

Phyllis, 1979

When I came out of prison my hair was white. I think it was a shock for them all, but for the children especially.

I'd had brown hair before but now it was yellowing white, like the mane of an old wooden rocking-horse. They hadn't set eyes on me for such a time: it must have seemed to them that there had been a horrible substitution, like in Little Red Riding Hood when the wolf is in the lacy bed, where the grandmother should have been. Here was this haggish-looking old person instead of their mother. My clothes must have seemed very drab, too. And then of course prisons smell awful. The lack of fresh air makes everything musty and stale, and the tar-tang of regulation soap sticks to your skin and of course your clothes aren't laundered. Heaven knows what I must have smelled of, when they came forward to be embraced. It was the first time they'd touched me for I don't know how long. They were pretty reluctant about it, shuffling when their aunt prodded them to come towards me, not that I really blame them.

They all thought it was the awfulness of prison that had made me old, like those old wives' tales where someone sees a ghost and goes white overnight from the shock, but the truth was simply that one couldn't get one's hair dyed. Hair dye was not provided, and why should it have been? It was meant to be a punishment, not a hairdressing salon. Some of the women combed shoe-polish into their hair, close to the head around the parting, but since we were only allowed black shoes there was just the regulation black shoe-polish, so that wouldn't have worked for me.

Of course I had never been the beauty of the family, but my hair was the one thing people had admired; it was long and abundant, not quite the colour of a conker, although that is how people did describe it. Someone said to me once, when I was young, that my hair was as glossy as the

flank of a well-stabled horse, and it is true that it did have a great deal of shine. I don't think I am being vain in saying so. When we were children our nurse used the tall tin jug which lived in the nursery bathroom to rinse our hair and she would add a few drops of malt vinegar to the water, for extra shine. She had a habit of pressing then sliding her wet palms close against our heads, to be certain all the soap had come out. Our hair squeaked beneath the firmness of her touch. I liked the feeling of her hands pressing against my skull, but the others would complain terribly. I don't suppose people use a jug to rinse their hair any longer, do they? Now people have those rubber tubes you fit over the bath taps, with nozzles on the end like a watering can. They have the same slightly scorched smell as hot water bottles. I rather like it.

My mother had gone grey in her late thirties and I was the same. I'd been having my hair dyed for some years before prison. Both my sisters knew this perfectly well, but somehow Patricia allowed the children's fright to affect her, so that she began to believe herself that it was something that had happened in an instant. I know that is what she used to tell people, as if it was some sort of fable or story. 'My sister was sent to jail and her hair turned white.' It was one of those things that snowballed, rather, until everyone in the family believed it had happened from the upset of it all.

But I wasn't upset. I did not mind being imprisoned. Well, that is not really true; I did mind very much, of course. Being separated from the children, taken out of one's home and set down among hostile strangers, kept under lock and key; and the catalogue of daily smells, urine and carbolic and a sticky, fishy smell like wallpaper paste . . . But the thing was, I thought I deserved it. What I did was terrible. Terrible. The shame of it will never leave me until my dying day. Such a stupid, sordid thing and yet I believed it to have had a terrible consequence.

Had it not been for my weakness, someone who is now dead could still be alive. That is what I believed and consequently lived with every day in prison.

I. Sussex, June 1938

Both her sisters had offered to put them up while they found a house. In some ways Phyllis would have preferred to stay with Nina, even though things would have been more cramped. As it was, Hugh favoured staying with Patricia, whose house would be so much more comfortable; and as ever Hugh prevailed. But what rankled was that Hugh hoped to have business in town over the coming weeks and probably wouldn't be with them for more than two or three days a week. It was his wife who would be spending all her time with one sister or another, and not himself. When Phyllis ventured this point, he looked blank.

'I can't see what that has to do with it,' he said.

'Well, what I meant was, it's me who'll have to be beholden. And I don't like to feel indebted to Patricia.'

'You should be indebted to Nina, if we were her guests. It doesn't make any difference, surely,' said Hugh. 'It won't be for long, so you need not concern yourself. Patricia will enjoy having you.'

And there the subject was closed.

On the train down to Sussex the children had irritated their father by kicking their legs against the heating grille beneath the seats, until he had remonstrated with Phyllis to stop them. Unaccustomed to matters of discipline where the children were concerned – overseas she had always had a girl of some sort, to look after the children – she hesitated before murmuring in their direction. The two girls desisted, but their younger brother did not.

‘Couldn’t you tell Edwin a story or something?’ Phyllis asked Julia, conscious of a note of pleading in her voice. The eldest of the three, Julia had her nose in one of her mother’s old detective stories, but something in the bored droop of her shoulders suggested she was not lost in her book.

‘What about?’ asked Julia.

‘I don’t know, darling. Anything.’

But the younger girl, Frances, had stepped in with an impromptu tale of elves, talking sparrows and magical shoes. Heaven only knew where she dreamed up such things. Hugh read the newspaper while his wife looked out of the window. She had not been back to England for three years and then only very briefly, for Nina’s wedding. Now the fields seemed almost absurdly green, the colour of new peas still bright in the pod. It made her happy, to see such vividness: from the boat the cliffs at Dover had looked so dingy, like the cut side of a stale loaf of bread, and the earth above the dull chalk had seemed as scant as a smear of Bovril. It was hard to believe that such thin soil could support the growth even of grass, let alone flowers, or vegetables; still less trees. Looking homeward with eagerness from the deck of the ferry it had felt disappointing, suddenly, to see that sturdy England was built on such thin earth. To the right, towards Broadstairs, the land was like a line drawn with a soft grey pencil, between a sky and sea likewise grey. This was not as Phyllis wanted England to be, not as England was in her memory. Their few days in London afterwards had presented no less dreary a picture, a constant drizzling rain smudging the streets, blurring the outlines of the buildings. But today the sun was shining and the world was bright and full of colour.

It was early June. Phyllis and Hugh could have stayed on to spend the summer in Belgium, but it had seemed prudent to arrive home in plenty of time to find a house, before Edwin started prep school in the autumn. Julia, who was fourteen, had

already been boarding at Coombe Park for a year; her twelve-year-old sister Frances would now join her there. And there would be things for the children to do here in England, to keep them occupied over the summer. In one or two of her letters, Nina had mentioned summer camps which she and Eric were somehow involved in putting on, along the coast at nearby Pagham or Selsey. They were tremendous fun, she said, and the children could join in, making camp-fires and playing games and sea-bathing, or doing handicrafts and PE.

Phyllis felt rather let down that Patricia did not meet them at the station herself, but sent a driver, a rather elderly man called Hitchens who did the garden and various other outdoor jobs at Rose Green, as well as what Greville called 'ferrying us about'. Greville was never specific when he could be vague; whether this signalled inability to grasp a point, or only unwillingness, was a question his wife's sisters had often returned to. He tended to move his arms about a lot when he spoke, as if attempting to fill in the details which were missing in the sketched picture of his conversation.

The car turned right on to a gravel drive which ran between a dark hedge of holly and hornbeam. Presently one side opened on to pasture enclosed within rails of park fencing, while to the other was a small beechwood. Green light filtered through the trees. As the drive curved leftwards, the front came into view: two storeys faced in pale Portland stone with eight generous windows, four above and four below, and a sturdy two-pillared portico. It was a pretty house, more distinguished than architecturally interesting. Patricia stood waiting for them by the main door, her fair hair waved, a double string of heavy pearls at her throat, a creamy silk blouse tucked into a narrow, belted skirt. At first glance she was beautiful, with perfectly round grey-green eyes like marbles and a small nose with just a little dent in

it. But the very symmetry of her features created a sort of blankness in her expression which became either maddening or mesmerizing to people as they grew to know her.

‘You’ve cut off your hair!’ said Phyllis. Patricia raised an automatic hand to her neck.

‘Have I? I must have done it ages ago. Hello, Julia, Edwin. Frances! You’ve grown!’

The children hung back, blushed. Hugh leant forward to kiss Patricia’s cheek, although neither spoke any words of greeting. Phyllis, taller than her sister, embraced Patricia, inhaling the particular scent of her which in contrast to her appearance was oddly masculine; a smell like bracken, or moorland.

‘Would you like to go up straight away, or come through for some tea?’ Patricia asked, leading them in.

‘Go up, just for a minute or two, if you don’t mind,’ said Phyllis.

Hugh stood with a hand on the round hall table, while the women chattered up the stairs, the three children behind them.

‘Antonia is out on her pony,’ Patricia was explaining, ‘but she’s simply longing to see you all. She’ll be back very soon.’

‘Where’s Greville?’ asked Phyllis.

‘Oh, he’s somewhere,’ said Patricia. ‘You know what he’s like.’

Patricia led the way. Phyllis was shown into a high-ceilinged room facing the garden, with a duck-egg blue Chinese paper of birds, while the children’s rooms – lower, with high mahogany beds – were along the nursery corridor, near the top of the back stairs.

‘Come down to the drawing room, when you’re ready,’ said Patricia.

Alone for the first time that day, Phyllis sat down at the dressing table which stood between the two windows. She looked not at herself, but out at the garden. Flower beds lined with low box

hedges were flanked by gravel paths which lay to either side of an expanse of lawn, with shallow steps down to a stone pond at the far end, where a deep ha-ha gave on to an orchard. The walled kitchen garden, with its fruit nets and long glasshouse, was to the left. To the right was the fenced paddock beside the drive. The light was soft, buttery. Why was the light here so different from Belgium, Phyllis wondered, when the distance between the two places was not so very great? She thought that it must be because Belgium essentially faced north, whereas here in Sussex things inclined south, towards the sun. In Belgium everything seemed harder: shutters instead of curtains and so much spiky wrought-iron work and tall, slender windows glinting an evasive slate colour. Looking now across the summer lawn, her earlier misgivings about staying with Patricia melted away. It was lovely to be back. Phyllis felt, for the first time since their arrival on home shores, a sense of grateful belonging.

A tea-table had been set up by the drawing-room window, with a cloth of drawn-thread work and a covered muffin dish and a fat silver tea-pot, like a sultan's headdress, on a silver trivet.

'Tea is always the best thing, in England,' said Hugh, taking a little sandwich. 'Tea and breakfast, actually. It's the luncheons and dinners that let the side down. On the Continent it's the other way around. Filthy food last night, wasn't it?'

'We had dinner at the hotel,' Phyllis explained. 'Lord knows what it was. Something brown.'

'It was mutton, wasn't it?' said Frances.

'Kedgeree! Now there's a thing,' said Hugh. 'One doesn't see kedgeree, abroad.'

'Should you like it?' asked Patricia. 'It's too late, I think, to arrange it for tomorrow morning; but the day after, I'm sure we could have it, if you'd like. Do say, if there are things you long for.'

Just then there were footsteps in the hall, and Greville and Antonia appeared, both smiling broadly as if they had very recently shared a joke. Greville's frame appeared slightly too small to support his features, like an ex-jockey. His daughter, at thirteen, had spread in all directions, her wide knees and general ampleness very evident in her jodhpurs. The tea-cups rattled on their delicate saucers at her approach. Phyllis felt a pang of fellow-feeling for her niece. She had always been called a heffalump as a girl, while both her sisters were svelte. Phyllis had hardly eaten for weeks before her wedding, but with limited success. It was living in South America that had finally seen the end of her chubbiness. To meet her now, no one would have guessed that she had once been otherwise: she was tall and slender and there was a slight forward tilt to her frame; like someone in a play stepping eagerly out of French windows, racket in hand, towards an imaginary game of tennis.

'Ah good, you've got everything,' said Greville, as if he had seen Phyllis and Hugh only minutes, and not years, before.

'Say hello to your cousins, Antonia,' said her mother.

The girl went red. 'Hello,' she said, not quite looking in their direction.

'Good ride?' asked Phyllis.

'Not too bad. It was more of a lesson, really,' said Antonia.

'Would help if she knew one end of the beast from the other, wouldn't it, Tiddly-wink?' said Greville.

'Can I see your pony, after tea?' asked Edwin.

'What a good idea!' said Patricia. 'You can take them all out, to see Dingle. They're probably not used to ponies.'

Antonia blushed deeper.

'Actually, I had a pony of my own, in Argentina,' said Julia.

'Journey go all right?' Greville asked.

'Absolutely,' said Hugh.

'So nice that you could come,' said Greville. 'We've got

people in to dine tomorrow, but it's us four, tonight; give you time to settle in. Is that right, darling?'

'Yes,' said Patricia. 'We've got the Templetons, and Johnny Thredham – who's just got back, you know – and Pammy and John Nightingale. Oh, and Anita Orde-Windham. She's coming on her own, because Richard's still in Kenya. And Pea-Brain will probably look in, after dinner.'

Phyllis had never heard of any of these people before, but noticed what pleasure the reciting of their names had given her sister. Greville knew a tremendous amount of people – it was one of the things that had made Patricia plump for him.

'What about Nina and Eric?' asked Phyllis.

There was silence, for the barest moment.

'We thought it would be more fun for you to go over to them, when you're settled,' said Patricia brightly. 'Perhaps the day after tomorrow? See their new house.'

'Peculiar sort of place,' said Greville.

'You must show me round the garden,' said Hugh.

'Oh yes,' said Greville vaguely.

'The garden's more my department,' said Patricia.

'Oh yes, of course,' said Hugh. 'Well, I'm sure Phyllis would adore to see it all. I should certainly enjoy a tour.'

It was not until after dinner that night that the sisters found themselves alone together. Leaving the men at the table to their port, the women went into Patricia's little sitting room, which gave off the hall. It was a pretty room, with a chintz of climbing roses and a walnut desk with a tortoiseshell and silver inkwell and matching letter-opener and stamp-box. Here she wrote her letters and household lists in the mornings, on cards as smooth and stiff as a starched collar, printed with her name and address. Patricia had never looked prettier, her sister thought. Her shorter hair made a golden frame to the picture of her face.

‘So, darling, tell all. How has it been, really?’ said Patricia.

‘Well, it was dreadfully cold in the winter, foggy; especially after Argentina. But I had a nice local woman for the children, so they’re all fluent now. I feel languages are so useful.’

‘Do you?’ said Patricia.

‘Well, aren’t they? Hugh always says so. Of course I missed all of you awfully,’ Phyllis said. ‘One minds the lack of female company the most.’

‘I can’t imagine there was anyone very interesting for you to talk to.’

‘No.’

‘And Hugh?’

‘Well, you know. He can be difficult. But he made great friends with some very nice people, so that helped. They had us shooting, backgammon parties, bridge, that sort of thing. But one never liked to get too fond of anyone, knowing we wouldn’t be there for ever. And he’s always best when he has a scheme to be working on and the rubber people kept him pretty continuously occupied. So he was busy.’

‘But what now?’

‘I know,’ sighed Phyllis.

‘Is he still . . .?’ Patricia grinned at her sister.

‘Demanding, do you mean? I fear so, yes. I mean, I wouldn’t mind sometimes, but not every day.’

‘I think you’re jolly lucky, actually. Greville has to be coaxed like anything.’

‘Funny how different they all are, men. It’s a pity one can’t tell, just by looking at them.’

‘Quite,’ said Patricia.

Hugh Forrester had worked for British Rubber ever since leaving the navy after the war, but in the spring the company had made it known that there would not be another posting for him. Nor was he to be offered the London directorship he had

expected. For the time being, instead, Hugh would go into the head office once or twice a week, to advise. He had invested soundly over the years, so income was not the trouble. But he was a man who disliked idleness, who enjoyed having people to oversee, things to do. He had been a Commander during the war and put in charge of various important things, all very hush-hush. It was said among the family that he had been instrumental in the setting up of naval intelligence, although it was not something he himself ever mentioned. He was efficient and good at detail; he could be pedantic. He would be ill-suited to retirement, his wife thought.

Hugh was getting on for sixty, although he looked much younger. He was still a handsome man. At the time of their marriage, people had said that Phyllis was lucky to have got such a good-looking husband, even if he was twenty-four years her senior. Hugh's posture was very distinct, very fine. People meeting him for the first time were always struck by this and often ventured, on the strength of it, that he would be a highly competent horseman. In fact, he disliked horses – a dog was one thing, he always said, while a horse was very much another – and did not ride.

'I'm sure Hugh will find plenty of things to do,' Patricia said. 'He's very clever, after all.'

'Oh yes,' said Phyllis. 'I'm sure.'

'I long to know what you'll make of Nina's place,' Patricia went on.

'Is it awful?' asked Phyllis.

'Fairly.'

They both laughed.

'I liked Eric, at the wedding,' said Phyllis. 'And from her letters she seems very contented, I must say. They seem always to be doing things, these camps and so on.'

'I don't know when Nina turned into such a busy little person.'

'What do you mean? She's always been like it.'

‘I suppose. In any event, they’re always at it. Party business, I mean; these summer camps. No sign of any little mechanics, though.’

‘Eric’s not a mechanic! You are naughty.’

‘A garagist, then.’

‘I do hope she will have a baby before too long. She is getting on. I mean, she’s thirty-six. One wouldn’t want her to’ve left it too late.’

‘I’m sure they’re doing their best,’ said Patricia, deadpan. They laughed again.

‘I don’t know that I’ve got anything very suitable for your party tomorrow night,’ it occurred to Phyllis. ‘I didn’t put anything smart in with the things we were bringing. I think my good evening clothes are still with the carriers.’

‘It’s hardly a party. Just a few friends for dinner. You can borrow something of mine,’ said her sister.

Phyllis remembered trying on both her older sisters’ clothes as a girl, when she had been too bulky to fit into them; how coolly Patricia, the eldest, had looked on as hooks and buttons refused to meet their partnering eyes and buttonholes; how Nina had tried to cover up Phyllis’s shame by draping their mother’s ostrich-feather stole theatrically over the girl’s shoulders and telling her she looked wonderful. Now Phyllis would be able to do up Patricia’s dresses with ease, although they would always be too short for her.

In their room later Hugh sat upright against the padded bedhead while Phyllis was at the dressing table, putting on her cold cream.

‘Greville’s less of a fool than he seems,’ he announced.

‘Really? I thought you always found him rather maddening.’

‘Once you get him talking about anything serious he’s actually pretty sound, I’d say. Once one gets through the waffle.’

‘Oh good,’ said Phyllis, absently. ‘He absolutely dotes on Antonia, have you noticed? He beams every time she opens her mouth.’

‘Knows some interesting types, too. I’m going to dine with him at his club next week, meet one or two of them.’

‘Patricia will keep rattling off all these names. I can’t take half of it in.’

Hugh always fell asleep first, lapsing into a light but regular snore which punctuated the night like a metronome. Phyllis lay on her back in the dark, conscious of the silence outside. The sights of the day unspooled in her mind’s eye: the brick backs of London houses seen from the train, with their rows of washing pegged out in the early summer sun; the hedges and the fields and the tussocky pasture; the Sussex lanes shaded by elms which reached far overhead, their branches meeting like gothic arches. Outside in the velvety darkness all around lay England. In the still air and in meadows and marshes and country towns; in smooth rivers and deep woods; at the edges of pastures where cattle dozed. Near to them now in the sleeping house was the sea, quietly lapping in sheltered inlets where little boats bobbed on the black water, safe in the shallow harbours of home. Home. Even thinking the word made her chest catch with a little jolt of happiness.

2. Sussex, June 1938

There were only three weeks to go until the first campers arrived for the summer season and Nina's pencil had already been sharpened and resharpened so that just a stub barely three inches long remained. It was all the lists she'd had to draw up. Extraordinary, how much there was to do. There was shin of beef for a hundred and twenty to get in for stew on the first night, as well as the sausages for breakfast the following morning. If they had sausages every morning it would cost God knows what and with a long season ahead it was important to stick to budget from the start. But you couldn't not give people meat for breakfast, so the plan was to have bacon and egg one day, sausage and tomato the next; with black pudding once a week on Saturdays. Ninety-eight were booked in for the first week, but it was as well to over-cater, in case more turned up. If the weather was fine you always had to count on stragglers. Nina had already ordered in the vegetables and eggs for the first two or three days, along with quantities of milk and tea and sugar. Her predecessor had warned her that they always ran out of sugar, since some people took as many as three spoonfuls in their tea. She had taken the precaution of ordering in what seemed an unfeasible amount, but at least it could find other uses, in custard and pies and crumbles for pudding and so forth. She just prayed it wouldn't be damp before the cooks found somewhere sensible to store the stuff, or it would form a rock. She was pleased with herself at having secured bread and buns for the camp at no charge, for the duration. This was thanks to Mr Pugh, who owned three bakeries in the area. He was a keen member

himself, and would be attending during week three, with his family.

Normally the camp kitchen was overseen by Big Jim, who came from Worthing, and Little Jim, from Hornsea: they generally took charge of ordering and arranging delivery of comestibles. Nina couldn't remember what had been done, in previous years, before such duties fell to herself. Had Big Jim – who knew what he was doing, having been in charge of an army field kitchen – come a day or two early, to sort out the orders? She rather thought he had. This time neither of the Jims were arriving until the first day, a mistake in the planning which exasperated her all the more for being her own fault. There were a significant number of children and young people this year: should they be allocated the same quantities as the grown-ups, or did children eat less? Someone had said, rather alarmingly, that the young – the teenaged contingent – ate much more than adults, their appetites stimulated by the sea air and activities. The butcher would know, perhaps. She added 'ask butcher to advise' to the catering list. All the lists were already too long. She'd received the 30/- subscription from most of the people who'd booked in advance, but there were always latecomers it was difficult to budget in advance for. She would have to set tasks, that's what Eric was always telling her. It was no good offering people a choice; nothing ever got done if folk were at liberty to pick and choose for themselves. Everyone went for the easy jobs, then. There was a meeting of the Women's Committee the following evening, which gave her time to decide which jobs to hand out to which people. It paid to be decisive.

Jennifer Talbot Smith was a nuisance. Meddlesome. She had been in charge of the Women's Committee when Nina first joined the local group and had been among those who had been asked to stand down from official posts, a few months back, when changes were being made from the top down. Noses were

out of joint. While it was true that the woman had plenty of experience, innovation had never been her strong suit. Whenever Nina proposed something new – however small, it could be something as minor as arranging a children’s entertainer to come to camp for an afternoon – she always looked affronted, as if each idea was somehow an insult to the glorious memory of her captaincy. Nina had to tread on eggshells, with Jennifer and her clique. Now that her sister Phyllis was back, Nina hoped she’d be able to get her to come and help. It would be useful to have an extra pair of hands, especially now, in camp season. And Phyllis had a natural mildness; people were never riled by her. She would be a useful adjunct.

It irked, slightly, that Patricia couldn’t be persuaded to do more. The trouble with Patricia – one of the troubles with Patricia – was she had too much time on her hands. She never really committed herself to anything, never rolled up her sleeves or got her hands dirty, literally or otherwise. She drifted. Same thing with Greville. They gave the odd donation and came to an occasional meeting and provided dinner and a bed to some of the most senior speakers who came down from London, usually people Greville had some connection with. But you couldn’t rely on them when it came to actual nuts and bolts.

Phyllis came to visit after lunch on her third day. Patricia had suggested she leave Julia and Frances and Edwin at Rose Green, where Antonia could entertain them for the afternoon. Phyllis thought it more likely that it would be her three who would be required to keep their cousin amused: Antonia seemed rather a listless sort of girl.

‘Won’t you come, too?’ asked Phyllis.

‘No, darling, you go alone. Nina will like having you to herself. And anyway, I’ve got no end of things to catch up with,

letters to write and so on. I've done nothing but yak since you got here.'

Nina's house stood a little way along from the garage, set back from the road politely, like someone waiting to be introduced. It was constructed of the local brick, with flint detail above each window, like pale eyebrows. Before the road was made it had been a small farmhouse and there was still a duck pond to one side, which Nina referred to as 'our puddle'. The ceilings were low; there was an inglenook fireplace and beams and doors with latches instead of porcelain knobs.

'How's Greville?' asked Nina straight away. 'Is he driving you potty?'

'No, he's actually being very kind. He's taking Hugh to his club today to introduce him to some people.'

Nina raised her eyebrows and smirked. Hers was the most expressive of the three sisters' faces, a page on which everything was written in clear ink. She was attractive rather than pretty, the neatness of her nose and mouth shown off to especial advantage in profile. It was a face whose animation suggested humour, although she was not in truth much of a wit. When she smiled too widely the line of her gums became visible above and below her rather small teeth.

They took a turn around the house and the garden before sitting down. Phyllis told her sister about Belgium and their house there, how the children had got on abroad and her concerns for Frances and Edwin, starting at new schools. She fretted about Edwin in particular. He was still very young to be going away from home. Although, as she said ruefully, they had no home just yet. Nina was always easier to talk to than Patricia, who seemed to have caught from her husband a habit of permanent distraction, as if she were always expecting an important telephone call and had only half an ear on what was being said.

'Hugh talks of building a house. It's something he's always

dreamed of. You know how he has such a lot of opinions about everything.’

‘So he’s threatening to put some of them into practice?’ said Nina, grinning.

‘He has strong views about which direction windows should face to encourage a house to air properly, that sort of thing.’ Phyllis sighed.

‘Will you stay with Patricia, then, for the duration?’

‘Oh no, I’m sure not. Heaven knows how long it might take, finding somewhere to build and then doing the drawings and all that: we’d be there for ever. No. We’ll find somewhere to rent, I’m sure.’

‘I’ll ask about, if you like. What with my committees and Eric’s, and the garage, we know a fair number of people around here. That is, if you’re planning to settle around here?’

‘Oh, we are. I’d want to be near you both, of course. You can’t imagine how much I’ve missed you. But I’ve been gabbling and I haven’t heard nearly enough about you. You must tell me about it all, your work.’

‘It’s very exciting. I do want you to get involved, it’d give you such a lot to keep yourself busy with, once the children have gone back to school; and I really think one has a duty to help out. I’m just a local beaver, of course, but we get some tremendous speakers: big-wigs very often come down from London and give talks, you know. There’s so much to do, what with meetings and committees and the newsletter and various other pamphlets and what-not. Eric’s very big on all that side of things. Editing, dealing with the printers and suchlike. You know me, I like to be useful. I like the practical day-to-day stuff.’

‘I remember it was always you who groomed the ponies, at home. All Patricia and I wanted was the riding out. It was always you who cleaned the tack for all three of us. Daddy was livid when he found out, after he’d made such a point of us each