

Bonnets To Breeches

By Elizabeth Carney-Marsh

Chapter 1

Leaving London

I remember the glass, cold on my forehead as I leant on the window looking out at the dark city disappearing before me. I had never been out of London before. I knew I was going north to the county of Nottinghamshire, the rest was a little vague. I wondered with a hollow clawing feeling in my chest what my parents were doing right now. It was late and my Father would have closed the pharmacy for the day and sorted deliveries and scripts for the following morning. Mother would have gotten tea ready and they would be eating by a single candle so as not to invite the Zeppelins.

Would they shout my name up the stairs like they sometimes did, calling me down for supper? Or would they be cross that I hadn't helped either of them do the jobs that needed doing? When would they find my letter? Oh God, what had I done? I didn't want to cause them any more pain than they had already been through losing my brothers Sydney and Harry in the hell of a war. But I could no longer be the good little daughter keeping house whilst my brothers risked everything for something they believed in. Something I believed in.

I saw the recruitment poster asking for girls to join the newly formed 'Women's Land Army' whilst out with Mother. There it was, as clear as day in the window of the Post Office. 'National Service' it said, 'Women's Land Army'. In the centre, a woman in uniform pushing a horse drawn plough. Doing her bit for King and Country! 'God speed the plough and the woman who drives it' it said. This was what I wanted to do. Mother saw what I was looking at. "Don't even think about it Clara Moon, for a start you wouldn't know one end of a horse from the other!". I protested, as I often did, but to no avail. Mother and Father had already lost two children to the war and poor Teddy was still fighting on the front. I was hardly let out of their sight and according to Father "girls need to be at home".

The following day, I offered to do errands for Mother on my own as I knew she was busy with Father in the Pharmacy. She agreed - partly because I timed my question at a time when she was particularly flustered! I took the dismissive "very well, just get on with it" as permission granted and set off. I took the bicycle and did Mother's errands in double time. This left me plenty of time to call at the Post Office on my way home. The Postmaster, Mr Beaty was a grumpy old soul but kept himself to himself. His wife however, wanted to know everyone's business and

delighted in passing the information around the neighbourhood. So, I loitered around the front of the store until Mrs Beaty was sent on an errand in the back. I hurried up to the counter and asked Mr Beaty in a hushed voice for the enrolment forms needed for the Women's Land Army.

"Now, Miss Clara Moon, I never had you down as a country girl" said Mr Beaty to my surprise. The man had never said more than a few words to me in all my time visiting.

"I...I...well...it's..." I stumbled clumsily over my tongue.

"No need, Miss Clara, I find it quite a thing. Quite a thing. I suspect your parents are proud?"

"Well..." I stared to panic.

"No fear Miss Clara, it is the business of a Postmaster to keep his customers' privacy." I sighed with relief. "The business of a Postmaster's wife however..." His raised eyebrows were signal enough for me to collect the forms he quickly handed me and exit as swiftly as possible. For the first time ever, I heard Mr Beaty chuckle as I hurried out of the shop and the admonishment from Mrs Beaty for her husband's sudden jovial nature and a demand to know what had happened in her absence. I remember smiling as I heard him say "Postmaster business my dear, Postmaster business" and her disappearing into the back of the shop with a huff.

I filled the forms out in secret at night in my room. Everyday there after, I intercepted the postman to look for news. I think Father was getting suspicious of my unusual new pastime. I told him I was waiting for letters from Teddy. The awful truth was, we hadn't heard from Teddy in some months. The letter finally came with my appointment time for which I was required to attend the WLA recruitment office in the centre of London. The weeks that followed passed in a whirlwind of half truths and hidden preparations. I'm still not quite sure how I managed to go through the whole process without my parents finding out, particularly as we were such a close family.

The day finally arrived when I was expected at the railway station at 8pm. I had spent the day with my parents, doing jobs, running errands and trying to etch the images of their faces in my mind to take with me. I had to do this, I needed to do this. I told them I was off to Marjorie's house to pay a visit on my closest friend who lived on the next street. In reality, I sneaked my pre packed bag from under my bed and headed quietly out of the front door.

The clawing feeling in my chest would not leave me as the train hurried North that night, further and further from my home than I had ever imagined I'd go. The cold of the glass numbed my forehead as I stared out at the darkness. Silently I prayed that I had made the right decision.

Chapter 2

Arriving At Clumber – March 1917

The station at Worksop appeared early the following morning, with shafts of dawning sunlight piercing the clouds of steam like bullet holes in tunics. As I stepped onto the platform, this small but perfectly formed station seemed to welcome me like no other.

"Well, it certainly isn't Kings Cross is it?" A voice from behind said.

I turned and saw a beautifully styled woman lighting a cigarette beside me. "No, a tad smaller I'd guess" I answered.

The woman laughed and stuck out her hand for me to shake.

"Cecilia Ellington. You can call me Sissy" she said confidently with a big draw on her cigarette.

"Clara Moon." I said shaking her free hand whilst juggling my case.

"Business or pleasure?" Sissy said with a rye smile.

"Hopefully a little of both" I answered, "I'm being billeted at Clumber Park with the Women's Land Army". That was the first time I'd said it aloud to someone and it was both frightening and exhilarating at the same time.

"Well that, Miss Clara Moon is fantastic news! Me too!" Sissy said this with a beaming smile I shall never forget. It was infectious and we stood there grinning at each other until we were interrupted by a short elderly man with a flat cap low over his face.

"You'll be the women then?" He said gruffly and I sensed he wasn't too happy to see us.

"Last time we looked" Sissy answered with raised eyebrows and a twinkle in her eye which elicited a small smile from the grumpy gent.

"Well, I'm here to take you to Clumber." He grunted.

"Fabulous!" Said Sissy. "I only have a couple of bags if you'd be so kind?"

"I should think if you're going to be handling the backside of cattle, there's nowt'll bother ya about those two bags." With that he walked off leaving Sissy speechless, which, even though I'd only known her a few minutes, I had the feeling was a rarity.



We bounced around in the back of the truck desperately clinging on to both ourselves and our luggage all the way there. It was a slow, bumpy journey but one that delivered the most breathtaking of views. I still remember that feeling of wonder looking back at the entrance to Clumber through the back curtains of the truck and then being engulfed by the most magnificent row of Lime trees that seemed to stretch forever. Through heathland and forest we continued for some time until our truck stuttered to a halt. Walter, our driver and guide extraordinaire, beckoned us to join him outside. We had obviously reached our

destination.

As I jumped down I was taken aback by the magnificent house that stood before me. Large elegant archways housed doorways and windows and in places there were beautiful statues in arched enclaves. Above these lay impressive sash windows which must have held superb views onto the gardens and lake beyond. The church sat behind the house and its bell tower stood tall in the blue morning sky. Lawns were perfectly manicured and Sissy and I could only stare in wonder at its beauty.

"That isn't where your stayin' Missus, that's the Duke and Duchess' residence. You'll be in the stable yard. Follow me". Walter trudged off and we followed, still numbly taking in our surroundings. We were led into the stable yard and shown to a corner building. There we were met by Mrs Thornley who turned out to be Walter's wife. The Duke and Duchess had kindly paid for Mrs Thornley to be our Housekeeper and her daughter Alice, our maid, during our time at Clumber.

Mrs Thornley showed us up a wooden staircase to two rooms joined by a single door. In the first room were two bunk beds and in the second, three. Enough to sleep the ten girls who had been billeted here at one of the first WLA training schools of its kind. The room was bustling with activity and it looked like we were the last to arrive.

"Right then girls, you will find your uniforms on the end of your bunks. Lunch will be served in an hour which should give you plenty of time to get settled and dressed into your uniforms. Mr Thornley will be taking you up to Home Farm where you shall meet Mr Davey who will set out your training schedule. Any questions, ask later. Alice will sort out anything you need or may be missing bedding wise. See you downstairs in the kitchen in an hour." With that, Mrs Thornley abruptly left. The silent room bustled into life.

Introductions were excitedly and hurriedly made. As well as Sissy and I, there was Betty, Agnes and Flo from the west of the country. Dotty and Nancy from Manchester way, and Evelyn, Margaret and Norah from the other side of London to me. Sissy and I would share the last remaining bunk by the window. I took the top bunk as Sissy had a habit of walking in her sleep apparently! The uniform was folded neatly on the end of my bunk.

There was a moment of trepidation slipping on those breeches for the first time along with the smart shirt, tie and jumper. As I donned the stockings and tied my shoes I could not stop the grin from spreading on my face. This was it, this was what I had waited for. I pulled on the overcoat and lastly came the hat. I held it in my hands, staring in wonder at the badge on its front. I belonged. For the first time in my life I felt I was doing something worthwhile. I remember thinking I would never wear a skirt or petticoat again if I could help it. There we were, ten smart, intelligent and brave young women ready to take on the world. All staring at each other with enormous grins on our faces. The joy I felt at that moment I would never forget as we noisily ran down the stairs to our new world

beyond.

Chapter 3

From Pharmacy To Farm

The previous day we had been introduced to Mr Davey who had shown us with much pride around Home Farm. The stench was quite something but he assured us our nostrils would adjust. I don't think Sissy was convinced. The farm was home to 89 Highland and Short Horned cattle, 183 sheep, 38 pigs, 9 horses and numerous poultry. There were also acres of arable land growing a range of root crops. Our first task that morning was learning the art of milking cattle, or so we thought. We were up at five o'clock and Mrs Thornley assured us our breakfasts would be waiting for us after our first lesson of the day. I can honestly say, the excitement and elation of the first day had dimmed somewhat in the early morning darkness.

As Walter dropped us off at the farm Mr Davey came to greet us.

"Right, first job is mucking out. Grab a fork and follow me". Mr Davey clearly wasn't a morning person.

The following three hours we spent mucking out stables and pens. A few of the girls were sick with the stench but were soon told to pull themselves together. I discovered that it was better to breathe through your nose, as taking a gulp of air through your mouth was akin to eating a mouthful of what you were shovelling. The animals were mostly cooperative although I did regret not putting my boots on as my shins would be black and blue by this evening. At 8 o'clock we were collected for breakfast. All of us were silent as we shovelled the warm oats into our mouths, desperate to rid them of other tastes. Once finished, I and several of the girls hurriedly changed into our boots for our next session on the farm.

We returned to the farm to be put into pairs. Sissy and I, as now seemed the custom, teamed up together. We were given a milking stool and a bucket and led to 'our cow'. Mr Davey didn't give the girls names but Sissy and I discovered over the years, cows are far more cooperative if you can have a good chin wag with them whilst milking! So, we named ours Poppy, after our Poplar roots in London. Sissy insisted on going first having said she'd seen it done before (although I have my suspicions this wasn't quite true) and that it "looked a piece of cake"! As she perched herself on the stool and placed the bucket under Poppy's udders she gave her hands a fierce rubbing together. I looked at her quizzically.

"Us girls never like cold hands I'll have you know Clara Moon!" With this she rolled up her sleeves and gave a firm pull with both hands. At that precise moment Poppy let out a disgruntled noise and shifted her whole rear end out which knocked Sissy flying off her stool and into a pile of freshly mucked out dung. I don't think I had ever laughed so much in my life up until that point. I rushed over to see if Sissy was ok with tears running down my face. Her shocked

expression soon turned into laughter too as we and the rest of the girls had to be bought back into line by an unhappy Mr Davey.

It's fair to say there's quite a knack to milking and it took some time to perfect. Some girls were naturals, others not so much. There were plenty of other skills and jobs to master though including harvesting, threshing, haymaking and ploughing amongst caring for the other animals on the farm. Ploughing the fields with the horses was backbreaking work at times but the fresh county air and midday sun filled you with joy. It was sometimes hard to remember why we were doing what we were. The country was running out of food, the men that once worked this farm were away at war. In that first three months of learning all those skills, I had the time of my life. Part of me felt incredibly guilty for the elation in my heart, knowing that Teddy was out there somewhere and Harry and Syd would never again feel the sun upon their faces.

At night I often lay on my bunk, exhausted from the days labour but insistent on writing home several times a week. I wondered how Mother and Father were doing. How life in London was what with the constant threat of bombs and Zeppelin attacks. I wondered what their reaction was when they realised I had gone. I wondered if the reason they hadn't replied to my many letters was because they hadn't arrived, or they were just busy. I wondered if they ever read my letters at all. Deep down though I knew I had disappointed them, when all I ever really wanted, was to make them proud like my brothers had done. Even though the replies never came, I never stopped looking out for news whenever Walter returned from town. And every time he saw me, he would shake his head and say, "not today Miss Clara".

Chapter 4

The Walled Kitchen Garden

After a few months of working the farm and the field, Sissy and I were called into see Mr Davey. He explained that the gardening staff in the house's kitchen garden were depleted due to men at war and we had been chosen to go and support and learn the skills to grow produce that would feed not only the family and guests but the estate and surrounding villages, including Hardwick where Home Farm was located. We were told to report to the Head Gardener, Mr Barker, at 5am the following morning.

Before the sun had chance to rise Sissy and I were up, dressed and walking from the stable yard up to the kitchen garden. The Walled Kitchen Garden at Clumber was close enough to walk from our billet and our bones were grateful for no more truck rides from Walter. We made our way to the bothy behind the walls of the great glasshouse we had been told so much about. There, waiting for us with his pocket watch in his hand, was the formidable Samuel Barker. Mr Barker

had been Head Gardener at Clumber since 1899 and commanded great respect from all over the estate and beyond. The Newcastles' had built him a house especially, to entice him into the job because of his mastery of growing Chrysanthemums. The Duchess demanded a fresh flower daily on her dressing table all the days of the year.

"On time, that's good" he said as he flipped his watch shut and placed it back in the pocket of his waistcoat. "Well, I'm not going to pretend this is an ideal situation, but the need arises. You will primarily be weeding and harvesting. You will be schooled in pruning, particularly the fruits along the walls as well as in the glasshouse. You will be under the instruction of Mr Dawes. He shall give out your jobs for the day as well as teach you what you need to know. Mr Davey assured me you were the fastest learners in your women's group. Let's hope he's right eh?" With that he turned and walked off.

We stared after him for several moments, a little in awe and a little in fear to be truthful. Without a word to each other we knew that this would be a man we should try not to displease.

"Which one's which?" We spun and turned to the deep male voice behind us.

"Sorry?" Sissy said.

"Which one of you is which? Names?"

"Oh, erm I'm Miss Clara Moon sir and this is Miss Cecelia Ellington".

"Sissy sir" she said boldly.

"What did you call me?" He thundered loudly.

"No, no, sir I meant people call me..." her stammers were cut off by his roars of laughter.

"I know Miss Cecelia, just having some fun" he chuckled as he thrust out his hand and shook hers then mine. "A pleasure to meet you both, I'm Robert Dawes and may I say what a great thing you are doing. My brother's daughter has joined the WLA and I couldn't be prouder. Now, let's show you around. In fact, we may just be in time." He started to walk towards the back of the glass house.

"In time for what Sir?" I asked.

"The magic Miss Moon" he said with a wink. We followed him to the rear of what he told us was the palm house. He reeled off facts and details lovingly like he was bragging about his favourite child. It was still early dawn as he unlocked the rear door. The first thing that greeted me was the most amazing smell. Fruits, flowers, bulbs and blossom filled my nostrils in an overwhelming wave. It stopped us in our tracks.

"You alright ladies?" he asked with slight concern.

"Yes Mr Dawes. The smell is just quite something." I said.

"Aye, a little different to cow muck I expect" he said with another wink.

As he led us through the palm house and into the large open space of the conservatory my eyes didn't know where to roam first. Glass corridors disappeared for what seemed like miles either side. He opened the doors onto the garden and

as if choreographed by some higher power, the sun began to rise over the garden walls beyond. Sissy and I could only stare in pure wonder as the early morning sun seemed, as if by magic, to bring this incredible place to life.

"It's beautiful." I whispered.

"It is." He said simply.

In that one single moment I was changed forever. I felt a peace I had never felt before, a reverence and an excitement. I knew right then, that somehow within these walls, I had come home.



As the weeks passed, my skills and love of vegetable gardening grew along with the produce I was cultivating. I quickly moved from weeding and harvesting to tending to the soft fruits, for which Mr Dawes said I had a keen eye and flair. The glasshouse was hot and the work sweaty as the weeks pushed into June. I had a morning routine now of watching the sunrise over the far walls and then watching the colours of the garden change at sunset as it fell behind me. All from my front row seat on the steps of the glasshouse. Mr Dawes would often catch me sitting alone, contemplating how much life had changed. He'd shoo me back to the billet, always with a friendly nod and a "Goodnight now Miss Clara". It was a ritual I had grown to love just as much as the garden itself.

It was on such a night that I sat on the steps thinking about the latest unanswered letter I had sent to my parents. I had also written to Teddy several times and had got a reply for which I was so elated. I'd re read his words and wondered how much was bravado. I knew he was on the front lines and I could tell that things were not as they should be. I thought by joining the Land Army I would be doing the same as my brothers and contributing to the war effort. In one way I was but oh how different our circumstances. He saw the mud of the trenches stained with the blood of his friends. The only mud I saw was from the beautiful gardens before me. The splashes of red from the stalks of the rhubarb and the leaves of the kale. I'd give anything for Teddy to be brushing Clumber soil from his trousers than that of Flanders' fields.

My thoughts that evening were broken by the sound of running footsteps coming from the Ducal walk. I stared along the long range borders to the bottom gates and was shocked to see Sissy running as fast as she could. What was she doing? We were certainly not meant to use the Ducal walk for cutting short the journey from the billet to the garden and she knew it.

"What the devil..." said Mr Dawes who had walked up behind me. Breathlessly Sissy came to a stop before us.

"Clara, it's Poplar..." she gulped the air like water.

"Sissy slow down, what's happened?" I said with a sense of confusion.

"I've had a telegram from Ma and Pa. Clara, Poplar has been hit."

"Zeppelins?" I whispered.

"No. Planes, planes with bombs Clara. Broad daylight. Upper North Street school. All the children. And the buildings around. All over the East End." My head started to buzz with fear. "The Pharmacy was hit Clara. Your Mother and Father...I'm so sorry."

Chapter 5

Losing Poplar

The train journey was a blur as countryside turned into city. My dear friend Marjorie met me at the station and tried in vain to explain what had happened. Poplar had indeed been hit. It appeared the Zeppelins had been replaced by planes, and the night time attacks by day time atrocities. Several bombers dropped their payload all over the East End of London with Poplar worst hit. The school was destroyed whilst full of children. And Sissy was right, my home too had gone.

Marjorie and I stood before what was the pharmacy and my place of birth. The shop was completely destroyed with rubble and medicine bottles strewn along the street. There was a gaping hole that opened up into the kitchen at the back of the house. The dining table miraculously still stood. I slowly clambered over bricks and charred wood to reach the back room. I stared wordlessly at the table where for years our family had sat and eaten together. Laughed together. Talked together. I sat down at the table once more, alone with only devastation for company.

Mother had died instantly. Father had held on and was taken to hospital. My train was too late to say goodbye. I went anyway, in the desperate hope the news was wrong and I could tell him how sorry I was and how much I loved them both. In the end I held his cold hands and said those words to ears that could no longer hear and a heart that could no longer feel. For some time I sat, his cool hand clasped in mine held softly against my cheek.

Sitting at that dining room table I replayed the feel of his hand on my face and the words I had spoken. There was a tin on the table which I never remembered being there before and I blew the charred ash from it's surface and opened the lid. Inside were my letters. Lovingly bound with Mothers ribbon. They looked as though they had been read again and again as the paper was crumpled as only hands could. Underneath the bundle of letters was the enrolment photograph I had sent them in my uniform. I turned it over and in my mothers handwriting it said 'Our Clara, a member of The Women's Land Army, March 1917'.

I closed the lid softly and kept the tin and it's precious cargo safe as I collected as many other keep sakes from the rubble as I could. That night I stayed with Marjorie and her family, who had welcomed me with open arms. They had even offered me a permanent home should I wish to stay. My thoughts turned to Teddy and the need to be here waiting for him to return home. But what home? I had a decision to make and one my soul was too tired to bear that evening. I loved my

life at Clumber but I wanted to be here for Teddy when he returned. The choice made demons dance in my dreams as I tossed and turned that night.

Chapter 6

Home

In the end, the decision was an easy one. I boarded the train at King's Cross the day after my parent's funeral and said, what I knew would be, a final goodbye to Marjorie and her family. I was going home. I had decided that Poplar would forever haunt me and if Teddy returned, I would like to think he would come to Clumber and enjoy the haven that I too had found there. I had written a long letter to Teddy explaining what had happened to Mother and Father. I told him of my intention to make Nottinghamshire my home and that I would very much like him to join me there on his return. I described the wonder of the Walled Kitchen Garden and how I could envisage him working the land with Mr Dawes and milking cattle with Mr Davey. How the fresh Nottinghamshire air would smooth his cordite ridden lungs. I just prayed the letter found him safe.

The train journey seemed so much longer than that first time. I was desperate to see everyone again. A group of people who I had begun to love like family. I craved the safety of those garden walls, the familiar feel of the soil on my skin, the scent of the blooms filling my lungs and the taste of fresh fruit devoured straight from the tree. As the train pulled into Worksop station, I could see Walter waiting for me, cap in hand.

"Good gracious Miss Clara it is very good to see you" and just as I had stepped from the carriage he embraced me in a tight hug. Tears welled in my eyes as I dropped my case and hugged this kind old man in return. He held both my shoulders and looked me up and down as if inspecting the back of his truck for damage.

"I'm fine Walter." I said and he replied with a trademark grunt.

"Very well" and with that he scooped up my bag before I could object and walked to his truck. I dutifully followed as he placed my case in the back and I got ready to climb in.

"No no Miss Clara, you can ride up front with me" and before I had time to answer, he disappeared around the side of the truck and clambered in. I joined him in the passenger side and we exchanged smiles as he started her up.

It turned out, the front of the truck was just as uncomfortable to ride in as the back. To me, it was the ride of my life. I could not wait to see the girls or the garden again. The last two weeks had felt like a lifetime. As we approached Clumber it dawned on me I had never entered the estate facing forwards! Always staring out from the back of a truck. I sat straighter in my seat and looked out for that beautiful entrance. I think Walter could sense this as he slowed as we

approached. The beautiful cream stone shone in the afternoon sun and as we passed through and down the hill, the magnificent row of lime trees greeted me with stunning wonder. Like a parade of soldiers welcoming me home, they stood tall and proud celebrating this magnificent place.

As Walter pulled into the stable yard I could see a gaggle of Land Girls with sun bleached hair, flushed faces and filthy from head to toe. They turned at the sound of the truck and exploded with squeals and laughter, running towards me. The door was yanked open from the outside and I was pulled from the cabin by several hands.

"Clara!"

"You're home!"

"Give her some room ladies!" I heard Sissy cry as she pounced on me and gave me a muddy hug. I couldn't help but laugh at their response.

"How are you Clara?" said Evelyn kindly.

"I'm ok thanks Evie, just a little tired. So glad to be back and see your filthy faces!" Laughter and giggles exploded once more with me being taken by the arm and into the billet. Walter had carried by bag upstairs and as I unpacked, the girls got washed and changed. Today was Saturday which meant all had the afternoon off. I was apparently being taken on a welcome home picnic.

That afternoon was as heavenly as the previous weeks had been hellish. The sky was a perfect baby blue and a cool breeze drifted up from the lake. We sat in fields and shared our deepest hopes and silliest dreams. Sissy was the centre of attention as always but this time not from her own making. She was being teased mercilessly by the other girls. It appeared, in my absence, Mr Davey's son had returned from convalescing at the hospital in Welbeck after a battle injury bought him home. It transpired that whilst I was away James Davey and Sissy had become smitten with each other. I had never seen Sissy so totally undone. I couldn't help but smile as I sat back on the warm grass and watched these incredible young women who I knew would be lifelong friends.

As we wandered back to our billet close to sunset, I told the girls I'd catch them up. There was one place I was still aching to see. I closed the wooden gate quietly behind me and I turned slowly. I drank in the orchards, the rows upon rows of crops, the fruit trees hugging the beautiful burnt orange walls. I filled my lungs with the smells of the garden. I made my way along the front of the glasshouse staring hungrily through the windows hoping to catch a glimpse of how things had moved on whilst I'd be gone. I reached the steps on the entrance and sat. Hugging my knees tightly to my chest and watching the colours change as the sun fell behind me, I knew I had made the right decision.

I'm not quite sure how long I sat there. All I remember is that familiar footfall approach behind me and the lovely deep voice of Mr Dawes.

"Goodnight now Miss Clara" he said softly. I rose and turned to smile.

"It certainly is Mr Dawes, it certainly is."

Chapter 7

Missing

I hadn't quite realised how much I had missed my life at Clumber and I threw myself back into the daily routine. As summer faded into autumn the crops changed with the weather and it was time to harvest the apples, so the girls came up from the farm to help. The garden was filled with laughter and chatter but only when the coast was clear of Mr Barker and his pocket watch. We stacked apples in racks as high as our heads in the fruit store day after day until the trees and orchard floors lay bare.

The girls returned to their farming duties whilst Sissy and I remained in the walled kitchen garden. That was our first winter at Clumber and it was harsher than any of us would have imagined. We would wake in the darkness and return to our billet in the darkness. The short trousers of summer replaced once more by our breeches, stockings and overcoats for extra warmth. The girls on the farm continued milking no matter what the weather and in fact enjoyed the warmth generated by the herd. They would huddle extra close and take their time over milking on those cold winter mornings.

For Sissy and I in the garden, we were never short of jobs. The glass house made work all year round and our winter jobs included cleaning vines and potting young plants ready for the next growing season including cucumbers and tomatoes. We planted early potatoes and sowed early melons and the Duchess still wanted bouquets of flowers and bunches of grapes. The garden kept the house and estate in constant supply.

As winter slowly melted into spring the garden sprung to life once again. We spent our days tying melons, propagating, top dressing and a whole host of new skills we added to our list. Snowy days occurred even into April but this did not stop us from potting off spring struck geraniums, top dressing the cucumbers and sowing turnip seeds. We had been at Clumber for over a year now and we had all learnt so much. Even though the horrors of war had irreparably wounded my heart by taking my family, it was slowly soothed by the changing seasons spent inside the walled garden. I would regularly include this fact in my letters to Teddy, hoping beyond hope that he would join me here when he was able.

Thankfully, the summer passed without incident or disaster unlike the one before. We continued to work the farm and the field with as much enthusiasm as we started with. We were also truly part of the estate family now and were respected in our own right for the dedication and competency we brought to any task given to us. Sissy and James were very much an item and James had asked for Sissy's hand in marriage. She instantly said yes but insisted they wait until the war was over and her work with the Land Army complete.

It was a late September evening and I'd had my orders from Mr Dawes to head back to the billet. I didn't take much convincing as it had been a long day in the

glasshouse and I was ready for my bunk. The girls were back from the farm and Sissy was already in bed writing home to her parents. I was greeted by tales of the day and bursts of laughter. I quickly washed and changed into my nightclothes just as a knock came at the bedroom door. We all stopped and looked at each other quizzically - no one ever knocked this late. Evie opened the door and Walter stood the other side.

"Sorry to bother you ladies. Miss Clara, there's an urgent telegram for you." I jumped down from my bunk, went to the door and reluctantly took the telegram from his hand. The girls surrounded me with worried looks on their faces. I stared down at the telegram in my hands, 'The War Office' emblazoned on the front. My stomach turned for what news maybe held inside and I stumbled backwards as my head spun. I remember the arms of friends guiding me to a lower bunk. I remember the feel of the paper on my weather worn hands as I opened it. The words blurred into one with by brain only processing parts. 'Private Edward Arthur Moon...Missing presumed dead...Belgium...so sorry...'

I don't remember how long I cried but I remember the arms of the girls holding me close whilst sobs racked my body. I don't remember falling asleep but I must have, as I woke in my bunk with tears dried on my face and the crumpled letter held tightly to my chest. I stared at the ceiling of our dorm and wondered how, when surrounded by so many people I loved, I could feel so desperately alone. I did the only thing I knew that would help me through losing my dearest Teddy; I donned my uniform, walked to the garden and placed my hands in the soil.

Chapter 8

Making Hardwick Home

In 1918, on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, the war was declared over. After four years and four months the guns fell silent. Celebrations erupted all over the country from Trafalgar Square to the gardener's bothy at Clumber. I was pleased the war had come to an end of course, but my heart was heavy with the loss of my family.

Work for the Women's Land Army was far from over however. Even at peace, the country was low on supplies and it was some time before men started returning home. There was a real sense that things would never go back to the way they were before the war, and in lots of ways that was a good thing. Women were being asked to stay on in roles they had undertaken during the war effort. For the first time in history, women were being seen in a different light.

I had, for some time, decided to stay on at Clumber in any capacity I possibly could. Of course my heart lay within the walled kitchen garden but I understood clearly it was seen as a man's profession. However, in a tragic twist of fate, the

young gardeners that went to war never returned to the soil of Clumber. It was Mr Barker himself that asked if I would like to stay on to work in the glasshouse. I didn't hesitate in telling him it would be an absolute honour. Mr Dawes was delighted and invited me to go and live with him and his wife in the village of Hardwick next to Home Farm. I was over the moon!

Gradually, one by one, the Land Girls of the Clumber Estate returned to their lives around the country. Fond farewells and promises of letters were made. Sissy and James married in the church behind the big house with kind permission from the Duke and Duchess. Sissy looked beautiful on her big day, a dress of white lace showing that natural elegance I had noticed the first time I met her. The girls all returned for the big day and we gave them an arch of pitchforks to walk under as they left the church husband and wife. James and Sissy also settled in Hardwick, which was wonderful to have my best friend so close.

The walled kitchen garden was as productive as ever and in my opinion, was the magnificent jewel in the Clumber crown. I worked long days and loved every single minute. I stuck to my routine of watching the sun set and rise, painting the garden with unique colours and shades. It was one such evening I sat on the glasshouse steps and looked out at the garden changing before me. I took a deep breath of the dusk air and listened with my eyes closed as the birdsong began to quiet. It was then my ears heard the sound of uneven footsteps in the distance and my eyes opened to search out their source. Coming up the ducal walk was a man in uniform walking with a cane. For a moment I thought it must be an acquaintance of the Duke and Duchess but as the figure drew closer, my heart started to hammer in my chest.

I slowly rose from the steps and in disbelief my feet started to move. Faster and faster they took me along the long range borders down to the gates. There he was before me, wearing his uniform and a smile I could never not recognise.

"Teddy?" I whispered and I ran into his arms before he could answer.

"I'm home" he said softly into my hair.

"Yes. Yes you are".

Afterword

This work of fiction is based in historical fact. 100 years ago the Women's Land Army was formed and a training school was set up for ten young women to attend on the Clumber Estate. The Duke and Duchess of Newcastle agreed to pay for a housekeeper and maid for the duration and billeted them above the stables. You can walk around that very stable yard today and enjoy the shop and cafe. Home Farm in Hardwick Village is now no longer working but it was under the guiding hand of Mr Davey and you can still peek over the gate and see where the girls would have milked the cows. In Hardwick Village you will see the War Memorial where the names of farm hands and gardeners that never returned to Clumber are inscribed. The house no longer remains but you can explore the walled kitchen garden as it would have been in Clara's time. The Head Gardener at the time was indeed Mr Samuel Barker and you can enjoy an afternoon tea in what would have been his house. Unfortunately, the events at Poplar were also based in historical fact and a bomb was dropped through the school that fateful June day killing 18 children.

This story is dedicated to the women of the Women's Land Army, formed 100 years ago in 1917. *"God speed the plough and the woman that drives it."*