now.'

Wilfred stood up from all fours and put his large hand over his da's gnarled, soil-stained hands and squeezed gently. Summer sunlight streamed through the window and lit up the humble and dishevelled room, and brought it into vivid relief.

'We have lived very well, you and I, in this room, and this house, *boy bach*,' his da stated. 'I hope I have been wise,' he added. 'The only thing I ever prayed for was to be a good father.'

There was a gentle pause.

'Do you think you should have cleaned the stove?' his da asked.

'I did,' Wilfred replied. He took the blackened, encrusted frying pan with its inch of white lard from the stove and put it in the higgledy-piggledy crockery cupboard. 'That's looking better now,'

he stated. 'And you won't be able to keep your spade in the kitchen sink any more. I don't think that will do.' Wilfred's da rubbed his chest in silent contemplation.

'There are momentous changes ahead,' Wilfred said, attempting to console his da but succeeding only in unnerving himself. Then, from nowhere, Wilfred remembered, as a child, waking from a nightmare and running with all his might to his da – out of bed, across the tiny landing and under the scratchy blankets of his da's bed, where he clung resolutely to his father's back, which was naked and strong.

'I dreamed a saint nibbled me.'

'Whoever heard of a saint in a bedroom?'

Tumbling into the deep dip in the middle of the old mattress, Wilfred was soothed by his da's presence.

'Keep still, *boy bach*. You've got St Vitus's Dance.'

'Who's St Vitus? Is he dead?'

'Not yet,' his da replied. And then Wilfred had fallen asleep, warm and safe – safe as houses.

Wilfred straightened the chairs around the kitchen table and closed the cutlery drawer.

'That's looking better again. Are you going to comb your hair?' he asked his da.

'Aye aye,' his da replied, smoothing his halo of white hair down. 'Now, you's better go and get yourself ready.'

Wilfred nodded, rubbing his bristly chin. He must have a shave.

'I've put petrol in the hearse,' he mentioned, adding, 'It's not ideal, is it?'

'What?' his da said, alarmed.

'You know.'

'No! I's thought you were happy this time.'

'Not that, Da,' Wilfred explained. 'This time I couldn't be happier. I meant it's not ideal, going to my own wedding in a hearse.'

'Once an undertaker, always an undertaker,' his da replied.

'Now, *cariad*,' said her mother, bending down and cutting the stems of some dalias, separating forever the flower heads from their roots. She stood up and handed the freshly cut flowers to Flora Myffanwy. 'Let bygones be bygones.'

Flora nodded. Her mother was talking about Albert. It seemed an obvious comment, but Flora knew what her mother meant. She was to let go of the past, no matter how golden it had been.

'This is a new beginning for you,' Mrs Edwards continued. She reached for the white, trumpet-like lilies. 'Shall I cut you some of these?'

'Yes, I'd like some lilies.'

'Your father planted these earlier this year.'

It was still so raw. Flora saw an image of her father slumped on the hall carpet. It was a very fresh memory. She gazed at the line of metallic blue sea in the distance. The air was full of insects flitting and a rabbit hopped in the apple orchard at the end of the garden.

'He would have wanted to give you away,' her mother stated, cutting four of the tallest, most beautiful lilies.

Her father had died in the spring; she had first seen Wilfred at the

funeral, met with him across the summer and they were marrying before harvest. Much else had happened besides, but at its simplest and most pure, they had come together over the year. Today was her wedding day, not to Albert, but to Wilfred. She loved Wilfred, but she was marrying him because Albert had died.

'Perhaps a few sprigs of laurel?' her mother enquired.

'Shall we find some ivy?' Flora said.

'Let's walk to the front garden,' her mother suggested, 'and see if we can find some. I'm sure there's some ivy clinging to the silver birch.' They ambled across the dappled lawn, passing the pink and lilac hydrangeas growing bushily in the borders and heading towards the iris beds.

'I like irises,' Flora said, gazing at the elegant, indigo flowers leaning giddily against the garden wall.

'But I couldn't imagine them in a bouquet,' her mother responded. 'The trailing ivy will go lovely with the lilies.'

Flora unbuckled her sandals, took them off and began walking barefoot on the cool, fresh grass. The lawn had not been cut regularly since her father passed away so the clover had long, wilting stalks.

At the silver birch Flora began pulling the ivy away from the tree. The sun beamed down, the sky was cloudless and it was a hot, almost oppressive day. Flora ran her hand round the back of her neck and lifted up her long brown hair.

'It will be time soon for you to put on your dress. I will help you with the lace veil,' her mother said, watching. 'That ivy's proving difficult.'

Flora tried to pull a young piece of ivy away from the bark but it was tangled and stuck too tightly to come away in one piece.

'Married life . . .' Mrs Edwards began, then stopped. Flora knew her mother would not advise her on married life; she would be more sensitive than that. 'I only want you to know that I had a lot of pleasure from married life.' Her mother was allowing Flora into an aspect of her life that she had not revealed before. 'And I learned that there was nothing to be gained from holding back.'

Flora tugged at a different frond of ivy. She didn't know if she could let go of the past. Time had passed but the ties of her heart remained. Flora tried to feel within her her love for Wilfred, but it felt hidden quietly beneath the preparations for the wedding and moving to Narberth. She needed a still moment to feel her love for him clearly and strongly again.

'And to think you are wearing the same muslin dress as I wore, the one belonging to your great-grandmother,' her mother said, arranging the flowers in her hand. 'That reminds me, I have a small gift for you.' She went into White Hook and Flora stood waiting, looking at the large, old house that was her home, and could not imagine having another home. Her mother returned with a neat box wrapped in dark green ribbon. 'It is for you, now you are almost married.'

Flora carefully removed the ribbon and brown paper, opened the glossy black box and pulled out a lipstick in a pale, pearly pink.

'It's for you to wear today,' her mother explained. 'Something new to go with the something old – the wedding dress – if you think you would like to use it.'

'I'll try it,' Flora Myffanwy said, carefully dragging the lipstick across her lips.

'If ever there is a day a woman can begin wearing lipstick,' her mother said, 'it is surely her wedding day.'

'Tell out my soul, the greatness of the Lord,' the reverend roared, and Handel Evans hit the organ chords as if his life depended on it. Wilfred stood at the altar next to Flora Myffanwy and sang, strong and deep, with his shoulders back and head high, losing himself in the voices of those he loved surrounding him. He sang with all his might so that his heart was full of lightness and he felt he could float above Stepaside and Narberth and be singing with the stars. His joy was as plain as the written sign.

When the final thunderous organ chord had faded to a slow echo and the Benediction had been given, Wilfred, beaming, held out his arm for Flora to take and they walked together down the aisle to the church door. These are our first steps, he thought, of a long journey.

Wilfred and Flora Myffanwy stepped out into the sunlight to the sound of voices raised in a cheer. A shower of rice confetti landed with a pitter-patter on Wilfred's top hat and tails. The rice fell helter-skelter onto his shoulders and into Flora Myffanwy's bouquet, nestling among the lilies and the ivy. Small children from the local cottages strewed wine-red camellia and rose petals at their feet for the bride and groom to walk on.

'Here's the bride and groom,' Jeffrey announced. 'They look a masterpiece.'

Wilfred and Flora stood outside the small chapel in Stepaside. Wilfred noticed the quivering aspens and wild rambling roses. It was a glorious day, the sun was shining and the sea in the distance was still. A blackbird was putting loops and twists in his voice and a solitary plump bee hovered about the honeysuckle. The black clothes and the white linen of the guests were very plain against the green of the trees and the silvery-grey of the chapel.

'There's one thing I will say, and it is this,' Mrs Annie Evans stated. 'There's children you'll have, with all this rice thrown.' Men in bowler hats and top hats nodded in agreement, as did the ladies in bonnets with feathers in them.

'It's better than the old shoes of tradition they threw at my wedding,' Willie the Post called, pulling Mrs Willie the Post towards him. 'We're only happy because I'm deaf and my wife is blind.'

'Wondrous sermon. The reverend is like Milton and Cromwell rolled into one,' Wilfred overheard Handel Evans comment.

'Aye,' Dai the Mint replied. 'There's no flies on that bugger.'

Arthur Squibs of Arthur Squibs Studios of Tenby emerged from the gathering, lugging his cumbersome camera.

'Good afternoon, Mr Price. Good afternoon, Mrs Edwards. Good afternoon, Mr and Mrs Wilfred Price.' He doffed his bowler hat in greeting. He gazed up at the light of the sun, then set up his heavy wood and brass camera on a tripod.

'Now, Mr Price and Mrs Melbourne Edwards, if you would stand next to your son and daughter respectively.'

His da, smelling of mothballs and boot polish, stood beside Wilfred, his fine hair fluffing out around his hat, as white as if the

snow had fallen in it. Mrs Melbourne Edwards, holding a new handbag, stood next to Flora. Wilfred watched his da attempting to straighten up.

The Reverend Waldo Williams MA (Oxon.) sashayed forward, his cassock swaying about him freely, with two simple wooden chairs for his da and Mrs Melbourne Edwards. His da sat down, as if resting from a long journey taken and completed.

'Wilfred, move closer,' Arthur Squibs said. Wilfred leaned towards Flora. Flora smoothed the wisps of brown hair springing loose from the delicate white veil placed over her head.

'There's beautiful the bride is,' said Mrs Bell Evans with admiration.

'Thank you, Mrs Evans,' Flora replied quietly.

'There's proud you must be of your daughter, Mrs Edwards.' Mrs Edwards swallowed visibly, unable to reply.

'Look straight ahead,' the photographer advised, clapping his hands to attract their attention. Flora Myffanwy stood by Wilfred, her shy eyes smiling. Wilfred stood tall and upright in his best suit.

'Stand still, if you please.' Mr Arthur Squibs moved his large camera and tripod slightly to the left, hid his head under the thick cloth and emerged, moving the camera nearer again. He stood beside the camera, like a magician about to capture their souls. The photograph was eventually taken.

'There are photographs, and then there are . . . photographs,' Mr Squibs said enigmatically, 'and *that* was a photograph.' Then: 'One more picture, please. It is important to have two of everything that is important to have,' he announced to the baffled gathering,

adding, 'like kidneys.' He took a cloth from his waistcoat pocket and rubbed the camera lens vigorously. 'Now, keep still, don't move a muscle,' he instructed. 'This is a ten-second exposure. Talk among yourselves, ladies and gentlemen . . .' Arthur Squibs pressed the shutter. 'One second, two seconds . . .'

Wilfred stood as still as he could. This was a proper wedding in an ancient chapel, and standing next to him was the woman he wanted as his wife. Out of the corner of his eye he looked at Flora Myffawny – beauty was around her like lavender – and thought to himself that this was the happiest day of his life. And there was the night to come as well. He felt the muscles in his belly contract and the long muscles heat and flare inside him. It would be the happiest night of his life, too, when the air between them was hot. He had not yet had conjugal relations and did not know the exact ins and out of these things, but he had lain in bed with a woman before and he felt confident this practise would hold him in good stead tonight. He glanced at Flora Myffanwy.

'Wilfred, you're twitching!' Arthur Squibs reprimanded. 'Six seconds and seven seconds . . .'

Flora was looking at the camera lens with her solemn beauty and serious eyes. It wasn't always like this at a wedding, Wilfred knew. But he wouldn't think about that today. That was the past. Whomever else he had professed to love, honour and obey was gone. He would dwell on it no more. He would put it behind him. Flora was his wife now and he couldn't be happier. To think that the days earlier in the year had been so dark, so imprisoning, when all had seemed lost . . . and now here he was.

And Flora had loved before, but the chap had died in that dreadful war and so that was all over and they could both begin a new life. The past was gone for Flora, too. She loved *him* now. He must remember Mr Ogmore Auden's advice. Mr Auden had asked him, when he was an apprentice undertaker: 'Do you know the secret to a happy life?'

'No, Mr Auden,' he'd replied.

'Two words: "Yes, dear".'

Wilfred decided, there and then, that he would call Flora Myffanwy 'dear' and he hoped that she would like that. It was important to call one's wife 'dear'. It was called a term of endearment, Wilfred knew, and was the opposite of a term of abuse. One would never call one's wife a term of abuse. That was unthinkable.

'Nine seconds and ten seconds,' Arthur Squibs counted. There was the fat click of the camera then a fizz of the photograph being taken. A dignified round of applause broke out.

I will kiss her cheek, he thought to himself, and felt the gentle warmth of her skin.

'There is good to have flowers so near you,' Wilfred remarked on Flora's posy. 'Dear,' he added. Flora looked up at him quietly. Still waters run deep, he thought to himself, though she had said the only words that mattered to Wilfred: 'I do,' and in the gentlest voice he could ever imagine. Wilfred put his hand tenderly around her small warm waist and looked at the woman he could almost barely believe existed. And he could see the smile coming in her eyes. Wilfred was aware that he knew very little about women, as his mother had died on the fourth day of his life. Women were

different from men. He had already noticed, and he'd only been married five minutes.

'Shall the bride throw the bouquet?' Mrs Willie the Post suggested.

'Those flowers are more beautiful than poetry,' Mrs Cadwallader remarked.

'There's an abundation of lilies for you,' Mrs Annie Evans agreed, 'and with the smell of the scent of paradise.'

'Jeffrey, if you catch the bouquet it will be your wedding next,' Mrs Willie the Post encouraged.

'Good God Almighty, there's a thought!' Handel Evans retorted.

Flora smiled, turned her back to the expectant crowd but the bouquet slipped from her hands, falling onto the soft grass. Wilfred, removing his top hat, bent down to pick it up.

'Oh,' she said, blushing a little.

'Let me. Dear,' he offered, picking up the bouquet and handing back the slightly crushed lilies. Flora took the flowers and threw them carefully behind her to a cheer of joy and excitement from the anticipating crowd.

2

Tea at the Ritz

London, midsummer 1925

'The Ritz is a machine that manufactures tranquillity.' The butler pulled a fat gold watch from his waistcoat and noted the time. He continued: 'A beautiful, purring machine oiled by money and cleaned by maids. Guests create chaos, the maids provide order.'

Grace held her hands protectively in front of herself and watched while the butler smoothed the shining bald dome of his head with a starched handkerchief, then drew the blinds to cut out the summer sun.

'So you want to work in the Ritz.'

Grace nodded.

The butler leaned back on his mahogany desk-chair and peered

at Grace over his half-moon spectacles. 'You are not alone. In these times of increasing unemployment,' he pontificated, 'many girls come from the provinces – and the Valleys,' he flicked a hand at her, 'to earn money so their brothers and sisters can eat. And,' he folded his arms, 'because a certain breed of young girl likes to serve – and ape – the rich.' He asked sharply, 'Have you worked as a servant before? Are you a servant?'

'No.' Grace waited while the butler refolded his handkerchief and dabbed the sweat on his jowls.

'What have you done?'

What, indeed, had Grace done? She had cooked and cleaned under her mother's critical eye, she had read novels and she had kept bees, and the keeping of bees was what she was most proud of. The honey she'd collected from her hive, then sold, was a rich amber and flecked with pollen, but she had no illusions: beekeeping was fruitless to her here. She had been in the city only a few days but she doubted there were any honeybees in London; there were so few flowers. But she was alone and must earn her own money.

'Are you in good health?' the butler enquired, in response to her silence.

'Yes, sir.'

'In which case, Mrs . . . ?' He looked down at his papers and straightened his glasses.

'Rice,' Grace mumbled, feeling herself tense from telling a lie.

'And am I to suppose that you are a war widow?' he asked with a weary sigh.

Grace nodded.

'In which case, Mrs Rice, you will be a chambermaid. You'll work six and a half days a week. One week's holiday a year – unpaid, of course. Stand up straight, girl.'

Grace stood up straighter.

'Report to the head housekeeper's office in two hours' time, at six o'clock sharp. She will apportion you your uniform. You will sleep in the maids' dormitory from tonight and begin work in the morning.'

'Yes, sir.'

'No visitors in the dormitory. On pain of immediate dismissal.'

Grace nodded; she expected no visitors.

'You are dismissed.'

Grace wandered the labyrinthine, muggy streets behind the Ritz, unwilling to venture far, frightened she would be late returning to the hotel. As she walked along the pavements, Grace thought how much had happened, and how quickly: within a matter of weeks she had married, divorced, left home and now become a maid. It was as if her life had been suddenly concertinaed, when before it had been an expanse of sameness. Grace was bewildered, numb and in shock, and amidst these changes, all she seemed able to understand was the unstoppable forwardness of life.

She walked until she found a small ladies' dress shop squashed between a tobacconist's and an Italian café. The bell above the door rang shrilly when Grace entered and she tentatively browsed while the assistant finished serving a woman with a Pekingese dog, who was purchasing a clutch bag embroidered with King Tutankhamun.

'Customers are asked to refrain from opening the cabinet drawers,' the shop assistant announced with a tight smile. 'Madam is looking for a corset?'

Grace wanted to turn and walk out of the door, away from this shop hidden behind Piccadilly, its window crowded with mannequins – armless, legless, headless figures which suggested that a butchering of the body was needed to buy clothes here – but the shop assistant quickly steered her into a changing room, in which stood yet another mannequin, like a cloth Venus de Milo.

'Madam should try a Rayon Corset first. It has steel stays,' pronounced the woman, standing close to the curtain dividing them. Shortly, a hand poked through the dusty, rûched curtain and gave her a corset. Grace yanked her dress down and took the rolled-up piece of elasticated fabric.

'Thank you,' she said automatically, heat flushing over her. Grace dragged on the corset; it was too tight over her hips and stomach, forcing her to breathe in and stand bolt upright.

'And would madam like a brassière as well? Perhaps a Symington Side Lacer, which flattens the bust and is lined with net?'

'Madam' sounded incongruous in this cramped shop selling coarse, drop-waist dresses: cheaply-made copies of *Vogue* fashions for poor girls who wanted to wear the chic styles but could not afford them. Was the woman being sarcastic? Grace didn't like the complexity of sarcasm, the amount of thought it demanded. It reminded her of her mother: 'Were you thinking of cleaning the hearth, Grace?' 'Were you thinking a man would look at you in that frock?' and the accompanying laughter that wasn't funny.

Grace fiddled with the stocking suspenders so they hung straight and barely dared look at herself in the mirror.

'Or perhaps madam would prefer a larger size?'

Grace squirmed. 'Is this the biggest corset you have?' she asked, closing her eyes when she spoke, emboldened by the curtain that hid her from the prim woman standing on the other side.

'Would it be of use, madam, if you adjusted the corset? Let the buckles out?'

'No,' said Grace, something new and stronger – an instinct to survive – rising within her.

'I will check the cabinet drawers.'

While Grace waited she thought of the print of the *Old Lady of Salem*: it was of a woman in Capel Salem who was committing the sin of Vanity, and so the devil hid in the folds of her shawl. It was her mother's favourite painting – she had collected nine tokens from Sunlight soap powder to receive a free print – and it hung in the drawing room above the fireplace. Her mother said that when Grace looked at the woman, if she saw the devil's face, then Grace had the devil in her.

'Here,' the woman pronounced with a distant contempt and thrust another thick corset through the curtain. 'This is the Spencer Corset, which corrects ptosis. Seventy women in one hundred suffer from ptosis,' the shop assistant declared, 'and the Spencer Corset cures it. It will prevent your intestines sagging out of place, resolve your figure faults and control your diaphragm.'

Grace tugged on the new corset, which reached from under her ribs to the top of her thighs.

The woman was waiting impatiently on the other side of the curtain. 'The whalebone provides considerable support for the spine,' she added pushily.

The corset was tight and hard but it would do. She would buy it and she would be a chambermaid. She was binding her body and binding her life.

Grace dragged the undergarment off, pulled her dress on, drew the curtains apart and there, standing too close, was the woman. Grace stepped back into the changing room.

'Is madam going to take the underbust corset, the one in blush pink?'

'I will,' said Grace.

'Certainly, madam.' The woman held out her hand to take the garment, showing Grace she hadn't yet paid for it so it wasn't yet hers, trotted behind the counter, wrapped the corset in crisp brown paper and tied it with string. Then she wrote out the bill with exactitude. Grace paid the nine shillings with a sense of anxiety, which she tried not to show. It was some of the money she had been given when she left Narberth.

'Thank you,' she said, from habitual politeness rather than gratitude.

'I hope you will find your purchase of use, madam. One mustn't let oneself go, must one?'

Grace sat on a bed in the maids' dormitory. She had returned to the Ritz at six o'clock sharp, collected her uniform from the housekeeper and spent the rest of the evening embroidering her

initials onto the two black dresses and four white aprons she would be expected to wear from tomorrow. When she had finished, she glanced down at herself. She had thought she would have put on weight and was starving herself so as not to do so. She focused on her feet, the bones jutting out as she unrolled her threadbare stockings. Her toenails needed cutting. She used the scissors from the cheap manicure set she had bought earlier in the tobacconist's next to the dress shop; she had forgotten to pack scissors in her rush to leave.

Grace looked around at the white room with the black iron beds and the modern electric lightbulb hanging starkly from the ceiling, shocked to find herself here, somewhere so strange to her and far from home. But this stuffy dormitory under the hotel roof would do for tonight, perhaps a few weeks, a couple of months at most. Then . . . she didn't know. A time would come when she would need her own bedroom but she didn't know where to find privacy in this populated city.

A maid turned over, pulled a blanket over her head and Grace heard muffled sobs.

'Don't mind her.' The girl sitting opposite indicated the shrouded outline of the weeping maid. 'She's homesick. Cries herself to sleep every night. She's from the Lake District. Says Windermere isn't like London.' The girl pulled off her cap and let down her black plait, slipped out of her uniform, undid her brassière and was soon naked. Grace looked away, shocked.

'You new? Did you answer the "Maids Wanted" advertisement in the *Evening News*?'

Grace nodded.

'My feet are killing me,' the girl moaned, hopping into bed, her breasts wobbling freely. 'Right, switch the electric light out. Go on, new girl.'

Grace went to the Bakelite switch on the wall and then fumbled her way across the cramped, darkened attic into bed. The lyrics of a swiftly paced song and the sound of a saxophone, full of longing, drifted upwards.

'He landed with a splash in the River Nile
A-ridin' a sea-goin' crocodile.
He winked at Cleopatra, she said, 'Ain't he a sight!
How about a date for next Saturday night?'

'Not going to cry yourself to sleep, are you?' the girl asked. 'I don't think I can take any more snivelling.'

'No,' Grace said.

'Good,' the girl retorted. 'It only stops you sleeping.'

'You have a problem with beds,' the girl with the plait stated the following morning, lifting the mattress for Grace and folding the sheet in one practised, mechanical gesture. It was Grace's first day of work at the Ritz. They were bending down to do hospital corners on a bed in the Louis XIV Suite but Grace's did not have the origami exactness of the other maid's: Grace's sheet was pleated like the edge of a puff-pastry confection. They finished the bed in silence, Grace following the other maid's lead.

'Watch,' the girl ordered. 'Keep copying me.' She dropped a

dented yellow cushion with a plop onto the Persian rug, picked it up, thumped it and arranged it on the chaise longue. 'That's how you plump up a cushion properly,' she explained, flicking her plait over her shoulder. 'And the guest who's worn this,' she said, grabbing a shimmery Flapper dress abandoned over an armchair, 'has the whole suite next door for her clothes. Can you imagine? Just her glad rags: as if they were a group of people. We'll clean that suite next. At least we don't have to change the beds because no one sleeps in them – so you'll be all right there.' The girl nudged Grace. 'Hilda,' she said. 'Hilda Bell.'

'Grace. Gracie . . .' replied Grace, fumbling to find a new name for herself.

'Where are you from?' Hilda asked. 'You sound like you're from America.'

'Wales,' Grace answered, immediately regretting it.

'Is that a Welsh accent?'

Grace didn't know she had an accent. She spoke how everyone spoke in Narberth. But if she had a Welsh accent then she couldn't pretend she came from somewhere else. Where would she pretend she came from? She only knew her tiny corner of Wales, and the countries she had read about in books.

'What's Wales like? Is it like London?'

'No,' Grace admitted, straightening the tangled fringe on a silk lampshade.

'You don't talk much, do you?'

Not any more, Grace thought to herself. 'I'm shy,' she said by way of an answer.

'Me, now, I come from Battersea. That's over the river. Me mum, she's never even been across the Thames, not in forty-two years. But not me, I want to be a chambermaid on a cruise liner.' Hilda twirled around, duster in her hand, white ostrich feathers waving. 'But not on the *Titanic*!' She smiled guiltlessly at her own joke, but Grace felt embarrassed by the girl's affectation. Hilda seemed suddenly self-conscious, aware of showing off.

'Well, it's better than living in Battersea all me life,' she whacked a lilac cushion roughly with the feather duster, 'being born and dying in the same place, like me mum and her mum before her. You got any brothers and sisters?'

'A brother,' Grace replied.

'They're the worst. Right: you and me, next door.'

Grace followed Hilda to the next room, their footsteps muffled. She had never seen so much carpet before, nor experienced the softness and silence it created. It wasn't slate, it wasn't grass, it wasn't wood; it was thick, sumptuous, almost-bouncy carpet. Grace thought of her parents' house, which was large alongside the crouching cottages that encircled Narberth, cheek by jowl, and which were painted in hopeful pastels. The framed print of *The Prodigal Son in Misery* that hung in her childhood home, and the heavy sideboards seemed burdensome compared to this glassy, modern lightness. Her parents' house was less sophisticated than she thought; less refined than her mother's pretensions had ever led her to believe.

'Get a wiggle on,' Hilda whispered, as if talking among themselves was a conspiratorial act and they oughtn't to be speaking. Grace

followed Hilda along another long quiet corridor. She pushed the trolley in front of her; it was heavy with crumpled white linen, the remains of expensive nights of tranquil sleep. Grace understood that maids were to remain unseen, like mice, busy at the business of earning a crumb, living in the hotel but unwelcome, creeping by when no one was looking.

'Room service!' Hilda parroted politely, tapping on a door with professional obsequiousness. 'You must always knock,' she warned Grace. 'Don't want to find them doing *it*.' She plucked a key from a huge ring of keys in her pocket and unlocked the door, like a thief without guilt. Inside, the room was in disarray. Trunks stencilled with *P. A. Lytton* lay open – one with a fur coat half-tumbling from it – and lingerie and Chinese pyjamas were splayed on the bed. Draped over the headboard was a Poiret black and white fancy-dress costume. Someone, a lady of means, had been trying on dresses and discarding them, considering ensembles of her clothes until she came to the right one, the dress she had chosen to wear, a dress which – inconceivably to Grace – must have been even more beautiful than those lying crumpled and abandoned on the unmade bed.

'See?' murmured Hilda, indicating the umpteen trunks, hat-boxes and rails of exquisite clothes.

'So many dresses,' Grace stated, and wondered how life would approach a woman who wore dresses like these. She imagined débutante balls, grand invitations, opulent dinners, proposals of marriage and promises from men – promises kept. Grace only had one lovely dress – a yellow one; beyond that, her wardrobe was

a selection of routine skirts and drab jerseys. She had been proposed to in her yellow dress. She liked her yellow silk dress, she felt beautiful in it, and it had been easy to laugh when she was wearing it. Grace remembered sitting on the picnic blanket, serving the trifle when he asked her. Clothes could change a woman's life. She recalled afterwards, taking off her yellow dress in her bedroom, and how she saw her future as a wife, which was what she had always wanted – a home of her own and a kind husband, perhaps time to read books. She remembered her reflection in the looking glass, her girliness in her chemise. Then she felt her breathing tighten.

'Stop gawping. Start working,' Hilda ordered.

Grace picked up a pearly-white dress, its under-slip dangling out, turning it into two garments, like two bodies sewn together at the shoulders. The inside was on the outside and the outside was on the inside. She tried to unravel it but the dainty crystals and taupe sequins caught in each other. It was like a puzzle of right-way-roundness. Grace felt overwhelmed by so many new impressions, and of having so many new skills demanded of her.

'Give it here.' Hilda held the dress with her reddened fingers, shook and unravelled it and slipped a silk-padded hanger through the neck. Then she hung it in the wardrobe that stood in the room as if it was a stern chaperone assigned to the protection of delicate clothes belonging to ladies.

'Like this,' she said, picking up another garment and putting it neatly on a hanger.

Grace watched Hilda's deft fingers. It occurred to her that swollen red hands were capable hands; the hands that made the world

go round. Hilda had strong square fingers that could do what they needed to do and would put the world to rights.

The Louis XIV Suite was cleaned as swiftly as possible, the carpet swept with a *Eureka* cleaner, the gold-plated taps buffed and the sinks scrubbed and swilled, and Grace followed Hilda on to the next room in a long corridor of guest rooms, all in need of order and cleanliness.

'Wait!' Hilda whispered, later that afternoon on Grace's first day. Grace stood behind a doorway in the foyer of the Ritz while a bride passed, walking jauntily, followed by three men in military uniform, officers perhaps. A grand piano tinkled both elegantly and jerkily – maybe it was Jazz music the pianist was playing. Grace peeked out from behind the door and saw the hotel foyer for the first time. Everything glimmered as if it had been washed in the cleanest, freshest water and then lit with pearly starlight when it was still moist and glistening. Oval mirrors were painted with leaping deer and golden harts. The chandeliers were like transparent jellyfish floating on the ceiling. She saw Pan playing his pipes in the Lalique glass, and thought it was like the Elysian Fields in Homer's *Odyssey*: a quiet heaven where the worthy might come when they died, should they so choose, and, to the accompaniment of the grand pianoforte, sip exotic tea from exquisite bone china.

'Stop ogling again,' Hilda admonished. 'Quick, follow me.' She clomped down the staircase to the Ladies' Powder Room. 'Clean in there,' she instructed Grace, pointing to a line of cubicles.

Grace, the whalebone in the corset straining against her, began

wiping the first lavatory. She didn't like to do it; it made her feel nauseous and humiliated. Her father, a doctor, would disapprove of her not wearing Indian rubber gloves, for reasons of health. He vouched clean hands made for a long life, and he had spoken with admiration of Joseph Bazalgette who'd engineered the London sewage system – although Grace doubted he had ever imagined that his daughter would be cleaning some of it. That would *not* have pleased him.

'There are rats in the Ritz,' Hilda said, getting down on all fours to clean under a lacquered cabinet. 'The kitchen lads swing them by their tails at the kitchen maids. The rats run up from the Thames.' She pulled a dusty and forgotten comb out from beneath the cabinet, examined it and put it in her apron pocket.

'Your hands are dripping on the floor!' Hilda exclaimed. Grace's hands were wet from cleaning the rim of the toilet bowl. 'You are a ragamuffin. Here, look what I've got.' Hilda took a heavily starched and perfectly folded napkin from her apron pocket to reveal one piece of shortbread, dusted with exceptionally fine sugar. She held the biscuit, cupped in both hands, as one might cup the face of a small and precious child. 'Don't tell. It's from the Rivoli Bar. They serve it with the tea. Jack, one of the kitchen lads, gave it to me – he's goofy on me. Pinched my bum!' She smiled ebulliently. 'Says he'll marry me.' She checked the door to see if a guest was coming. 'One of us break it in half, the other has first pick.'

'You have it,' Grace replied. But Grace was hungry; she wanted it. She quickly rinsed her hands.

'Are you on a weight-reduction diet?'

'Yes.'

'You are quite stout. Here.' Hilda broke off a small piece and Grace put it in her mouth. The white sugar sprinkled down her front and she tried to flick it off but it clung stickily to her. The shortbread was like a mouthful of crunchy butter, almost fudgey, and the cinnamon gave it warmth. Grace wanted more. Hilda put the rest of the biscuit in her mouth, laughed, spluttered and then wiped her saliva-splattered hands on a dirty hand-towel. She bent and picked up a large crumb from the toilet floor and popped it in her mouth.

'Stay here and clean the rest of them cubicles; I'm going to the linen room to get more hand-towels,' she said, the crumbs falling from her mouth onto the gold-veined marble, commenting, 'you've had tea at the Ritz now.'

When Grace had wiped the panels of all the lavatory doors with a damp cloth, she began to polish the glass door-handles. She felt uncertain of herself, surrounded by the opulence of the Ritz, but she did at least know how to clean a bathroom. Her mother had taught her that.

'Goodness,' an elegant woman in a navy dress commented, coming into the Ladies' Powder Room and putting her parasol down on a small dressing-table, 'one can still hear the pianoforte in here. Do you notice it?' she asked, seeing Grace's face for the first time and looking at her.

Grace did. Since she had arrived in London four days ago, she had been overwhelmed by the constant noise of the city. She was

used to silence – a silence that deepened with the night and the dark and gave one space to think and expand. At night, at home – or what was once home – there were stars and starlight. Here, there were even occasional gas lamps in the street. So yes, she noticed the noise.

'Yes,' Grace replied, wiping a washbasin with the clammy cloth scrunched in her hand. Last night when she lay in the dark in the maids' dormitory, she could still hear the noise of the day; it filled her mind, surrounded it like a halo of chaos.

'I suppose one becomes familiar with noise working in Piccadilly,' the lady continued, regarding her reflection and patting the kiss curl at her temple.

Would she? Grace wondered. The Ritz – London – seemed busy. Always. Everywhere. Or at least, the fragments of the city she had seen. There were the throngs of people in the theatre of the streets. She noticed the white marble, embedded with ancient fossils, on the steps and staircases, and the flat façades of modern buildings made of stone polished into slabs of milky pearl. And the poverty, too. London was not a parish that cared for its parishioners.

The woman adjusted her pink silk turban in the mirror, applied some lipstick and retied her red belt, although Grace was aware the lady was also watching her out of the corner of her eye. The guest appeared as shiny and sleek as the Ritz itself. Grace was flushed from working, whereas the woman looked serene and slightly dewy.

'Do excuse me, I have a cold,' the guest said. She took a House of Liberty handkerchief from her sleeve and gracefully dabbed her

green eyes. She smiled brightly; her white teeth ordered and even. 'I've been waiting in the Rivoli Bar for a friend. I wonder where she can be?' She arched her eyebrows. 'Well, there's not much one can do but keep waiting, I suppose.' She smoothed her auburn hair, then looked at Grace. 'We're going to the meeting – in the Conway Hall,' she said confessionally. 'Do you subscribe?'

'To what, ma'am?' Grace asked, straightening her stained apron.

'To votes. For all women. My aunt says female emancipation is poppycock. She believes all a lady needs to know is how to make a gentleman do what she wants.' The woman clicked open the silver clasp on her clutch bag and put a leaflet on the dressing-table. 'Here. I'm supposed to distribute these. Do come.'

Grace picked up the leaflet out of politeness.

MASS MEETING

ON THE REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE ACT

SPEAKER MRS EMMELINE PANKHURST

WED NEXT 3–5

CONWAY HALL, RED LION SQUARE

Grace considered it irrelevant to her: a diversion for rich ladies, those who'd had governesses and those women – far and few between, and whom Grace envied – who were admitted to university to receive an education. As far as Grace knew, votes for women were for the most privileged; were something luxurious that only the wealthiest could afford, or would contemplate having in the first place. What use was that?

The woman put on a navy summer coat, buttoned the one enormous tortoiseshell button, glanced back at Grace and said, 'The vote is only the start. It's not all shorts and cigarettes, you know.' She straightened her silver brooch, lingering. 'If you don't mind me being so impertinent, it's only, I had an elder sister. She looked rather like you. I'm painting a portrait of her from a photograph.' The lady composed herself. 'Excuse me asking, but what's your name?'

'Grace, ma'am.'

The lady offered her hand to be shaken. 'Lady Penelope Lytton.'

Then Hilda walked in, carrying clean towels, and Grace surreptitiously put the leaflet in her apron pocket.