

55. A Shocking State of Affairs

February 2025

I found Catherine at her desk reading a letter. "This is from the golf club, their captain, Mr Greeves, has written to apologise for the discourteous reception we received at our recent visit and requesting a meeting to discuss all our demands." She handed me the letter, hand-written on Earl of Maybury Golf Club paper. I read it and passed it back, smiling broadly. "We were taken seriously after all," I said. "How very satisfactory."

"Yes, Ellen, and if the apology was not enough, Mr Greeves has invited us to be his distinguished guests at Earl of Maybury Golf Club Ladies' Summer Evening. Quite turn around, don't you think?" She put down the letter. "So what are you doing this morning?"

"I've heard young George Watkinson is home. I want to call at the vicarage to find out if he'll be available to help us again this summer. He was so useful last year: going through our paintings and so on. There's still work to be done. But I must speak to his father, I don't want any misunderstanding."

Catherine smiled. "No, one doesn't want any of that. Take care he doesn't propose again."

"For goodness sake, Catherine, that was last year. I'm hoping all that's gone and forgotten. Is there anything you want from the village?"

"Stamps from the Post Office if you're passing."

The vicarage is set in rambling grounds next to the churchyard. I propped my bicycle at the steps up to the front door and rang the bell. I was surprised when the door was opened by a grey-haired woman wearing a large cross on a gold chain. "Good morning," I said and introduced myself. "I do hope this isn't inconvenient, but I wonder, is the Reverend Watkinson at home?"

The woman stepped out pulling the door closed behind her. "I'm afraid the Reverend Watkinson is unavailable. I'm his sister and I'm staying here for a while dealing with some affairs for him."

"Oh," I replied, "It was only to ask if George would be able to continue his work at Maybury this summer. He was so useful last year."

But even as I spoke the woman was shaking her head. "I'm afraid that won't be possible."

"Oh," I said, "I am sorry. I hope everything is all right..."

We were interrupted by the sound of the vicar's voice from within, "Who is it? Who's there?"

"Nothing, William," answered the woman. "Only someone calling about George and I've told them..."

"Where is George? Who is asking?"

"William, it's all right, only someone enquiring. Nothing to worry about."

"I heard a voice..." Suddenly the Reverend Watkinson lunged into view and on seeing me, his expression changed, he pointed at me and uttered the one word: "Dirt..."

"No, Will..." said his sister, putting her hand to him. "Go back to your study. Remember you have a sermon to prepare. Remember, we chose a subject? That's right..." she closed the door and turned to me. "Miss Macpherson, I am sorry but I'm sure you can appreciate things are not as they should be."

But I wasn't listening. It was that look in his eyes, finger pointing right at me and that one word: dirt. Of course, it was only a moment, and I quickly said, "Yes of course. I'm sorry to have troubled you."

I was quite shaken. As I collected my bicycle, I glanced up at the vicarage: austere and aloof and suddenly intimidating. It seemed to suit him. As I turned to leave a shiver ran through me. I'd never felt comfortable with the man since the embarrassing episode last year and I'd vowed never to venture into the vicarage again. But to witness this today, to hear him say that one word as if... as if I was somehow tainted. But how could I know – or anyone know – what was going on in his head at that moment. I set off down the drive.

I slipped into the churchyard by the side gate. I didn't want to meet anyone. I had a most odd feeling, one that sort of shivered inside me. I took the top path, a narrow path behind the hedge to come to the corner by the wall where my brother rested and there I paused. I remembered being here with my mother in the snow at Christmas. The vicar appeared to us then and I remembered my mother's remark: 'Your vicar's a blunt sort of man. And what did he mean by a steadying hand on certain young ladies?' Suddenly, I was troubled and annoyed at the same time. Why was I letting this person have this effect? He, this man of God, had called me something horrible and the hand that pointed... the same hand that one year ago had... I found myself staring at the stone that bore my brother's name and my own hand pressed to me as if to make sure that everything about me and inside of me was me and only me. I continued though the graveyard. When I reached the Shelham family resting place I paused in its shadow to let in the quietness there, soft hum of bees, distant calls and twitter of birds. My gaze came to rest on my ring. So bright in its simple innocence. So treasured.

At the Post Office, I propped my bicycle away from the entrance as this was always a busy place. On the wall were two noticeboards, one for church notices the other for parish affairs and, as usual, there was some jostling with those wanting to read the latest village news and those hurrying in and out of the Post Office. I stood aside and let them pass. It was then I noticed Angela Russell closing the church noticeboard. She saw me and came over, saying in a low voice. "I think it's most regrettable..." she indicated over her shoulder at the notice she'd just pinned there. "You won't know of course..."

"Know what?" I asked.

"The Mothers' Union notice of future meetings," she explained. "We wanted to invite Lady Catherine to talk to us about Maybury but the vicar was there and this person he introduced as his sister. It was very strange: the way he spoke, awkward, as if finding the words was difficult. His sister had to prompt more than once. Then when our chairman, Joan, mentioned about asking Lady Shelham, he said that that wouldn't be appropriate." She leaned closer and her voice dropped to a whisper. "Ellen, it was embarrassing. There were things said that were not nice about you and her Ladyship. Really, it was quite embarrassing."

Even as she spoke I was thinking of the disturbing encounter I'd endured only minutes earlier but Angela wasn't finished. "I'm so sorry, Ellen," she said, "We never gave it a thought. You know, that the vicar would object, and then he seemed to get all tied up and couldn't explain. And to cap it all this sister of his took over. Yes, she did. She said we had to be mindful of temptations and bad influences. Now Mrs Roberts – you know, the farmer's wife – well, she was on her feet pretty quickly. 'Excuse me,' she said, 'What bad influences are you talking about?' 'The vicar has decreed,' said this person. 'That is sufficient.' 'Well, I've never heard anything of the sort,' went on Mrs Roberts, 'And if I might ask, madam, what is your concern in this?' Well, by now everyone was up in arms, talking all at once. Joan, our chairman, declared the meeting over and got up to leave. Mrs Roberts told her to stay and turned to the woman, saying, 'It's you who should go, not our

chairman. You're not a member and it's not for you to advise us mothers. That sort of talk is not welcome here. It's for you to go,' and when nothing happened, Mrs Roberts took a step closer. 'Madam, d'yer hear me?' Well, you know Mrs Roberts when she gets on her high horse... 'I'm here to support my brother,' said the woman. 'He is vicar here'." Angela paused and her voice dropped. "But the vicar seemed... well, all at sixes and sevens. Confused, staring about him and muttering such things as 'rooting out dirt and demons of desire and wilful sin.' Really, Ellen, it was most upsetting."

Such is Angela, a steady, educated woman, and I had much admiration for her but on that day she was quite nonplussed. We walked High Street together and I thanked her for telling me. We came to her cottage gate and she took my arm. "That woman singled me out," she said. "She told me I must not allow Lizzie to visit you again. I told her that my family was my business. She's a nosey troublemaker, that one, even if she is here to help her brother." On that we parted.

The coffee pot was still warm on the range, a cup and saucer nearby, milk jug on the cool marble slab. It was how we were: each would think of the other. I poured my coffee and sat on the kitchen window seat, kicked off my shoes and stretched out my legs. I wanted to take off my stockings... so I did. My legs were browning, the result of wearing shorts. We often wore shorts – ex-army tropical kit – and we didn't care what people thought. I drew up my legs and let them be uncovered. But today I presented properly dressed at the vicarage because of my respect for others. I expect others to respect me. They live their lives and so do I. Here, we are two women who live together. That is all. It is how the Good Lord made me and that was that. I opened the window to let in fresh air and common sense.

I didn't hear Catherine enter the kitchen. "I saw you come up the drive,' she said. "Any coffee left? Did you get my stamps? Oh..." she'd seen me, bare feet and bare legs, by a window open to the world. "I see..." she said, "Foot loose and fancy free. So what happened? The vicar didn't propose again, did he?"

I slowly turned to this woman I lived with – who knew me better than myself – and my tongue was tied as I had no answer for her. I stared out of the window at blue sky and soft white clouds until they blurred with the staring, until I blinked and said, "No, the vicar called me dirt. It was not nice. In fact, it was horrible." I related it all. Nothing was left out.

Catherine stood by the table, cup in hand, looking at me. "You poor, poor dear," she murmured. "What on earth happened? What was it about?"

"What do you mean: what was it about?" Now I stared at her, the upright steadiness of her. I said, "I rejected the man. A year ago I said no but it's still there: rejection and resentment. In his mind I'm dirt. That's what he called me. Even if the man's gone strange in the head, dirt is dirt. I mean, is there anything else it could be?"

"My, you are in a state," she said.

I shrugged.

"Did he touch you or anything?"

"Not this time."

"What do you mean: not this time?"

I folded over until my forehead rested on my knees and I rocked gently, eyes tight shut. "That's when it began," I said. "That evening last year, the meeting at the vicarage and when everyone else had gone he..." I took a deep breath. "He produces two glasses of sherry and sits by me and his hand... I can only say it came about as if in some quite

matter-of-fact way as if he had a God-given right to place a hand on me. 'We should be married,' he said and then his fingers sort of... Catherine, it was as if he was offering me bread and wine at the altar rail... you know... that superiority... the looking down on a kneeling woman as he presents the chalice. Ugh! You know what I mean. We put up with it because that's how it is: normal. He's the vicar and we're in church. But that night, when I asked him to please take his hand from me, he didn't... just grinned at me and said, 'Ellen, we're made for each other because God has...' well, he didn't get any further because I hit him. I hit a man of the cloth so hard the wine was sent spinning across the room." At last I unfolded myself to see confusion all over her face. "Yes, Catherine, it's hard to believe, isn't it. But it happened. You must never tell anyone, though. Never, do you understand? No one would believe us, anyway."

She came and sat behind me on the window seat and said gently, "Poor you, and you didn't tell me."

"How could I?"

"But we tell each other everything."

"I couldn't until today. That man, our vicar expected to own me and I said no. From that moment I was dirt."

"Oh Ellen... Ellen..." I felt her head sink against me. "I'm sure the man cannot be himself..."

"You weren't there."

"And you never told me. We've always talked, haven't we? How we are here: companion ladies. Isn't that how we are? The feelings we have for each other that have always been there."

"But not dirty."

"No, of course we're not dirty. Whatever that means."

"We hold hands."

"But not in public."

"We did in childhood," I shot back. "Holding hands as little children... like little children do and, yes I know, sometimes we still do."

She pressed her ring finger over mine. "Fondness from innocent childhood."

"But never in public."

"No, never in public."

"Catherine, this Sunday we go to church. Face people down!" and I thumped the seat with my hand so hard that it hurt.

56. Good Girls Go To Church

[2562]

To the sound of bells on Sunday, Catherine and I walked the High Street to church. We acknowledged the various people along the way who nodded their 'good mornings' to which we likewise replied. Yet that morning, my mind was firmly on church and vicar and I was not looking forward to either. Catherine said, "Ellen, you must not allow this man to disturb your soul." I raised my hand against the sun and thought, how can I not?

We arrived at the lychgate. I was relieved to see the vicar was not there to greet his parishioners and so, thankfully, we proceeded into the calm and peace. Ordinarily, I like our church, the organ quietly playing, gentle rustle of hymn and prayer books as sidesmen silently hand them out. As usual, we were escorted to the front and the family pew and there our sidesman stopped, unsure, for the pew was occupied. It was that woman, sister of the vicar, kneeling, hands clasped, eyes shut, face fixed, and seemingly unaware of our presence. The sidesman was embarrassed. We smiled our thanks, took the offered books and moved into the pew behind and there to join in silent prayer.

For me, though, there were no prayers, only the going back over how I came to be here today. At breakfast Catherine had suggested we go to communion and I'd said no. She didn't argue. I didn't have to repeat my distaste of him glowering down at my humbled, kneeling, self. I quickly rose to sit. She in front remained kneeling, grey bob under frumpy hat, starched white collar hiding the gold chain from which, I knew, would be hanging the wooden cross. A choir boy came to arrange the reading on the lectern. A shaft of sunlight snatched at the gilt on the alter hanging. Suddenly, the organ boomed and everyone stood.

And so the service began. The procession, choir and clergy... and there he was, upright and righteous. Why this effect on me? One year since and one word. First hymn and I sang with all my might. Prayers and first psalm – the Lord is – I knew by heart and from that moment all seemed as it should, as if nothing bad had ever come about. The man was as normal as... I fixed on him but he looked everywhere else. As if I wasn't there. As if all was normal. Then came the sermon. The man mounted the steps and there, for a moment, he hesitated, the paper in his hand shaking. A chorister – clearly prepared – came forward to prompt but was waved away, a glance at the sister, and the sermon began. The voice filled every part of the church, and now I fixed on him hard. He stared ahead, right ahead, as far as the tower and beyond, as if no one mattered. At one point he caught me and I held him... held and he faltered. The chorister stepped up again, was waved away... and the delivery of sermon carried on and the gaze drifted away to settle somewhere but where doesn't matter...

Outside, the sun still shone.

Outside, there seemed an air of relief. The vicar was nowhere to be seen. Folk drifted away and no one mentioned anything about what everyone had witnessed because it wasn't the sort of thing for polite folk. Now he was gone. We fell in with the Roberts family and away from the church Mrs Roberts asked Catherine about giving her talk to the Women's Institute. It was then I saw him. Something made me turn... a casual glance and there he was, striding through the churchyard, vestment billowing, striding on, sister hurrying to keep up. Now the path was empty. He was gone from us. I said, "I don't know what came over me. I thought it was behind, forgotten. Then, suddenly, he's here again... Ugh!"

"Come on," said Catherine taking my arm to draw it through hers. "Let's go home."

Next morning I was on the grand stairs when I heard the telephone ringing in the hall. Catherine called from the drawing room. "Ellen, did I hear the telephone?" I was halfway down when it stopped ringing. One has to remember these were the days of the telephone operator and at Maybury that was the village Post Office. Catherine would have none of it. "The village will know everything before we do," she said. "The telephone is out of bounds." Out of use and out of sight behind goodness knows what. But now it was ringing again and I couldn't find it. And now it was stopped. "Oh stupid thing..." and I stumped back upstairs.

It rang again. Catherine swore as she swept aside coats and sou'westers. "Oh where the devil is it? Why can one never find the... Oh here it is. Hello." She pressed the receiver to an ear. "Hello, yes..."

Curious, I came to lean my ear against hers. She clamped a hand over the mouthpiece. "Ellen, do we know anyone called Bishop?" Then taking her hand away, said, "Operator, do you have the correct number? We are... what was that?" a squeaky female voice leaped out of the earpiece, "BISHOP FROM THE CATHEDRAL!"

We stared at each other. Only for a moment before I moved away after hearing only bits of a one-sided conversation. Catherine clamped the mouthpiece again. "Ellen, the bishop wishes to see me. This is his secretary speaking. Something to do with the church council. Quite urgent, apparently." She pressed the receiver to her ear. "Yes, of course. I can manage tomorrow morning. At his residence... the summer residence. At ten-thirty. Yes, of course... and please inform His Grace I do look forward to meeting him. Thank you. Good bye." She replaced the telephone and looked round at me. "Ellen, where does the bishop live?" I could only shrug. "Well, can you take me there, please?"

But for what and why: we were at a total loss.

Somehow, from long ago in the earl's time, I seemed to remember the bishop lived not far away in the country. But there'd been a war since and so many changes. In a flash of inspiration I caught our postman delivering letters. He said the palace was just off the main road into town, a couple of miles after the big double bend and it's on the right, a large Georgian house down an avenue of lime trees.

I turned the car through open gates into a courtyard and stopped at a large door.

"Give me an hour," said Catherine and got out. The door was opened by an unseen person. She went inside and the door closed.

I drove on into town, the bank, then to the coffee shop to enjoy a cup and watch the owner as he weighed out coffee onto sheets of paper to fold into bags and tie with string. The scent was wonderful. An hour quickly passed and by now very eager to hear what Catherine had to say, I hurried back. I was greeted by a young man who introduced himself as the bishop's chaplain. "His Grace invites you to join him and Lady Shelham for luncheon. Please do come in." This was unexpected but of course I accepted.

I was shown into a drawing room, comfortably furnished, scent of polish, portraits of vested clergy along oak panelled walls, ponderous chime of a clock. I heard Catherine's voice, she sounded subdued but I was bursting to know what all this was about. Yet, of course, politeness precluded my asking. She came in followed by a small rotund man with shock of white hair and wearing a clerical collar who took both my hands in his.

"Miss, Macpherson, Bishop Stanley, how very pleased I am to meet you. Lady Shelham has described to me your circumstances at Maybury Park. I feel it is so right what you do there. Now, please let us take our places for luncheon." We were conducted into a dining room. I was intrigued as to what circumstances Catherine had described. The bishop stood behind his chair at the head, indicated Catherine to his right, me to his left. The table was set precisely: white tablecloth, silverware, napkins on side plates, condiments, everything as it should be. An elderly lady in pinafore served helpings of shepherd's pie. I looked at Catherine, she at me. Did she mouth the words 'loaves and fishes'? I'm not sure but each portion was so small it was obvious that the bishop was sharing repast with us. However, as each plate was quickly cloaked in cabbage, it didn't matter. The bishop gave thanks and we took our seats. He served water, we sat hands in our laps, and I was reminded of earlier gracious times. And now conversation could begin.

"Now, Miss Macpherson, you must tell me about yourself. I understand you served in the Italian campaign. Awarded the Military Medal. You must be very proud. I can't claim anything of the sort. I was a chaplain in the Air Force during the Battle for Britain, padre as we were styled on station. But the squadron was posted abroad and I was retired. Too old, they said. Hah... never too old. Isn't that so?" He grinned at the pinafored lady who had reappeared to serve equally small apple dessert, but she didn't answer. "And never too young. Isn't that so, Lady Shelham? Never too young: fine young women that you are. Here to do good work." He took up his spoon and silence fell. And I never got to say very much.

Catherine remained quiet as I turned the car out of the courtyard and headed for Maybury. "Has the bishop sworn you to silence?" But her face was fixed on the road ahead. "Catherine, are you all right?"

"Of course I am," she said. "Rather a shock, that's all. The Reverend Watkinson is dead."

I pulled the car over to the side of the road. "Good Heavens..."

"On Monday morning his sister found him at the bottom of the stairs. The Bishop was informed yesterday and called me immediately. Ellen, you won't believe what he's asked me to do."

"Go on..."

"He has requested that I reconvene the parochial church council. Ellen, I have to do this to appoint a new vicar. And do so as soon as possible." She took a deep breath. "The bishop has informed – with greatest curtesy of course – that as the highest ranked in the parish, it is a duty one must carry out. I said I'm only twenty-five but he dismissed that with a waved of the hand and said that Edward the sixth was only nine when he was crowned."

"Good Lord," was all I could think to say.

"Ellen, one does most sincerely wish for the good Lord but..." at that she faltered and pressed her hands to the dashboard. "Please drive on," she demanded. "Drive to the Roberts. They will know."

"Wait a minute," I said, "Why are we doing this?"

"We have to make a start. Now please drive on."

"Catherine, why 'we'?"

"Because..." she faltered again. "Please, Ellen, let us do it together."

I slipped the car into gear and we moved off.

However, at Maybury gates I stopped. "Catherine, this is for you to do. Not me. Tell me about it later." I got out and held the door for her. She said not a word but head high and face set, she slid into the driving seat and drove off. Quite the earl's daughter, I thought, and smiled for her proudly.

Four o'clock came and she wasn't back. I made a pot of tea. Of course I wasn't worried. Only curious. I'd been working on one of the flower beds, wearing boots and dungarees, digging out bramble and nettle. Unable to wait any longer, I put away the spade and set off on my bicycle down the back drive to the farm.

Why?

I wasn't worried. Why should I be worried?

There was no sign of the Alvis at the farm gate. Or inside the yard. Always so tidy, only a few hens pecking about. Had she gone back? Would she be wondering where I was since my empty cup and saucer would still be on the kitchen table? I peddled back along the track. But she wouldn't have come this way. Not in the car. Then I heard voices. I was by the walled garden and I heard her... the other side... inside the garden. The wall was tumbled here. I propped the bicycle and clambered up the loose piles of bricks to see Catherine addressing Mr Hoskins, the gardener.

"Really, Mr Hoskins, I don't think this is safe for you. Onions or not, it really is not safe. Oh..." she'd seen me. "What are you doing here? Ellen, this wall is not safe. Really, you should know better. What are you doing here, anyway?" I carefully made my way down into the garden and dusted my hands on my dungarees. Mr Hoskins touched his cap and I nodded to him. "I just came looking, that's all." I don't think Catherine quite believed me.

"Well, since you're here," she said, "Mr Hoskins has kindly agreed to join the church council. Or I should say: re-join as he was a member before the war. The Roberts as well. So isn't that good? And we've arranged to have our first meeting on Thursday afternoon in the church and we hope others will come along too. Now, Mr Hoskins, I don't want you working near this wall again. Do you understand? It is not safe." Then to me, "Mr Hoskins has built a shelter here against the wall to dry his onions but it keeps crumbling away." There was a steady grin from under the old gentleman's cap. I could have smiled: Catherine in her smart city wear fresh from visiting the bishop, expounding like this about an onion shelter. She noticed I wasn't listening and with a brief nod to the gardener, came away.

"Things to talk about," she said quietly. "Let's go to our special place."

As usual we were greeted by the quietness and easement there. As it always had, always did. Still does. We sat close together. She unpinned her hat, slipped off her jacket. I pressed my hands together, waiting.

"Mrs Roberts knew about you and the vicar." For a moment I wasn't sure I'd heard correctly, then I froze. "Sorry," she went on, "I thought you should know, that's all. As I was leaving, Mrs Roberts took me aside. She had worked it out. Quite astute, that woman. She said he was never the same after his wife passed away. When you were present, he had wandering eyes. That was how she put it."

"For God's sake," I blurted out.

"But since he's dead he can't hurt you anymore."

"Hurt me, hurt me! How many know of this?"

"No one. Mrs Robert's is safe."

"Oh for God's sake..."

RETURN TO MAYBURY

"Ellen, it's over. He's gone. Put it behind."

I lifted my eyes to that place, to allow its enfolding calm to take me and steady me.

"Catherine, why have you told me this?"

She shrugged. "One should know these things. You and I don't have secrets."