



A Life of Secrets

MARGARET KAINE

Allison & Busby Limited
11 Wardour Mews
London W1F 8AN
allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2020.

Copyright © 2020 by MARGARET KAINE

The moral right of the author is hereby asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

*All characters and events in this publication,
other than those clearly in the public domain,
are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent buyer.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-2494-9

Typeset in 11/16 pt Adobe Garamond Pro by
Allison & Busby Ltd.

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

Chapter One

Bloomsbury, London, 1926

'You look so seductive with your hair loose, so beautiful,' the husky and haunting voice crept into her mind and she found herself struggling to push the memory away. Yet she had to, it belonged to another life, one taken from her by the terrible war that had robbed England of the cream of her youth. And only too aware of the pitfalls of allowing such nostalgia to overwhelm her, it was a welcome distraction for Deborah when there came a timid tap on the door.

A pale and anxious face peered round, followed by the plainly dressed figure of a young woman.

'Please, do come in and take a seat.' Deborah indicated the chair opposite her desk and waited.

'Be you Miss Claremont?' The girl's voice was hesitant.

'Yes, that is my name.'

‘And is it true that you find positions for such as I?’

Deborah studied her, trying to establish the girl’s dialect. ‘I shall certainly try to help you if I can.’ She opened a file and on a blank sheet of paper wrote the date. ‘Perhaps if you could tell me your name?’

‘Boot.’

‘And your Christian name?’

‘Sarah.’

‘Age?’

‘I be nineteen this coming June.’

Again, that soft burr. ‘And your current address?’

She named an East End area notorious for its poverty and crime, and Deborah frowned. ‘May I ask how long you have been resident there?’

‘A fortnight, miss.’

Deborah felt a surge of relief. Poverty in itself was not a crime, but dishonesty was, and it was essential that her agency’s reputation for supplying staff with good character did not become tainted. Otherwise she would never be able to achieve what had become her only purpose in life.

‘And before then?’

‘Wiltshire, miss, then I come up to the London house when I were sixteen. Kitchen maid to start with, and finally parlourmaid.’ The last word was spoken with pride.

‘And your reason for leaving?’ Deborah paused, seeing colour rise in the girl’s face. ‘If it was for an embarrassing reason, I can promise you that I won’t be shocked, nor will I judge you. Not unless it was for theft. In that case I’m afraid I cannot help you.’ Sarah’s expression was one of horror. ‘No, miss, I never stole nothing in me life.’

Deborah waited.

The words stumbled out. ‘It was the master. Been after me for weeks, he had, ever since I went upstairs to work. And I knew it was only a matter of time afore he had his way, because we servants weren’t allowed locks on our doors. He was a randy old—’ She bit her lip. ‘And I wouldn’t have bin the first maid he’d ruined.’ Sarah looked directly at her with eyes full of honesty. ‘I was brought up respectable and I want to stay that way.’

‘So you gave notice.’

She shook her head. ‘No, I just packed me bags. I wasn’t taking no chances.’

‘Was that wise? To leave without a reference?’

‘Better than leaving with something else, if you’ll beg me pardon, miss.’

Deborah’s lips twitched. But the situation didn’t call for levity. The girl, like many before her, was now in a desperate situation and through no fault of her own. However, she did need to probe a little more. ‘But you knew you had somewhere to go, to family perhaps?’

‘I thought I had, miss. I went back to Wiltshire, but I found me auntie had taken up with a man at long last and I didn’t fancy the way he looked at me either. Out of the frying pan, if you know what I mean. So I slung me hook and managed to find a cheap room here. You know, miss, it’s a mixed blessing to be born with looks.’

Deborah’s lips twitched again. She had no illusions about how she must appear to this young girl, older and dressed as soberly as she was.

‘And how did you hear about my agency?’

‘It was when I went to Mass at St Malachy’s. The priest told me as how you had a charitable outlook on girls without references.’

‘Deserving girls,’ Deborah corrected.

‘Yes, miss.’

‘And you want to go back into service?’

‘Even though things are changing, it’s all I know.’

Deborah regarded her. It was true that since the war ended, increasing numbers of women were looking for different employment, but a position in a good household still offered advantages for girls without family support. A roof over one’s head, warmth and food were benefits not to be underestimated. Deborah took great care in placing her applicants. ‘And the name of your previous employer?’ She made a note of it with an asterisk, ‘Females – send only homely and middle-aged.’

She gazed at the young woman before her. Fair, with a good complexion and frank blue eyes, she seemed trustworthy and Deborah had great faith in her own judgement. ‘If you would like to return the day after tomorrow, perhaps in the afternoon at three o’clock, I may have some news for you.’

‘You mean you’ll help me?’

Deborah smiled at her. ‘I’ll certainly try.’

Sarah rose. ‘Oh, thank you, miss. I’ll be here on the dot.’

Deborah watched her leave and then began to leaf through her card index, thankful that her father had not subscribed to the belief that education was wasted on women. Her private tutor, Mr Channing, had included administration in his teaching, peering at her over his half-rimmed spectacles.

‘It is quite probable that you will marry a member of the aristocracy, or at least be the mistress of a large household, and you will find such knowledge useful.’

Deborah paused in reflection. Who could have possibly foreseen that at the age of twenty-six she would not only be a spinster, but while concealing her title, have an occupation that would have appalled her parents. A staff occupation would have been

regarded as 'trade', a term of disparagement used by her insular class to describe anyone who worked for a living other than in a profession. Even as a young girl she had inwardly rebelled against such narrow-minded snobbery.

But it was only when her heart was splintered, first by the news that the man she adored had been killed at the Battle of Amiens, and weeks later by the loss of her parents to the Spanish flu pandemic, that Deborah discovered within herself a core of steel. Her beloved mother, then within days, the gentle, intelligent man who had been her father, had succumbed to the airborne virus that had taken the lives of 228,000 people in Britain alone. And afterwards she'd had desperate need of that inner strength. Even more so when it was revealed that her brother Gerard had been appointed as her guardian.

That evening, Deborah sat before her walnut dressing table feeling impatient as Ellen began with firm strokes to brush her shining bob. 'I'm feeling rather tired tonight, I wish I hadn't accepted the invitation to go and dine with the Anstruthers. And Gerard expects me downstairs for drinks beforehand, more's the pity. I expect my new sister-in-law will have invited more of her boring friends.' She knew that her mother would have disapproved of such intimacies with one of the servants, but Deborah had little patience with such conventions. She had fought years ago for Ellen to be her personal maid, with Gerard's opposition only stiffening her resolve.

'You're mad. The girl is far too young and inexperienced!' Her brother's pale-blue eyes had been like flint. 'An older woman such as Olive would be a much more sensible choice.'

What you really mean, Deborah had thought, is that she would be a useful spy for you. She'd stood her ground. 'Ellen might be a parlourmaid now, but she is an intelligent girl and a quick learner.'

Besides, I had discussed the matter with Mama before she died. Naturally, her maid then attended me, but now that she's left . . .'

'I don't believe you.'

'I hope you are not accusing me of lying, Gerard. You should consult Fulton, because he was aware of the plan.'

It was a bold untruth but with relief she saw his expression of uncertainty and knew she had won. The Claremont household depended greatly on the efficient butler who had not only run their Grosvenor Square house for twenty-five years, but to whom their mother's word had been sacrosanct. Gerard would never dare to gainsay one of her instructions.

'Sadly, Mama died before she discovered how much you needed guidance.'

The barbed reminder had made Deborah, who then was at her most vulnerable, flinch, but over the years Ellen had not only repaid her support with fierce loyalty, she had become her trusted confidante.

Deborah smiled. 'I suppose I'm lucky that since she married Gerard - Julia shows little interest in my personal affairs. She knows I serve on various charity committees and enjoy shopping and lunching out with friends, but never asks for details.' She considered her reflection as Ellen teased her hair into its sleek shape.

Ellen said, 'But she might later, as she becomes more used to being the mistress here.'

The possibility had already occurred to Deborah, and it was not a welcome one. While she had been able to conceal her activities from her cold and distant brother, she suspected that Julia might become both curious and ultimately more perceptive.

'I shall tell her the same as I told Gerard at the beginning, that I just like to keep busy during the middle of the week. My habit

of spending time away from the house on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays has long been accepted. If she does ask further, I'm sure I'll cope with it.'

Ellen turned to the two couture gowns she had laid out on the rose silk eiderdown. 'Which one, Lady Deborah? The blue or the green?'

She gave them a cursory glance. 'You decide, Ellen.'

'I think the blue, it matches your eyes. And the sapphire earrings look lovely with it.'

Deborah tried to imagine how she would feel in Ellen's place, caring for beautiful clothes for another woman to wear, handling her exquisite jewellery, yet unless she was an excellent actress, she had never betrayed any jealousy. One Christmas, Deborah had offered her a string of seed pearls and with some reluctance Ellen had accepted, but she only ever wore them beneath her black dress, fearing being accused of theft, or even of causing jealousy. The revelation about the insecurity of servants was one that Deborah had never forgotten.

Ready at last and gazing at her reflection in the cheval mirror, she had to admit that her applicants, or even clients at the agency, would hardly recognise her. There, Deborah was careful to wear only layers in grey: dropped-waist dresses with pleated skirts and matching jersey cardigans. Or a plain skirt and white or ivory blouse. Her business outfits, as she thought of them, were completed not only by a small cameo brooch and black bar shoes, but plain lens spectacles. But now, the blue brocade dress not only revealed her bare shoulders but was cut on the bias to drape in sinuous folds over the contours of her slim figure. A body she was well aware that men found attractive. Knowing that her decision to remain single was a constant irritant to her brother, afforded her not a small amount of pleasure.

It was when Deborah paused at the foot of the sweeping staircase that she heard from the open door of the drawing room the tinkling sound of her sister-in-law's voice.

With a sigh Deborah paused in the doorway. The room held several small groups of people, while Julia, with Gerard by her side, was talking to a young woman with insipid features. Deborah remembered her as also being vacuous.

'Good evening, Deborah, you've joined us at last.' Julia's smile was thin. 'I believe you know Caroline Morton. You recall that she was one of my bridesmaids.'

Deborah wondered whether it was truly a coincidence that all of Julia's six bridesmaids had been less than beauties. The bride had shone like a lily in a field of dandelions. 'Yes, of course. How are you, Caroline?'

'I am exceedingly well, thank you, Lady Deborah.' She gave a complacent smile. 'Have you heard my news? I have just become engaged to be married.'

'My congratulations, and who is the lucky gentleman?'

'Unfortunately, my fiancé could not be here this evening.' She named an odious friend of Gerard's, who was florid of face with hard eyes and fleshy fingers. Deborah had to bite her lip to suppress an exclamation of dismay. He would eat this little mouse alive. And she had no doubt that he had chosen his bride in anticipation of her fortune. Deborah hated hypocrisy. Caroline might be glowing with pride at the prospect of having a wedding band on her finger, but Deborah suspected that she was more in love with the status of a married woman than she was with the man himself.

'Maybe one of these days you will have similar happy news to share,' Julia's tone was one of honey.

'Now why would I wish to marry,' Deborah's own voice was also sweet as she turned to her stony-faced brother, 'when I have such

a welcoming and comfortable home here in Grosvenor Square?’

‘But surely you would like to have your own establishment?’
Caroline said. ‘Every woman wishes for that.’

‘But I am not like most other women.’ She met Gerard’s gaze in challenge, but he was looking towards the door where a tall man was hovering.

The butler announced, ‘Mr Theodore Field.’

‘I believe he’s single,’ Julia whispered, with an arch glance at Deborah, which only served to annoy her.

Gerard turned to greet him and made the necessary introductions, mentioning that the new guest was a Member of Parliament.

‘And which political party do you favour, Mr Field?’
Deborah said.

‘Mr Field is a leading Conservative,’ Gerard snapped. ‘Something I would have expected you to know.’ He turned to the MP. ‘My sister professes an interest in politics.’

Deborah ignored him. ‘I would imagine, Mr Field, that with the widespread unrest in the country, this is not an easy time to sit in the House.’ He was by far the best-looking man she’d met for ages.

‘Indeed it isn’t, Lady Deborah. But of course, one has to do one’s duty.’

Pompous prig, she thought. He’s obviously not prepared to elaborate on a political point with a mere woman. She excused herself, relieved she would soon be leaving for her dinner engagement. But then what else had she expected? Only after a long and bitter struggle had women achieved the vote, and then only once they were thirty years of age. As for their political opinions being sought and valued, that was a rarity. Deborah glanced at Gerard’s smug face, which epitomised the grim fact that it remained a man’s world.

It was only by running the staff agency that Deborah had been brought into close contact with ordinary people, and she continued to be shocked to discover how many of the women had suffered hardship or abuse at the hands of their fathers or their brothers. Often innocent young girls sent out to service were a target for unscrupulous employers who, complacent in their innate superiority, managed to remain free from censure. But I can at least try to protect my own applicants, Deborah thought, while her fixed smile gave lip service to the idle gossip around her. And that, surely, was a worthwhile ambition. It also gave meaning to what would otherwise be a rather empty life.