

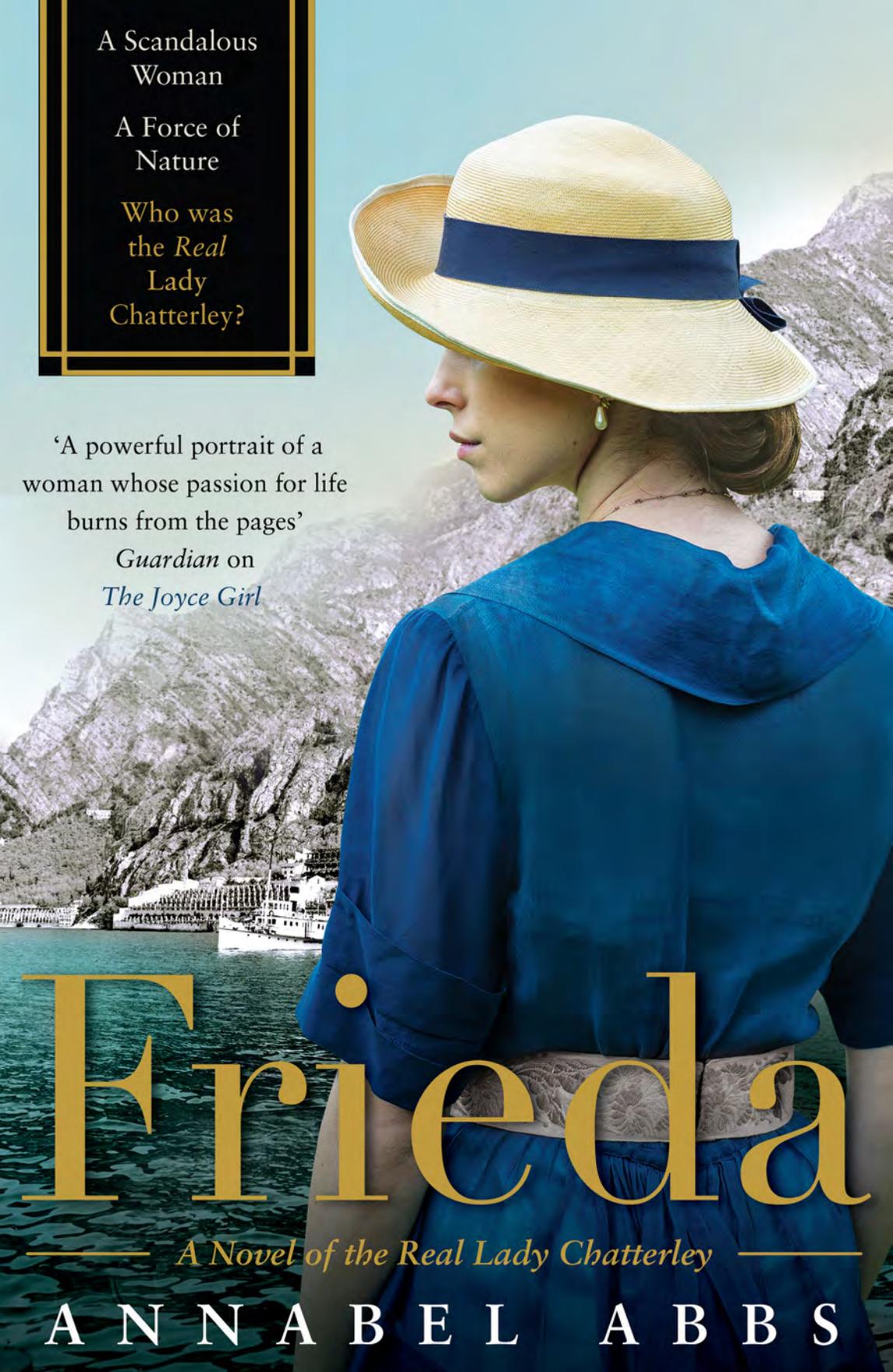
A Scandalous  
Woman

A Force of  
Nature

Who was  
the *Real*  
Lady  
Chatterley?

‘A powerful portrait of a  
woman whose passion for life  
burns from the pages’

*Guardian* on  
*The Joyce Girl*

A woman in a blue dress and straw hat is shown in profile, looking out over a coastal town and mountains. The scene is set against a backdrop of rugged, rocky hills and a body of water. The woman is wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat with a dark blue band and a blue dress with a white belt. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

# Frieda

*A Novel of the Real Lady Chatterley*

ANNABEL ABBS

PRAISE FOR ANNABEL ABBS' DEBUT

## *The Joyce Girl*

'A hugely impressive debut. Annabel Abbs has brought to life an extraordinary cast of characters – Joyce, Beckett et al. – and painted their rackets, bohemian world in vivid technicolour'

*Observer*

'Here is a powerful portrait of a young woman yearning to be an artist, whose passion for life and rage at being unable to fulfil her talent burns from the pages'

*Guardian*

'Poignant and absorbing . . . thoughtful historical fiction that transports you to another time and place'

*The Australian Women's Weekly*

'Avant-garde Paris . . . bursts onto the page in this gripping fictionalisation of an extraordinary life'

*Who Weekly*

'This intimate and absolutely splendid novel must top my recommendations as the best 20th-century fiction of the year'

*Historical Novel Society*



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*To my daughter, Imogen  
Who is, and always has been,  
utterly and wholly herself*



‘You know I would have died for you.’

Ernest Weekley, Letter to Frieda Weekley, 1912

‘My love for you will live as before, and more strongly than before, and should you return, even after many years – and should my hope be alive or dead – you know, I am yours.’

Otto Gross, Letter to Frieda Weekley, 1907

‘If she left me I do not think I would be alive six months hence . . . God, how I love her and the agony of it.’

D.H. Lawrence, Letter to Edward Garnett, 1912



# PART ONE

*Nottingham 1907*

‘Nothing is so bad for a woman as she gets on in life as the feeling that she’s missed something: perhaps the most important thing . . . It is a dreadful feeling, to feel you’re going to die without having had what you were born for.’

D.H. Lawrence, *The First Lady Chatterley*



## ONE

# Frieda

Later, after the scandal had broken and the newspapers had turned her into a pariah, she traced it all back to a particular day. A particular moment. Sometimes the moment spun dizzily before her, everything coming into focus in a single frame. Thirteen years of marriage and three perfect children condensed into a single image. And she wondered how something so vast could spring from such an uneventful moment.

The day had started with such excitement. A sky flushed pink, the silver birches bursting into leaf, the grass and leaves spangled with heavy dew, a glimmer of yellow where the first celandines were thrusting through the black earth. The children had torn round the house shrieking ‘Aunt Nusch is coming all the way from Berlin.’ Monty had jumped up and down on the sofa, Elsa had draped strings of purple beads over her shoulders, and even Barby had banged her spoon on the breakfast table, shouting ‘Nusch comin!’

Mrs Babbit spent the morning scrubbing, polishing, dusting. Monty and Barby picked primroses and bluebells which Elsa arranged in jam jars. Frieda baked *Apfelkuchen*, lavishly dusting its cratered surface with cinnamon and icing sugar. Even Ernest, who rarely left his study, roamed the house dabbing at the coal

dust settling on the sills, and prodding at the paint flaking from the skirting boards.

By early afternoon, as Nusch was due to arrive, the weather changed. Rain began slicing at the window with a spitting sound and the sky seemed to split in two, one half sagging with cloud and the other a pale milky blue. Ernest went to meet Nusch at the station, waving his tightly rolled umbrella as he left and calling out 'Prepare to be dazzled by her jewels!' And he'd shaded his eyes with his hand in a theatrical gesture, making everyone laugh and giving Frieda a dim feeling of pride.

The image that etched itself on Frieda's mind forever came an hour later. Nusch dismounted from the trap, holding her skirts high enough to display the fine lace hem of her petticoat and her costly leather boots with their carved heels and pearl buttons. After brushing the dust and grit from her travel suit, she looked up at the narrow house with its plain brickwork, its pinched front door, its cramped little garden and said, 'Oh, you poor, poor dear!' Frieda opened her mouth to protest, but then decided against it and led the way into the hall, talking cheerfully about their plans for Nusch's visit: a ramble in Sherwood Forest, a tour of Newstead Abbey, a peak at Wollaton Hall.

As she held herself tight against the wall, so that Ernest could pass with Nusch's trunk, she heard something that made her pause. It was Nusch, nose tilted, sniffing extravagantly at the air. As if she had a cold or a touch of influenza. Then she made a faint gagging sound in her throat and plunged her gloved hand into her reticule, pulling out a handkerchief and pressing it hard against her mouth.

'The children have picked wildflowers for you,' Frieda said. Even as she spoke she knew her home had disgusted Nusch, that all the primroses of Nottingham couldn't disguise the dogged reek of boiled bones and kitchen gas. She gestured to the drawing room, but in that split second she saw it through Nusch's eyes: cotton curtains eked out with a mismatched border, paint blistering on the walls,

the frosted light-shade stippled with grime. Even her embroidered cushion covers – roses and lilies in vermilion and ivory – looked amateur and crude.

Nusch surveyed the room, her upper lip twitching, her brows arched. She lifted her skirts as she swayed across the room, as if rodents or fleas might scramble from the balding rug. Then she scrutinised the sofa and wiped at it with her handkerchief before perching, carefully, on its edge. Her gaze flickered round the room again, pausing at the slouch of rising damp, the meagre fireplace, Ernest's framed certificates hanging in proud lines on the wall.

'You should never have married so far beneath us. The impudence of that man . . .'

Frieda was about to defend Ernest when she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror that hung above the hearth: her hair caught in a straggled bun, a streak of cinnamon on her forehead, rougeless cheeks that had lost their youthful contours, a tight smile stuck to her mouth. Why hadn't she wiped her face? Why hadn't she pinned her hair elegantly, with the little painted combs Ernest bought her when they married? And the plaid dress with the collar that griped her neck like a noose – too tight after three children, old-fashioned, the shapeless skirt without any drop left in the fabric. She should have spent less time baking and more time on her appearance.

She turned to the door with relief as the children tumbled in, flinging raindrops from their hats and from the sodden hems of their clothes.

'Take your coats off and dry your hair. Aunt Nusch doesn't want to be soaked by you.' She spoke brightly, shooing them out with a too-careless flap of her wrists. 'They are so excited that you have finally come to see us, dearest Nusch. They have hundreds of questions about their little cousin. If only you could have brought her.'

Nusch gave a short laugh. 'One should never mix travel and children, a fatal combination.' She leaned forward and dropped her voice a fraction. 'I have not had a single appreciative look since I stepped off the boat. What is wrong with English men?'

'They are reserved and you are too used to military men. But I have something much nicer for you: a cake I baked myself.' Frieda wished Mrs Babbit would hurry up with the tea. A generous slice of cake would give her the strength to ignore her sister's jibes, she thought, the insides of her mouth moistening in anticipation.

'The children look charming, even with all that wet hair. Far too charming to be the spawn of Ernest.' Nusch stood up and smoothed at her skirts, and it struck Frieda that her sister's clothes flounced too much and fitted too well; the immaculate travelling suit was too new, the buttons too shiny, the egret feathers too lustrous. None of it looked right in her tawdry little home.

Later, after Ida had taken the children away and Mrs Babbit had served tea and left the room, Nusch cleared her throat. 'All the most modern ladies in Berlin and Munich are having affairs.' She lowered her eyes and peered coyly into her teacup. 'I know we are baronesses but we must be seductive or we are nothing at all. And I have no intention of being nothing.'

'But you aren't nothing. And you have everything,' said Frieda, bewildered.

'Oh, I'm not thinking of myself. Anyway, we von Richthofens are not made for boring lives. It simply doesn't suit us.'

Frieda felt a pain inside, as if a metal belt had tightened sharply round her chest. 'My life's not boring,' she said, gesturing at the window with an arm that seemed suddenly stiff and heavy. The children were playing in the garden and she wanted to tell Nusch how happy they made her. But a thin small voice had crept into her head and its impatient drone was distracting her: Boring, boring, boring. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

‘You should go and visit Elisabeth in Munich. The cafés are full of anarchists and artists discussing free love, and she is at the very heart of it. I prefer military men but I think you would like it. You always were a little radical.’ Nusch paused, staring narrowly at the rings scuffing on her fingers. ‘Do you remember how you used to pee against the pear trees in Father’s orchard? You used to cock your leg like a dog. Shameless!’

Frieda put a large forkful of cake into her mouth and tried to think of an appropriate retort. But Nusch had settled herself against the cushions and was talking of the past again. ‘I never understood why you didn’t die when Father hurled you into that lake. Do you remember? He used to leap off that wobbly bridge with you clinging to him like a monkey . . . And all those naked soldiers bathing there!’ Her pencilled brows waggled up and down. ‘Mother kept forbidding him from doing it. But he took no notice. Did you actually like it? Or were you just placating the old rogue?’

‘Hush! I was just a child.’

‘He was so desperate for you to be a boy. I do believe he thought he could turn you into one, the old fool!’ Nusch plucked the napkin from her lap and tossed it onto the table. ‘And now here you are. A happy little wife in England!’

She stretched and yawned. Frieda pushed her *Apfelkuchen* round the plate, watching it collapse into a mass of yellow crumbs and apple chunks. When the door clicked sharply in the silence and Ernest appeared – stooped and bowed with a thin strand of pale hair over his eyes – she felt an unexpected relief.

‘Nusch wants me to visit Elisabeth in Munich.’

‘Before motherhood turns her into a complete bore.’ Nusch gave a coquettish wiggle of her shoulders and the diamond drops at her ears shot a flurry of light across the table.

Ernest nodded placidly. ‘Why not? Mrs Babbit and I can manage and Ida can look after the children.’

‘But won’t you come with me, my dear?’ Frieda reached for Ernest’s hand. It felt cold and papery and she wished he would let Mrs Babbit light the fire in his study. He was so frugal, so hard on himself. ‘We could attend one of Elisabeth’s salons and see some Munich theatre. You’ve not had a holiday since I met you.’

He shook his head vigorously. ‘I’m far too busy. Go on your own.’

‘On my own?’ She felt a prick of anxious excitement. She hadn’t left the children before but Monty was seven now, Elsa was five and Barby was three. Could she? She glanced at her sister. Nusch was staring coolly at her, head cocked neatly, like a cat observing a mouse.

‘Yes, Frieda. Come back to us, before it is too late.’

‘The etymological properties of lateness . . . yes, most intriguing.’ Ernest paused and stroked his moustache with his thumb. ‘Debatable whether the word comes originally from the Latin, *lassus*, meaning weary or exhausted, or from the Germanic or even the Middle Dutch, *laat*, meaning lazy and sluggish. And then of course there is the Greek word, *ledein*.’

‘I think lazy and sluggish will do for now.’ Nusch gave a snort of laughter, her fingers prodding at the ivory combs pinning up her sleek golden hair.

‘It is not so easy when you have three children. You only have one, so you wouldn’t know.’ Frieda turned away, stung. The window panes had started their nervy rattling as darts of rain splintered against the glass. ‘But perhaps I will go to Munich alone.’ As she spoke she felt a tiny flare of defiance, infinitesimal but unmistakable. ‘Yes, perhaps I will . . .’

## TWO

# Frieda

The following day, Nusch announced her intention to return early to Berlin. She and Frieda were walking home across the fields, a favourite route of Frieda's because of the amethyst orchids that appeared every spring. Nusch disliked the mud, fretting over her kid boots and her silk stockings. And instead of admiring the orchids, she kept her eyes fixed on the horizon, a dark sullen line of smoke and steam and pit fumes.

'You've only just arrived,' Frieda said, hurt and confused. 'I had trips planned. England is so beautiful in the spring, the blossom and the new leaves and the lambs.'

'Yes, yes, but my lover wants me back. We can hardly bear to be parted at the moment.' Nusch smirked, one hand fluttering demurely at her throat. It struck Frieda that this was the real reason for Nusch's visit. Not to see her. Or the children. But to crow about her lover.

'We meet every afternoon, in his curtained carriage, and we drive up and down Unter den Linden, until we're quite exhausted. He's so passionate, so in love with me. I'm sure all of Berlin have heard our cries of pleasure.' Nusch gave a quick trim shake of her head, then lowered her voice and added, 'He likes me on top.'

Frieda thought of Ernest in the spare bedroom, lying rigid in the narrow guest bed with its scanty mattress and the Bible he kept beneath the pillow. How easily, how softly he'd slipped away. She wriggled too much, she breathed too noisily, her weight made the mattress dip. And now that he had so many mouths to feed, he needed his sleep. And so he'd slunk off to sleep alone. But she wouldn't tell Nusch that. Nor would she tell Nusch that she had never been *on top*. No, she wouldn't give her little sister that satisfaction.

Besides, she loved the early mornings when the children poured into her room, bouncing on the bed, burrowing beneath the covers, begging for a story or a pillow fight. That wouldn't have happened with Ernest in the bed.

A vicarious curiosity gripped her. 'Surely Elisabeth doesn't have a lover?'

'Of course she does! Oh you poor dear. You have no idea, do you? She has the most extraordinary lover, renowned in Munich, apparently. They practise free love. No curtained carriage for them!'

'W-what?' Frieda felt her jaw fall open. Elisabeth, one of the first women in Germany to go to university, to get a doctorate, to have a man's job, now married to the sober, bespectacled Edgar. No – this was too much. Nusch was lying.

'Munich is a hotbed of free love. Elisabeth is quite a convert.'

'So what do these *converts* do?' Frieda felt her face flush with shock, a flush that travelled down her throat and into her dress until every inch of her body felt hot and rosy.

'They share lovers. Nothing furtive. All out in the open, with anyone they want! Personally I like the frisson of something a little more illicit.' Nusch looked at Frieda from beneath her lashes. 'Doesn't it tempt you? Ernest is such a dry old stick.'

'I thought Elisabeth was busy with her suffragettes and her two houses and her salons and spending Edgar's mountains of money,'

said Frieda, indignantly. All of a sudden she didn't want to hear any more about *free love* or her sisters' paramours.

'Yes, she's busy with the Bund Deutsche Frauleinerer but she still has time for pleasure. You'll meet her lover if you go to Munich. It's worth going just to see him.' She stopped and sniffed, in the same exaggerated way she'd sniffed at Frieda's hall. 'What is that ghastly smell?'

'The wind is blowing from the factories today. It could be ammonia or sulphur or the ash pits or perhaps the cattle market. But look at the trees,' Frieda pitched her head upwards, at the dusty catkins and the tiny leaves unfurling like miniature green parasols. 'Aren't they marvellous?'

Nusch put her handkerchief to her nose and fanned at the air with her fingers. 'Elisabeth doesn't understand why you don't hold a salon. She holds one every week, either in Munich or Heidelberg. I attended one last month, Max and Albert Weber spoke and afterwards the room erupted into such a buzz of excitement I could barely hear my own thoughts. You would have loved it.' She lowered her handkerchief and sniffed cautiously. 'Has she written to you about the Weber brothers? Max is a genius and has quite a following now. Elisabeth says his ideas will change the world. She says all the most exciting ideas are coming from Munich or Heidelberg now. England is quite finished, apparently.'

Frieda tried to still her mind by looking at the violets and dandelions bursting through the verges, at the crunchy white blossom on the blackthorn thickets, at the birds cutting and twisting in the sky. It was the only way to *endure*: focus solely on the beauty around her and let her sister's voice fall away to nothing. But all she could see was Nusch in her curtained carriage, her velvet skirts hitched to her waist. Or Elisabeth in the swirl of her salon, presiding over the animated discussion of great men.

'Yes, she writes often of Max Weber and his books and essays,' she said flatly. But never of free love, she thought.

‘He and his brother, Albert, kept me up all night, talking about mixing the intellectual and the erotic. I didn’t understand a word but they defer to Elisabeth on everything. She says her salons are creating a new age of freedom.’ Nusch coughed loudly and batted at the grainy air. ‘Couldn’t you try a salon?’

‘There is no one I could invite – we don’t have philosophers or poets in Nottingham,’ Frieda replied. ‘We live quietly here.’ Too quietly, she thought. And her sister’s words of the previous day tolled in her head: *boring . . . nothing . . . before it is too late.*

‘Elisabeth and Edgar discuss the works of Tolstoy, every night that she’s not with her lover. Apparently they are working through his entire oeuvre. Couldn’t you and Ernest do the same? He must discuss books with his students, so why can’t he discuss them with you?’

Frieda sighed. She had tried, of course. She had tried to discuss Shakespeare and Stendhal and all the other writers she read during her solitary evenings. She had tried to share her fascination with the characters, their feelings and dilemmas. But Ernest either began lecturing her on the *forms* of literature or correcting her grammar. Eventually he’d stopped bothering, disappearing to his study instead, and she’d felt a sense of relief.

‘He is too busy preparing his seminal book on etymology,’ she replied, her eyes on the ground.

‘Your life gives me the creeps, you poor dear.’ Nusch gave a visible shudder, then a relieved laugh. ‘Thank goodness I’ll be back in Berlin for the weekend!’

Later that night Frieda slid into Monty’s bed, wrapping her arms around him and breathing in his smell of wet buds and soap. She stared into the darkness and wondered what it was like to be an admired salon hostess in Munich. She closed her eyes, pictured herself there. The crush of voices and laughter. The press of bodies. The clink and clatter of glasses. The crystal bowls of fruit punch. The bright flames of sundry lamps burning long into the night. And herself, clothed in dazzling silks with scarlet poppies in her hair, at

the epicentre of an impassioned debate on the future of literature. A tingle swept up her spine.

The morning after Nusch's departure Frieda flung open all the doors and windows, pushing back the curtains as far as they would go and holding doors in place with stacks of books. The light poured in and the sharp April air gusted through the house, blowing hats from the hatstand and sending Ernest's papers billowing down the hall. When Elsa asked what she was doing, Frieda replied, 'I want to feel spring rushing through the house. I had forgotten how it feels.'

'But it's dirty!' protested Elsa.

And as Frieda chased after Ernest's papers, she called back 'So do not tell Papa!'

### THREE

## Monty

**M**utti, what's a Hun?' Monty spoke in a whisper. He didn't want anyone to hear and the Mikado Café was very busy with ladies and gentlemen at every table, and waiters and waitresses running to and fro with cake stands and silver trays of tea and coffee.

'A what, my love?' His mother lifted her head from her book. She'd been reading a lot recently, ever since his Aunt Nusch left, a week ago.

'A Hun. Is it like a nun?' Monty reached for another scone and then began picking out the lumps of strawberry from a pot of jam and arranging them in neat circles on his scone.

'The Huns were a tribe of warriors. Very fierce and very ugly.'

'Is Barby called Barby because she's a Bar-barbarian?' He rearranged the strawberry lumps into a tight whorl and reached for the bowl of cream.

'Barby is short for Barbara and it is nothing to do with barbarian. Is someone teasing you at school?'

Monty shook his head quickly. He didn't want to tell her about the big boys who called him a Hun, how they'd jostled him and taken his satchel and thrown it so high it had burst open and all his books and papers had come fluttering from the sky like dying leaves.

‘You should be proud to be half-German. We have produced some of the best minds in the world, like this.’ She showed him the cover of her book. It was a story about a man called Zarathustra. But it had no pictures and looked very dull.

‘Why do people stare at us when we speak German?’

‘Oh my dear.’ She put her book down and poured herself another cup of coffee from the silver coffee pot with the twirly lid. ‘Germany wants an empire now. But the English think only they should have an empire. They think we Germans are getting too big, too important. English people only like themselves.’ She dropped a cube of sugar into her coffee and stirred it slowly.

Monty chewed and frowned and tried to make sense of his mother’s words. ‘Is that why you have no friends?’

She looked at him but said nothing. Monty wished she would laugh. He liked it when she laughed so hard the curls tumbled from her hairpins and the gold flecks in her green eyes sparkled.

Instead she tapped the cover of her book and said, ‘Mr Nietzsche is my friend, Monty.’

‘Is he coming for tea soon?’

His mother didn’t answer for a long time so Monty noisily swallowed the crumbs that had stuck to his gums and the insides of his cheeks. He wondered if her words had stuck to her mouth like crumbs of scone had stuck to his. He swallowed again, encouragingly.

But then she blurted out her reply in a single breath. ‘Now you are seven, I can tell you, Monty. But you are not to tell anyone else. It is to be our secret.’

Monty nodded and wiped the cream from his mouth with the back of his hand.

‘I have realised there is something inside me struggling to come out. I call it the what-I-could-be. It is difficult to explain, *mein Liebling*.’

Monty’s eyes fell to her stomach. He nodded very slowly. He didn’t want another sister, but a brother would be all right.

‘It feels like a secret fire.’ She paused and placed her hand first on her chest and then on her stomach. ‘I am scared to die before I have lived.’

Monty nodded sympathetically. He knew some ladies died when they had babies. ‘I’ll pray for you,’ he said, taking another scone and smearing it with butter.

‘My friend, Mr Nietzsche, is helping me.’ She picked up her book again. ‘And you, Monty. You and Elsa and Barby.’

He reached across and lightly patted her hand, like his father did sometimes. He was worried that her only friend was in a book. How could someone in a book help her have a baby? ‘Does Papa know?’

‘About what, my love?’ She lifted her eyes from her book and looked distractedly at him, as though she was reading something very difficult and he had broken her concentration.

‘The thing growing inside you.’ He jerked his head in the direction of her stomach. It was definitely larger, he thought. And floppier.

‘That is to be our secret, Monty. I should not have said anything, but I have no one else to talk to.’

‘When will your friend come to tea?’

She smiled and stroked his cheek with her thumb. ‘Mr Nietzsche is dead, my love.’

Monty blinked hard and chewed at his scone. She wasn’t reading any more. She was staring at the ceiling with a faraway look on her face. Monty thought there must be something up there, on the ceiling, because she sat gazing for a very long time. But when he looked up, there was nothing – not even a cobweb.

## FOUR

# Ernest

Ernest decided to walk home from the University. There was a biting wind and a thin drizzle had made the cobbles dark and slippery. But he needed time to think. Nusch's aborted visit seemed to have unsettled Frieda and he wanted to make amends. If he walked via the marketplace perhaps he could buy her some flowers. Perhaps the florist's stall would have a few tulips left. Or some early carnations, in cream and pale pink. He wanted her to know they could afford proper flowers now, cultivated flowers, grown and picked by other people. Frieda insisted on collecting cow-parsley and honeysuckle from the hedgerows. She even picked ragwort from the fields, in spite of his abhorrence of a weed known – by any English peasant – to poison cattle. 'But we are not cattle, my dear,' she had laughed, 'and they are so bright and jolly.'

And now the children were doing the same thing. Filling the house with limp, drooping stems. Jars of scummed water placed haphazardly on their best mahogany tables. Dead petals littering the floor. Pollen all over his newspaper. At least they had Mrs Babbit to sweep it up.

His thoughts swerved to all the new staff swarming in and out of his house: the housekeeper, the nanny, the man who came to mow the lawn. He'd tried, unsuccessfully, to emulate his wife's

combination of disdain and sympathy. She had an aristocratic ease with them that he envied and admired. His clumsy attempts to appear equally at ease had made him feel curiously diminished. Now he left dealing with the servants to her.

He liked thinking about his wife. Her vitality, the abundance of her. The way she seemed to occupy every corner of the house at the same time. The way she dashed up and down the stairs like a human earthquake. Of course, it was enormously provoking when he was trying to work, but he enjoyed thinking about her when she wasn't around.

The vitality seemed to have leached out of her since Nusch left. He wondered, just briefly, if Nusch's flaunting of her sumptuous suits and opulent hats had made Frieda feel lowly in some way. Nusch had made a better match, he supposed. A husband as old as he was, but rich and aristocratic, with a distinguished duelling scar across his left cheek. The sort of military husband Baron von Richthofen had wanted for each of his three daughters.

He'd have to work harder, Ernest told himself. Do some extra marking for the Examination Board or teach another evening class for labourers. And he'd let her order a new hat from London . . . with a fine plume in the brim. Egret feathers perhaps . . .

Her eyes still shone when she played with the children. Only yesterday he'd come home to find her on the floor, her skirts splayed, her sturdy stockinged legs circling in the air. Monty had explained that she was pretending to be a bicycle. Inappropriate and undignified, of course. But he'd been so relieved to hear her laughing, he decided not to comment.

The depth of her motherliness never ceased to surprise him. She seemed to love the children with a fierce energy that he couldn't quite comprehend. It had made him aware of a weakness within him, buried beneath the layers and layers of sophistication he'd acquired in his slow, steady path to respectability, to the position

of gentleman. A weakness he could neither articulate nor locate, rather like a mosquito bite trapped beneath tight clothing.

A crimson tram rattled past, breaking his stream of thought. He hurried on towards the marketplace, momentarily distracted by the image of his wife's generous thighs. He shook his head. It was Nusch he needed to think about. What had she said to make Frieda so dispirited? He'd never much liked Nusch's combination of rapacious spite and flirtatious superiority. He knew she looked down on him – even as she flirted with him. There was something ungodly about her, he thought. Something vaguely immoral. Words from the Bible swam into his consciousness . . . *Yea, in my house have I found their wickedness, saith the Lord . . .* At least Frieda had the moral fibre of her mother, not the shameless laxity of her father or her sister.

A gritty breeze swept through the market, stirring the brim of his homburg hat and plucking at the handkerchief protruding from his breast pocket. He gripped the handle of his umbrella and looked round at the straggle of remaining stalls. No tulips or carnations. A basket of limp sorrel leaves. Another of green rhubarb stalks. A tabletop of rabbit carcasses. He paused and looked at them. Slithers of translucent flesh still clung to their spines.

'Carcass,' he murmured. 'Carcase, *carcosium* . . . perhaps from *carchesium* originally, or even from the Persian, *tarkash*. Carcase in Australia, I believe.'

He caught the grim eye of the stall holder and quickly turned away. The drizzle was getting heavier, he needed to get home. He was about to leave when he spotted a woman packing crocheted lace into a basket.

'I'd like some lace,' he said, careful to make his voice sound both decisive *and* disinterested.

The woman thrust a square of mouse-coloured lace at him. 'These are all the rage in London.'

Ernest cleared his throat. They looked like handkerchiefs, but something told him they weren't handkerchiefs. And yet they were too big to be mats or doilies.

'For the backs of chairs. Where greasy little heads go,' explained the woman.

'I'll take four.' Ernest drew back and let his mind dwell on the word 'four'. From the old English, *feower*, and before that quite possibly from the Germanic, *fedwor*. And before that? His mind drifted back through the linguistic litter of time gone by – to the Latin, to the Greek, to Old Norse, to Old Frisian.

He was still thinking about the origins of the word 'four', when he found himself home, inside the hall, handing his damp parcel of lace to Frieda.

She tore off the paper, her smile stiffening very slightly as she looked at the lace squares.

'Nottingham lace is still the best in the world,' he said, feeling a small swell of pride. It was a pride – of England, of her empire, of himself as an English gentleman – that he'd fostered over the years of their marriage, and that he dated dimly, obscurely, from the morning of his wedding when he'd seen the regret in Baron von Richthofen's eyes.

Frieda dropped the paper into the waste basket. 'Yes, my dear,' she said. 'I suppose it is.'

As she moved away, he noticed a weariness in the turn of her shoulders. As if she was overcome with fatigue. Yes, he would buy her a ticket to Munich. She needed a holiday, some time to herself. Munich was the answer.

## FIVE

# Frieda

After Nusch's visit, Frieda found herself thinking back, over and over, to the day she met Ernest. As she brushed his hat or arranged his umbrellas or polished the little mirror he kept in his study, she would close her eyes and picture the fountain where they first met. She could remember, so clearly, the sensation of sun-seared stone and springy moss beneath her fingertips. And Ernest, leaning nonchalantly on his cane and examining the carved water spout. She'd liked the way his pipe sat jauntily in the corner of his mouth, the silk bow tie at his neck, the boater angled rakishly on his head. He'd spoken to her in German, then French, then English. She had liked that too – his talent and sophistication.

She'd rushed home to her sisters and told them about his years of studying, the four universities he'd been to, the many scholarly books he was working on, and his new job as a Professor of Modern Languages in an exotic-sounding English town. 'He is even cleverer than you,' she'd said to Elisabeth. She didn't mention his age, or the blue veins that throbbed at his temples, or the way he draped his thinning hair over the shiny plates of his skull.

When her mother said Mr Weekley wanted to marry her and take her to England, Frieda had looked up from her volume of poetry and smiled, already imagining herself as an inspirational wife,

bringing levity and joy to a great scholar. Even then, at the age of eighteen, she had believed in greatness. She'd pictured them walking over the rolling English hills deep in discussion – philosophy, poetry, politics – their tongues slipping effortlessly from one language into another. Only afterwards had Frieda felt the thrill of sibling victory, whispering into the pages of her book 'I shall be the first to marry, the first to shed the burden of virginity!'

'Of course, he's not our sort,' said the Baroness. 'But he doesn't mind that you have no dowry. And beggars cannot be choosers.'

Frieda hadn't cared about money. It was life she wanted. Adventure. Discussion. Love. Ernest had offered them all. And then there was the promise of England: the very word seemed imbued with mystery, glory, passion. She felt the land of Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Byron calling to her. A land of kings and queens. An empire that stretched to the very ends of the earth. *A sceptred isle . . . a demi-paradise . . . a precious stone set in the silver sea.* She repeated the word 'England', over and over, and felt it reverberate on her tongue.

Later, after a cringing meeting with Ernest's parents at Dover – his pious little mother scuttling and scraping in her darned gloves, his hunched father bobbing and stooping in a shirt leaf-thin from washing – the Baroness had flounced furiously back to Metz. When Frieda returned, her parents made it clear they no longer approved of Ernest. His obvious virginity had become a family joke, his pauper parents were a disgrace, his lack of class a crime.

But Frieda had seen something in Mr and Mrs Weekley's modest marriage that filled her with hope: the small gestures of affection and familiarity that passed between them, the devotion with which Ernest's father blacked the stove for his wife, the way she combed his beard every morning, and smoothed the creases from his trousers when he stood up. Little gestures of loyalty and love she'd never seen before.

In the early days of marriage she'd tried to do the same, brushing the crumbs from Ernest's moustache and straightening his tie. She picked buttercups and forget-me-nots, arranged them with a little foliage and placed them in egg cups on his desk. At breakfast, she laid his paperknife beside his post and cut the crusts from his toast. Things had changed after the children were born. Something had happened to Ernest, she wasn't sure how or why, but she'd felt slowly pushed to the very periphery of his life. Confused, she'd wondered if he no longer loved her, if he'd ever loved her. Her confusion had turned briefly to anger. After a few weeks, the anger settled and dulled into a fond acceptance of him, of their separate lives, and she'd thrown herself with great gusto into motherhood.

But on occasion her acceptance would spill over into a mute sadness. And always she sensed that a role had been thrust upon her. A role not quite of her own choosing. It was something she felt rather than knew, something she couldn't articulate. Until Nusch arrived, with all her talk of affairs and salons. Implying that she and Elisabeth – neither of whom had an ounce of Frieda's courage – had somehow made their own lives and chosen their own roles. Lives that were unfettered and joyful. Lives in which they were loved with the sort of passion Frieda had always dreamt of.

I'll go to Munich, she thought, and see how they've exaggerated the fullness of their lives. Perhaps they were punishing her for marrying so far beneath them. She arranged Ernest's pipe and tobacco pouch, exactly as he liked them in the far corner of his desk with the brass ashtray and a fresh box of matches. Then she straightened the drab little squares of lace he'd bought her which now sat, one on top of the other, on the back of his wing chair. And as she did so another thought struck her. What if Nusch hadn't lied or exaggerated? She shook her head. The scholarly, serious Elisabeth cavorting with a handsome lover in the open air? A ridiculous notion!

## SIX

# Monty

It was a week after his mother had imparted her big secret and Monty was finding it more and more difficult to stop thinking about his brother-to-be or the possibility of his mother dying. When she'd talked of a fire inside her, she must have meant she had a fever. He remembered his last fever. He had felt as though he was burning up, as though his blood was boiling in his veins, and flames were licking at his insides.

That evening, when his father came to tuck him up, the question that had been gnawing away at Monty came rushing out. 'Papa, where does a baby come from?'

His father sat on the edge of his bed, frozen and silent. Eventually he said, 'It's a gift from God.' And then he coughed as though he had something stuck in his throat.

'If it's a gift, why do so many ladies die?'

'That only happens sometimes. If – when . . . when . . .' His father's voice tailed off and he stood up quickly, moving towards the door as if he was in a hurry to get somewhere. Back to his study, no doubt. Back to his books.

'Would a lady die if she had a baby and a fever at the same time, Papa?'

His father's hand gripped the door handle. 'It's time you went to sleep. Goodnight.'

'But how does something so big get into a lady's tummy?' Monty heard the click of his door closing and the hurried tread of his father on the stairs. Pictures of babies and flames bursting through his mother's skin, popping out of her mouth, erupting from her head, her nostrils, her tummy, churned through his mind. And then pictures of her dead, with her eyes closed, nothing moving – just lying there in her best Sunday dress with the velvet-covered buttons. How was that a gift from God?

The next day at breakfast, he asked his mother how she felt. 'How is . . . your fever?' He nodded at her stomach and then concentrated on spreading marmalade over his toast, making sure the shreds of orange peel were evenly spaced.

'Fever?' She sounded surprised.

'The fire.' Monty lowered his voice. Ida had taken Barby and Elsa to the farm to buy some eggs and his father was at work, but Mrs Babbit was in the kitchen and could come through at any moment.

'Fire?' His mother turned to the grate where a couple of logs were burning half-heartedly. 'You are always so observant, Monty.' She pushed back her chair, went to the hearth and flung a small log onto the fire so that a shower of sparks flew into the air.

'Does a baby come from God?'

'In a way, yes.' She looked curiously at him. 'But it is really a man who puts it there. Then it grows and grows and out it comes.' She picked up the butter knife and began gouging at the butter, dropping yellow clods haphazardly over her toast.

Monty chewed pensively. 'What man puts it there?'

'Why, the father of course. You remember that bull we saw last week? The one who was climbing on the cow, by the oak tree with the rope swing?'

Monty nodded.

‘He was putting his baby in the cow. Now the cow will get fatter and fatter and then she will have a calf. Like magic!’

‘Oh,’ said Monty, perplexed. And he remembered the bull and its enormous red penis and the way it had grunted and heaved – and he felt a flush of heat spread over his face. He still wasn’t sure how God fitted in but he didn’t want to think about his little brother any more, or angry bulls, or his father climbing over his mother. ‘Can we go to Sherwood Forest today? Just you and me, without Elsa or Barby. Can we take some plum cake with us?’

‘You have only just finished your breakfast!’ She reached across the table and squeezed his hand. ‘I like it when you eat lots, Monty.’

She put the last corner of toast in her mouth and stood up. Monty looked at her stomach. Was it getting bigger? It looked the same as before. He decided to look at her stomach every day. And then he would tell his father. Someone had to tell. Even if it meant snitching.

## SEVEN

# Frieda

As Frieda prepared for Munich – getting her hats repaired and her shoes resoled, oiling the hinges on her travelling trunk – letters continued to come from her sisters: Nusch writing regretfully that she would not be able to get to Munich, such were the daily demands of her lover and her seamstress; Elisabeth instructing her to stop immediately at the Café Stefanie *whatever time of day or night you arrive*, and hinting at the *intellectual and artistic oasis* that Munich had become. Frieda tossed their letters into the waste basket but couldn't help feeling oddly excited. She seemed to veer between flippant disbelief and nervous anticipation. She had tried, again, to persuade Ernest to join her. But he'd insisted that a holiday was quite out of the question.

One night she awoke parched and gasping for water. As she reached for the glass beside her bed, the dream she had awoken so violently from came flooding back. She frowned, blinked, gulped at the water. Not a dream, she thought. A perfectly recalled memory. A memory she had packed away ten years ago. She wondered if her imminent trip home had, in some oblique way, unlocked a small door to her past. Lifting her from her cramped sunless house and returning her, momentarily, to the military garrison of Metz. She lay down and closed her eyes.

The memory spun back, as vivid as her dream. She was in the drawing room, her mother's pacing footsteps and ruptured voice filling the air. The Baroness sending Nusch to beg for money from the commanding officer, rouging her girlish cheeks so that he would be made pliant by her beauty. The news unfolding bit by bit. The servants had been dismissed. The house was to be sold. No money for dowries. No chance of marriage to an army captain now. Money must be borrowed, secured against their few remaining possessions. The Baron's gambling debts had become too large, too unwieldy.

She put her fingers in her ears and gave herself a shake beneath the eiderdown. She didn't want to be reminded of what had followed. But the memory forced itself upon her, like water from a dam that has found a fissure and must tear its way through. The Baroness's skirts swishing furiously over the floorboards, her arms wrapped tightly round her chest crushing the stiff ruffles of her bodice. Her voice mingling shame with bitterness, her plaintive excuses for him . . . *It is not easy being wounded in battle. For a military man to carry his scarring so publicly . . .* Her gaze sweeping from the ceiling to the floor, as if she couldn't bear to look at her daughters, to see herself reflected in their eyes. *He has a bastard son whose mother's silence must be bought . . . If only he'd had a legitimate son to inherit the baronetcy . . . Such disappointment he has lived with . . . All the endless oysters she had eaten – to the brink of sickness . . . The gypsy who swore Frieda would be a boy . . . Your fault, Frieda . . . If only you had been the boy you should have been . . .*

Frieda opened her eyes and pushed back the covers. The chill morning air shook her from her daze of semi-consciousness. She didn't want to think about the past. She didn't want to recall the move to a meagre, low-ceilinged apartment or how wrong it had felt – too narrow, too new, too parsimonious – or the endless ensuing discussions of who might marry them *without a dowry*. Her mother's voice filled her ears again. *Nusch will find a rich husband because*

*she is beautiful . . . Elisabeth will be all right because she is brilliantly clever . . . but Frieda?*

She sat up quickly. I must think about the day ahead, she thought. I have things to do: instructions for Mrs Babbit, magazine subscriptions to be renewed for Ernest, a salve to be made for Barby's rash, an order for the butcher.

Later, as she yawned her way through her errands, she had a small moment of epiphany.

'Ernest,' she said, over dinner of mutton cutlets and fried potatoes. 'I want our children to grow up knowing courage is more important than appearance and intelligence.'

Ernest had a pile of exam papers beside him and was attempting to eat and mark at the same time. 'Whatever are you talking about, my snowflower?'

'I want them to know that courage is more precious than looking nice or being clever.'

His expression was one of such blank perplexity, she wondered if she should remind him of *his* courage, when he'd asked so boldly for her baronial hand in marriage. But then he looked up from his papers and answered her.

'I suppose courage is important if Monty wants a military career. I shall be happy if the girls are as pure and beautiful as you.' He patted her hand and turned back to his work.

She sighed and pushed her plate away. She was just about to ring the bell for Mrs Babbit, when Ernest said, 'Read Monty the stories of King Arthur. They're all about courage and bravery.'

'And the girls?' she persisted.

Ernest paused, his eyes lifting briefly from his papers. 'Duty, loyalty, morality. It's all in the Bible. It may even be in those Brothers Grimm stories you fill their heads with. Will you ask Mrs Babbit to bring my glass of stout to my study tonight?' He pushed back his chair, picked up the pile of essays and hurried from the room.

‘Perhaps I will take Monty to Munich so he can remember his German courage!’ Frieda called to his fleeing form. But there was no answer, just the sharp thud of his study door echoing through the house.

## EIGHT

# Monty

‘Why do you keep answering me in English?’ His mother’s voice rose over the hubbub of the café. ‘Don’t you want to speak German to me now?’

Monty chewed diligently and said nothing. People stared when he spoke German and he didn’t want to be called a hideous Hun any more. But he liked it when she spoke German at home. He liked the way German words came from deep in her throat, the way they rose and plunged and rattled from her mouth like gunfire.

‘At home,’ he mumbled, after a long silence.

‘Very well.’ She reached across the table for another slice of fruitcake. ‘The cakes in Germany are really much better. I think you should come to Munich with me, Monty. Would you like that?’

Monty felt the tension slip from his shoulders and the tight knots fade from his stomach. ‘Yes, please. Oh yes please!’ Cake crumbs flew from his mouth but he didn’t care. He was going to Munich!

‘I don’t feel quite myself and I think a short holiday in Munich will help.’ She opened her book again, but she didn’t seem to be reading. Her eyes didn’t move.

Monty reached out and touched her forearm very gently. ‘Have you a pain in your tummy, Mutti?’

She looked up and said, 'What would I do without you, Monty? You are such a big boy now.' Monty wished he wasn't such a big boy. He wanted to be small again, to climb into her lap and stroke her face and her hair and feel his skin melting under the soft heat of her palm. Like Elsa and Barby did.

'Oh look, Monty!' Her voice was suddenly silver bright and she was pushing her book back into her basket. 'Move up. Move up. We shall need more chairs.'

He looked up to see Barby's godfather, Mr Dowson, and his wife coming towards them. Mrs Dowson was pointing at him with the tip of her purple umbrella and Mr Dowson had a big smile on his face, so big it seemed to stretch from one ear to the other. Mr Dowson lived a few streets away and often came to visit. Monty liked his twinkly eyes which grew even brighter when Papa wasn't there. It struck him that perhaps Mr Dowson could be his mother's friend. Mrs Dowson wasn't much use – she was too busy embroidering banners for her committees.

'We're just leaving!' trilled Mrs Dowson. 'I have a women's meeting to attend. Emmeline Pankhurst is coming to Nottingham. You will come, won't you? We want to show her that Nottingham is taking women's suffrage seriously.'

'You don't need me, Helena. I'll join Mrs Weekley for a coffee.' Mr Dowson turned to Monty and his mother. 'You can tell me how my favourite goddaughter is.' He winked at Monty and squeezed in next to his mother on the banquette, even though the space seemed much too small and she had specifically said they needed more chairs.

'It is nice to see you, Mr Dowson.' Monty's mother put her head to one side, like a sparrow, and fixed her eyes on Mr Dowson. Monty was pleased. Perhaps she would tell him about the new baby. He stretched out his ears to make sure he didn't miss a single word.

'I've been busy, keeping out of mischief while Helena fills the house with her rabble-rousing suffragettes,' said Mr Dowson, rolling his eyes.

‘They are doing important work and women should have the vote.’ She hesitated for a second, stirring absently at her cold coffee. ‘But when I went to a suffragette meeting they did not make me feel welcome. And now they are shouting and marching and behaving like men. I have a different vision.’

‘Oh? Are you listening to your mother, Monty?’ Mr Dowson prodded him in the arm.

Monty nodded and she continued, slowly, as if groping for the right words. ‘They are not . . . inclusive enough. And it is not the vote that will bring us true freedom. It is much more complicated than that. We are powerful because we are different from men. We should be making our world more female, helping you men see things differently.’

‘A more womanly world, eh? What do you think, Monty? Should women be given the vote?’ But Mr Dowson was still looking at his mother so Monty wasn’t sure if he was supposed to answer or not.

‘Monty and I are going to Munich. It is more progressive there.’

‘I hope you’ll come back.’ Mr Dowson gave a deep barking laugh. ‘We all know what you think of Nottingham.’

‘It is Nottingham that doesn’t like me,’ she protested. Monty turned away and fastened his eyes on the window where he could watch out for anyone from school coming in. It was then that he heard his mother’s peculiar words.

‘. . . Something inside of me . . . like a fire burning away . . .’ She lowered her voice and ran her fingertips absently down the front of her dress. ‘. . . Feel as if I have . . . no meaning, no purpose. One day . . . dead!’ She paused and clasped her hands against her stomach. ‘And that is all.’

Monty recoiled. ‘Why must my little brother die?’ He blurted and he knew his eyes were very wide because his eye sockets ached.

‘What?’ His mother looked at him and the skin between her brows went into little pleats. ‘Monty is obsessed with death at the moment. All morning he has been asking me about Heaven.’ She

shrugged, a big shrug, and kept her palms face upwards in the air for several seconds.

Monty suddenly felt very tired and his stomach was hurting. 'I have tummy ache, Mutti,' he said.

'I'm not surprised, young man. All the cake you've eaten.' But Mr Dowson wasn't looking at him. He was still gazing at Monty's mother, as if he'd never seen her before.

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