

*The
Hazelbourne
Ladies
Motorcycle
and Flying Club*

A Novel

Helen Simonson

New York Times bestselling author of Major Pettigrew's Last Stand

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Chapter 1



IN THE FIRST PLACE, IT did not seem quite right that a girl that young should be free to wander the hotel and seaside town without a chaperone. She looked respectable enough, though she was pale as alabaster and thin as a wet string. She was clothed in a brown wool dress, perhaps a bit too big, that fell decently to the ankles, and her leather boots still had a shine of newness on them. She was some sort of connection and companion to Mrs. Fog, an old lady from a grand family in the shires, but it seemed to Klaus Zieger that the old lady encouraged far too much independence. Since her arrival at the Meredith Hotel, the girl was always to be found tripping through the grand public rooms alone, or curled up in an armchair deep in a book, oblivious to all. And now, with the old lady having ordered dinner in her room again, the girl wished to be seated in the Grand Dining Room alone.

“I hoped, because it was early...” she said, peering past Klaus into the high-ceilinged room, which functioned as both restaurant and ballroom. She spoke respectfully but there was a firmness to her tone and a faint lift of the chin. “A quiet corner somewhere?” Only two tables were occupied; each with a pair of elderly ladies nodding their hats at each other. The room echoed a little. Silverware pinging against glass, shoes loud against the parquet floor. The tall potted palms stirred in an unknown draft and from beyond the tall French windows came the murmur of voices from the seafront and the low booming of the sea against the pebbled shore. Later would come the dancing crowds, the loud hotel orchestra, and the crude

drunken Saturday night carousing—all things that would never have been countenanced before the war.

“I’m very sorry, miss,” Klaus repeated, drawing himself up. He was the lone waiter at this hour, and in the absence of the headwaiter, who was having his own dinner in the kitchen, he felt keenly the need to defend the ragged standards that were left. “Can I arrange to have something sent to your room?”

“Please don’t be sorry,” the girl said. “We are all bound by our duties, are we not?” She gave him a brief smile and walked away down the long marble floor of the glass-enclosed Palm Terrace. Her smile made him ashamed. Not answering him about the dinner tray made him irritated. Turning away a hotel customer added a new string to the vibration of anxiety that hummed in his veins.

He tugged down surreptitiously at the sleeves of his black jacket, now a little stiff from age and mothballs, and rubbed the arthritis in his knuckles, wondering if he should have relented. Would this quiet young woman eating tonight’s chicken quenelles behind a potted palm have been more scandalous than the women who would come later in the evening to dine intimately or in great parties, with men, laughing openmouthed over champagne and bending the fringed edges of their décolletages into the mock turtle soup?

He cast a discreet eye over his tables, looking for the dropping of hands, the setting down of cutlery that would signal he was needed, and sighed. Everything was confusing now. He had recognized one of the pair of diners from before the war, the widow of a wealthy brick manufacturer and her spinster sister, who lived in a large villa on a hill above the town. Kind women who appreciated fine service, who blushed at a carefully dispensed compliment, who always left a little gratuity hidden under the napkin. He had made a mistake today, exclaiming at seeing them after so long, trying to kiss their gloved hands. They had responded with squeezed lips, their eyes darting and anxious. Like a blow to the ribs, he understood why the hotel manager had been hesitant and cruel in hiring him back. Two months’ trial

only and an instruction to keep his mouth shut as much as possible. Klaus had been hurt, almost to the point of refusing.

Before the war, a German waiter commanded the greatest respect. But what was the point of standing on his pride? After six humiliating months in the internment camp, and banned from returning to the coast, he had nearly starved in London, scratching for whatever job they would give to a German. He remembered the long steaming hours at the sink, washing dishes in a men's hostel; waiting tables at an asylum where an inmate might thank you for the supper or throw it in your face; a pallet on the cellar floor in exchange for working in a boardinghouse dining room. To return home to Hazelbourne-on-Sea he needed this job and the room that came with it. He wondered, as a tremor ran down his spine, where he would go now if the two women, or the young girl, made a complaint.

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IN THE LOBBY of the Meredith Hotel, Constance Haverhill paused, pretending to admire the flowers in the towering urn on a marble table at the foot of the grand staircase. The reception desk seemed busy with a large party arriving and two or three gentlemen chatting to the concierge. Her rejection from the dining room fresh, she felt too humiliated to push herself forward to the center where the clerk would offer her the menu of the day and she would be forced to publicly decide between broth or fish paste on toast and then accept the plain dinner and one of the three rotating puddings, most of them custard. On their first night, she and Mrs. Fog had dined together, but dinner had been taken in her room these last three days and Constance was tired of the lingering smell of gravy and the awkward waiting for the used tray to be removed.

There would be plenty of time in the years to come to feel the limits of a life as a spinster. Lady Mercer, who fancied herself Constance's patron and had sent her to the seaside to look after Mrs. Fog, her mother, had been loud in her opinion that now, with the war over and women no longer needed in men's professions, Constance would be well advised to take up as a

governess. Joining the family once a week for dinner with the children, trays in one's room when important guests came to dine, sharing one's room on occasion if there were too many ladies' maids at a weekend party. Constance shivered at the thought. As a young girl, she had seen the governesses come and go, for Lady Mercer couldn't seem to keep one. And when one left, Constance's mother would be called in to help during the transition. On those occasions, Constance would go with her mother to the big house and join in the lessons with Rachel, their daughter.

Her mother and Lady Mercer had been schoolgirls together, and though the former married a farmer and the latter a lord, they maintained the fiction of a lifelong affection of friends and equals by never allowing the crudeness of money to come between them. Constance's mother had never received a wage for the many services she had provided under the guise of friendship and the patronage of the Clivehill estate. Instead there was always a small velvet bag of sovereigns at Christmas, the discarded dresses of prior seasons, a supply of preserved fruit that she and Constance helped the kitchen put up every summer. There were invitations to hunt balls and to fill out the numbers at some of the less distinguished dinners held in Clivehill's magnificent dining room. Constance herself had plenty of training in working for, and being grateful to, the Mercer family, including having run their estate office for most of the war. But with the Armistice, it had been made clear she was surplus to requirements and her need for paid employment was now pressing. As a thank-you, she had been promised these few short weeks at the seaside, during which she might float in the luxurious anonymity of hotel life. But her rejection from the dining room made her uncertain future seem all the more immediate.

Her reverie was interrupted by the slightest ripple of tension in the lobby. There were no raised voices but only the urgent cadence of a disagreement being conducted discreetly by the open French windows. The hotel's undermanager, a shy youth of some relation to the hotel manager, was bent to converse with a woman about Constance's age who was sitting half-concealed on a settee, reading a newspaper. There seemed to be some issue

regarding the woman's ordering tea and Constance drifted closer with all the natural curiosity of someone fresh from her own humiliation.

"Oh, don't turn me out, Dudley. I'm having dinner here with my mother later," said the young woman. "Just bring me a tea table and I'll promise to hide behind the tablecloth."

"But we cannot serve you, Miss Wirrall..." said the undermanager, his face reddening at her familiarity. He seemed like a man on the third or fourth round of saying exactly the same thing. Constance could see that the young woman, though discreetly tucking her ankles under the seat and partly covered by the day's headlines, was wearing slim brown wool trousers tucked into the tops of thick black knee boots. A green tweed jacket and white silk scarf completed the ensemble. A leather helmet and goggles lay abandoned on a low table. The woman's chestnut hair was fuzzy and loose in its pins, no doubt from wearing the helmet, and gave her a slightly disreputable look.

"Take pity on me," said the girl, but the undermanager shook his head. She seemed to catch sight of Constance in that instant and grinned before tossing the newest of her long list of arguments. "I'm liable to die of thirst, Dudley."

"May I be of assistance?" asked Constance. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but if the lady needs a companion for you to bring her tea?"

"We only serve ladies on the Palm Terrace," said Dudley, his face stiffening. "And afternoon attire is required." Constance was distracted by his Adam's apple bobbing awkwardly above the too-large ring of his stiff shirt collar. Everywhere she looked these days it seemed that the people, at least those not swathed in the comforting blanket of rank and money, had become smaller than their clothes. Hollowed out perhaps by the rationing, the ravages of influenza, the usual ailments of the British damp. But maybe it was just the long years of the war itself, which could not be sloughed off in a few days of Armistice celebrations. Everywhere, she saw the cinched-in belts and frayed cuffs, the stiff shoulders and old-fashioned clothes. Everywhere in the gaunt but cheerful faces, the flickering ghosts of loss. The young undermanager's face might have shown a hint of disdain at

Constance's interference, but she saw the war in his eyes too and could not resent him.

"Bless you, but I'm unchaperonable," said the girl, laughing. Her cheeks were pink, but from fresh air not from blushing; her posture was relaxed and her blue eyes were clear and full of mischief. She really did not look as humiliated as the situation seemed to require, and Constance realized she was only playing with the poor youth. The girl was amused and Constance felt a slight indignation creeping inside her.

"I shouldn't have presumed," she said, stiffly. "I didn't mean to interfere." She turned on her heel, anxious to escape.

"I say, is there any chance you would help me?" said the girl, jumping up and extending a slightly oil-stained hand. "I'm Poppy Wirrall. I've been out all day on the motorcycle and damn it all if I didn't leave my bag behind at home. My mother is still out visiting and the powers that be here have decided that after four years of war and pestilence they should still have the vapors over a woman having tea in trousers."

"I foresee no chance of either of us persuading them as to any softening of the rules," said Constance, shaking hands.

"Yes, but could you be an absolute saint and lend me a skirt for an hour?" asked Poppy. "Probably be a bit of a squeeze for me but I take it you have pins?"

"Well, I..." Constance paused, her mind racing. How was one supposed to respond to a complete stranger asking to borrow from one's small stock of clothing? And when most of the clothing is not yours to begin with and the only good skirt left would be one's best...

"It's too much, I know," said the girl. She began to cheerfully tidy up the newspaper and handed it to the young man. "Not to worry. My mother will be back for dinner and she'll be only too delighted to stuff me into something frivolous of hers, perish the thought." She sighed. "I'll just have to slowly dehydrate in the gardens until then."

"I'm very sorry...but we just cannot make exceptions..." babbled young Mr. Dudley, flushed and confused. He waved his hands as some sort of deflective protection. "I'm sure you understand."

“Yes, the floodgates will open and tea will become a bacchanal of oddly dressed bohemians and suffragettes.”

“Exactly,” said Dudley.

“I’ll lend you something,” said Constance, leaping in as much for the poor undermanager as for the strange girl. “I know something about how awkward hotels can be.”

“Would you really? You are a lifesaver,” said Poppy, as if the whole thing was Constance’s idea. She began gathering her helmet and goggles. “Shall we go to your room?”

“Of course,” said Constance, quailing at the thought, as she couldn’t quite remember if she had left the bedroom absolutely tidy. It was quite a large room in the back of the hotel but there might be books and papers on the bed and floor. There might also be stockings drying over a chair, slippers abandoned under the dressing table, and a pear ripening on the windowsill.

“While I’m dressing, could you arrange a late tea for two on the terrace, Dudley, and charge it to my mother?” said Poppy. She stopped and raised an inquiring eyebrow at Constance. “Would that be all right? You will have some tea with me, won’t you?”

“Oh, that’s not necessary,” said Constance, though she felt suddenly desperate for the chance to talk to someone so interesting and of her own age.

“Nonsense!” said Poppy. “I insist you let me treat you. It’s the least I can do.”

“Well, that would be lovely,” said Constance. She did not look to see if the undermanager was raising his eyebrows at her.

“As well as tea, we’ll have sardines on toast, some deviled eggs, and two glasses of sherry,” added Poppy to the undermanager. She tucked her arm beneath Constance’s as if they were old friends and added, “We wouldn’t want to faint from hunger before dinner.”

CONSTANCE'S ROOM WAS bigger than she had expected it to be, and she was grateful it was not some narrow attic reserved for ladies' maids and children. It faced a small, fern-filled courtyard and was furnished with only a bed, a dressing table with a triple mirror, and two small gilt chairs, all in the French style. It seemed to shrink with Poppy in it, and Constance, hauling her best lilac silk skirt from the wardrobe and laying it on the bed, wished she had the elegance of a screened dressing area or a full-length mirror to offer.

"What's that blue skirt in there?" asked Poppy, peering brazenly into the wardrobe. Constance, busy whisking the dried stockings out of sight, stiffened at the casual sense of entitlement, a hallmark of the wealthy so familiar to her from many years' acquaintance with Lady Mercer. But in Poppy's case she was charmed to see that it seemed to come without criticism.

"The blue is really a walking skirt; the lilac is more formal," said Constance. She took out the plain blue wool skirt, trimmed with a narrow black ribbon around the hem, and laid it alongside the lilac skirt she had not yet worn. It was worked around the hem with embroidered sweet peas and caught up at one side to reveal an underskirt of darker purple. It was really too fine for her and she had hesitated to wear it. Perhaps she would wear it tomorrow, Sunday, when a string quartet would play on the hotel's terrace at teatime. The wardrobe also contained two white summer dresses she hesitated to dirty, several blouses, and a stiffly boned, dark blue lace evening dress. Some of the clothes were castoffs of a decidedly old-fashioned cut, retrieved from dusty trunks and hastily altered to fit Constance. But some were more fashionable. They had been ordered for Lady Mercer's daughter, Rachel, early in the war, but when the first Zeppelin raids on London appeared in the newspapers, Rachel had been rushed away to wealthy friends in Virginia. There, she had apparently made quite an impression on American society and presumably acquired a new wardrobe along with a fiancé from a prominent political family.

Rachel and Constance called each other “cousin,” but they were not close friends as their mothers had been. There had been help, and not a little self-congratulation from the Mercers, in securing a scholarship for Constance as a day girl at the local boarding school. But Rachel had been sent away to a much more prestigious boarding school and they had naturally, or by design, grown apart. Now Constance fingered the blue silk knots that decorated the evening gown’s bodice. “If you’re having dinner later would you prefer to borrow an evening dress?” she asked. “It is Saturday night.”

“I despise all fuss and furbelows so I’ll take the blue,” said Poppy, nodding at the plain skirt. “Do you have a scarf I can use?” She was unlacing her boots as she spoke, and then she was shimmying out of her trousers while Constance turned her back and dug in her dressing table drawer for a scarf of blue silk flowers. In another moment Poppy had slipped on the skirt, buttoning it in the front and swiveling it around to its proper position. Removing her tweed jacket, she revealed a plain white blouse with two jet pins carved into swallows at the collar. She took one and used it to fasten the scarf around her waist like a broad sash.

“You look transformed,” said Constance. “I’m astonished.”

“I’m used to making do with very little luggage,” said Poppy, unpinning two strategic hairpins and combing her locks with her fingers.

“You can use my comb if you like,” said Constance, shyly.

“Well, now I am really in your debt,” said Poppy, barely scraping her hair with the comb before loosely twisting and pinning it up again. “Lending another girl your comb—it’s sort of like my brother and his friends declaring blood brothers.”

“I would offer to lend you shoes but I’m not sure...”

“Oh, not to worry, I have the feet of an elephant,” said Poppy, sitting and hitching up her skirt over her knees to put on her boots. “To my mother’s eternal despair. My father would always tell her not to worry. ‘In the event of a flood, Poppy will always have her own canoe,’ he’d say. It really didn’t help.” She shook her head, and though she gave a short laugh, her face grew soft and her eyes wet.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m sorry. My father died in the autumn. Spanish flu. I forget sometimes and then...well, it catches me unaware.”

Not used to such naked openness of feeling, Constance sank into the other chair and turned her head away. In the sudden silence an unknown bird in the courtyard spilled its song into the last rays of the afternoon sun and something cracked in her usual reserve.

“My mother too,” she said at last. “We buried her on Armistice Day.”

Constance could still hear the sounds of church bells ringing and the village band playing; see the cheering crowd gathered in front of the Rose and Crown, children waving flags and racing across the village green. The band had fallen raggedly silent as the hearse and the small band of family following it on foot had rounded the bend, heading for the church. The cheering people hushed and men removed their caps. Women nodded to her and tried to disguise a slight backing away. A pair of small girls froze where they were on the green, clutching dolls, unsure. She smiled at the girls, releasing them to run to their mother. The funeral procession was a small group; just Constance, her brother and his wife, who did not know there was worse grief to come; the Vicar, clutching a handkerchief to his nose; and two or three farmers who had been friends of the family for years, each walking carefully apart. Lady Mercer had wanted to come, of course. She made that very clear. But for the fear of the influenza and her weak heart. The Vicar had been relieved that theirs was the only funeral of the day. After they passed into the churchyard, Constance heard the cheering resume. The band struck up a march. And why not? Today marked the end of the war, and perhaps the end of the war would bring an end to the influenza, which had created so many new-turned mounds of dirt in the churchyard.

“One gets exhausted exchanging condolences,” said Poppy, and her face seemed to have lost some of its color. “It feels as if no one is untouched.”

“And my brother’s child,” Constance added, almost a whisper. “We lost him just before Christmas.” She could see the baby, small hands turning blue, breath bubbling as his lungs drowned. Her sister-in-law, Mary,

shrieking at her, convinced that even a full month after her mother's death, it was somehow Constance's fault that the pestilence had come to the farm. That she was blameless did not stop her feeling guilty, and the crushing weight of it had helped drive her from home. She would be a governess before she would live at her brother's farm again.

"As if the war wasn't enough," said Poppy. "Do you think God laughs at us for our hubris?"

They sat in silence for a moment, companions of circumstance.

"Shall we go down?" said Constance.

"Don't you want to put on the pretty skirt for Saturday night?" asked Poppy. "I'm a frump of the first order, but don't let me stop you from kitting out."

"I'm not dressing for dinner tonight," said Constance, smoothing at her plain wool dress, which until then she had considered appropriately demure but suitable. Perhaps if she had worn the lilac the waiter might have seated her in the dining room, she thought. "I'll just have them bring something up later." She turned away, touching at her hair in the mirror to disguise any blush that might betray her nonchalance.

"I have an idea," said Poppy. "After we have tea, why don't you do me another enormous favor and join us for dinner? Mother always has extra room at her table."

"I couldn't possibly," said Constance. "It's a family dinner."

"Well, you would have to put up with Mother," agreed Poppy. "But she would love the extra company. That's why she lives in a hotel." Constance would have liked to ask where Poppy lived, but she feared it rude to ask why an unmarried daughter would not live with her perfectly available mother.

"I wouldn't like to impose" was all she managed.

"And look, my brother is a decent chap; bit morose, but he lost his leg so that's understandable," added Poppy. "You're not afraid of a man with one leg, are you?"

"Losing a leg? How awful," said Constance. She had seen the broken men at the railway stations in London; leaning on crutches in their tattered

coats; sleeves or trouser legs pinned up, rattling tin cans for alms. There had been a man in her carriage, all his limbs intact but rocking silently all the way to Sussex, humming low and tuneless. The war seemed to have shattered those it had not killed. Even in the seaside atmosphere of the hotel there seemed a slight strain to the jollity, as if the same low humming vibrated behind the potted palms and between the notes of the hotel's dance orchestra. "I'm only afraid of not knowing how to behave," she added.

"Honestly spoken," said Poppy. "I know we've only just met, but I have a feeling we're going to be great friends. Do say you'll come to dinner with us. When you know me better you'll understand I find it hard to take no for an answer."

"I believe I have already learned that," said Constance, laughing. "So I would be delighted." The invitation might have been unconventional, but Constance was suddenly tired of being a dull moth. So she would let herself be drawn to this rather alarming young woman and trust that, for the length of one dinner, she was sensible enough to protect her brown powdered wings from being singed.