



Peace Comes to Honeyfield

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London W1T 6DW
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First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2018.

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

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-2045-3

Typeset in 11/16 pt Sabon 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

London, 11th November 1918

Georgie Cotterell stole a quick glance at her father's face as she tried to persuade him to change his mind. 'But I only want to go out for a short time to join in the celebrations, and I won't go far, I promise. It's such a special day!'

'No. Definitely not.'

As they stood facing one another, noise from the street echoed into the elegant sitting room: cheers, shouts, laughter, somewhere in the distance a very bad brass band, car horns tooting, every noise you could possibly imagine a crowd of happy people making.

After all the years of war, people were celebrating the Armistice and she wanted desperately to celebrate with them, because like everyone else she was delighted that the war had ended.

His voice softened. 'It won't be safe for you to go out, Georgie. Men can't be trusted to control themselves on

such a day, even with respectable young ladies like you.'

The obvious retort escaped her. 'Not so young now, Father. I'm twenty-eight.'

'You've still got time to find a decent chap and get married.'

'I doubt it. How many men have been killed in the war? Hundreds of thousands, you told me once, mostly younger men. So there won't be enough left to go round and they'll be looking for younger, riper fruit than me. I shall be part of a generation of spinsters.'

He sighed and walked across to join her at the window. 'I'm afraid you're right about our losses. The cost of winning has been very high indeed and the pain of recovery will continue for a long time, which is why I continue to be so busy. There are certain people who want the Germans to get off lightly, and others who want to punish them too viciously. I try to put my efforts on the side of fairness and reason.'

She looked at him in surprise. 'You don't often talk about your work.'

'Don't I? Well, the war *is* over now.'

'I'll just go and stand on the doorstep, then,' she pleaded. 'At least I'll feel part of the celebrations if I'm outside.'

'No. I've told you before. Because of my work, I have enemies, and I don't want you lingering on the doorstep even in an exclusive neighbourhood on a day like this. The riff-raff are everywhere and a lot of them will be drunk. The veneer of civilisation can be very thin at such times, I'm afraid.'

'Can't you stay home, then, and we'll celebrate together? I don't know why you have to go to work today.'

‘Butterly isn’t well. Someone has to be at the helm.’

‘Major Butterly seems to be ill rather often lately, and it’s always you who has to fill in for him.’ She couldn’t stand the man. He was not only a fusspot but he made her flesh crawl, for some reason she couldn’t work out.

‘The man’s old. He does his best and he’s very good with the paperwork and accounts. Now, I really must get ready to go out, my dear.’

Sure of her obedience, he kissed her forehead and left the room. He would be working in his office till late, even on this special day. He went there most weekends, too.

She’d only come to live here in London with him two years ago and they’d been like two strangers sharing a house, not father and daughter. She’d insisted she wanted to do war work, and not just rolling bandages with a group of gossip ladies. She wasn’t trained as a nurse, but hoped she might be accepted as a driver in the Voluntary Aid Detachment. Her friend Bella had driven ambulances.

But no. Her father said if she became a VAD, she could be sent anywhere in the country at a minute’s notice and that wouldn’t be safe. Doing *something* to help the war effort had been one of the few times she’d held firm against him, though as usual her father had discovered a way of reaching a compromise. He’d obtained an informal job for her as one of a group of ladies organised by Lady Berrens, a close friend of his, telling her she’d be making a difference without having to leave home.

And indeed, it had been very worthwhile to help ferry wounded officers around London, taking them to hospitals, to see specialist doctors, to visit relatives, whatever was needed to help them in their convalescence. She loved

anything connected with motor cars and intended to buy one of her own as soon as vehicles were being produced again for civilians, but hadn't told her father that. She had her own money, after all, and if he objected, she'd just do it.

The main thing that had tempted her to join Lady Berrens' group had been that she'd have to learn how to drive. Her father had been surprisingly helpful about that, even taking her to the Post Office himself to obtain her driving licence and as he paid the five shillings it cost, he joked about how expensive she was.

Then, as she put the licence carefully away in her leather shoulder bag, he had grimaced and spoilt the mood of the day.

'Why do you insist on carrying that huge thing around with you, Georgie? It makes you look like a suffragette. A small, plain handbag would be much more ladylike.'

He wasn't exactly against women getting the vote, she'd give him that, and indeed, he was fairly modern in his attitude towards women, but he disapproved strongly of everything remotely connected with suffragettes, and it was they who had started the fashion for larger handbags.

'A small handbag isn't practical, as I've told you before, Father, and it wouldn't hold even half the things I need for my war work.' Not just her purse, handkerchief and notebook, but a brush, comb and spare hairpins, because her long curly hair would come tumbling down at the slightest provocation. She'd have had it cut short but her father had objected vehemently to that, saying it was her crowning glory.

When he'd added without thinking, 'As it was your mother's,' with a dreamy look in his eyes, Georgie had given

in. She knew so little about her real mother, she'd treasured even that small piece of information. She'd pleaded several times for more details of the mother she had never known, who had died after a difficult birth with twins, but he'd stubbornly shaken his head.

It had only taken a few trips to show her how genuinely useful her work was, not just because wounded men needed this sort of help but also because they usually perked up when they were chatting to a young woman who could make them smile. She carried Fry's chocolate cream bars in the handbag her father despised, when she could get them, because they were such a convenient size. She'd never met a soldier who didn't welcome a sweet treat.

She was still staring enviously out at the celebrating crowds, when her father came downstairs again. As she turned round, he stopped in the hall and raised his hand in farewell. She waved back, admiring his trim, upright bearing. He was still a fine figure of a man, even though he was past sixty. He looked younger now she'd persuaded him to stop wearing formal morning clothes and a high, starched wing collar. He was carrying a briefcase as usual, even today, and wearing his 'uniform' of neat, navy-blue suit and felt homburg.

She sat down again, losing herself in thought. Her father had been a distant figure for most of her life and she'd wondered why he stayed away from them. She'd only found out a couple of years ago that she and her twin brother were the offspring of his mistress who'd died in childbirth, not his wife whom they'd thought to be their mother. He must have loved their real mother so deeply, he couldn't bear to talk about her. What else could explain

the way he refused even to tell her the name of her mother?

He'd bribed his wife to pass them off as her own and then kept his distance. Georgie now knew that it had been one of his wife's conditions for doing it, that he stay away. A way of punishing him, probably. But he'd wanted to avoid the stain of bastardy for them, because people would ostracise those not born in wedlock.

Life in the country hadn't been too bad when Georgie had her twin to love, but poor Philip had been killed in France and after that she'd felt desperately alone in the world. She was glad when she found out *that woman* wasn't her mother because she'd come to hate her father's wife, who had even tried to trick Georgie out of an inheritance and into a marriage with a scoundrel, wanting the money for her own invalid son.

It had been a relief when Georgie's father rescued her, told her the truth and brought her to live with him in London. Her father's wife was becoming increasingly strange and was now living in a secluded house in the countryside with a stern housekeeper to keep an eye on what she did.

Why did her father continue to refuse to tell her more about her mother, though? It didn't make sense. Well, there must be *some* relatives on her real mother's side who could tell her more and one day she'd find them – she was just as determined about that as he was to keep them secret.

The word 'peace' echoing from the street brought Georgie back to the present. The Armistice, official end of the horrors of war, was to be declared at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. She glanced at the clock. When it struck eleven in half an hour's time,

she wanted to be with other people, not on her own in this too-quiet house.

She went to the window, looking longingly at the crowds outside. No, she wasn't going to obey her father's ban on joining the celebrations. This was such a special day. It would be something to tell her children about – if she ever had any.

She went back out into the hall, unbolted the front door quietly, so as not to alert Mathers to what she was doing, because he had been manservant to her father for so long, he'd know what his master wanted and try to stop her going out. She stood for a few moments taking it all in. She'd never seen such crowds or felt such happiness. It seemed to surge around her in waves.

Surely she couldn't be in danger in a street as respectable as this? It was daylight, there were people all around and if she wore her VAD raincoat, which was one of her plainer outer garments, and her small felt cloche hat, she'd look like a maidservant on her day off. She could see several young women similarly dressed in the street now, arms linked, cheering and bobbing to and fro in clumsy dances.

Oh, she couldn't bear to be kept out of it, just could not stand it!

Promising herself not to go beyond the end of the street, she put on the raincoat, tightened the belt and left the house, cramming the hat on anyhow, then closing the door quietly behind her.

As she stood at the top of the four steps that led up to the front door a car drove slowly past, loaded with cheering passengers, some sitting on the bonnet or standing on the

running boards, where they clung to the edges of the open side windows.

One man held out his hand to her, a mute invitation to join them, but she ignored it. She might be willing to disobey her father occasionally but she wasn't stupid enough to go off with a complete stranger.

He shrugged and gestured to another woman further on, who did jump on to the running board beside him.

After a few moments Georgie ventured down the stone steps. As she stood at the bottom, three young women walked past – or rather danced past – with their arms linked and the one nearest grabbed her hand and dragged her into their line.

At first she allowed it, skipping along with them, but when they reached the end of the street, she decided she'd gone far enough and tugged her arm away. Reluctantly she turned to make her way back to the house. She could still stand outside near her home and watch the merrymakers, after all. Still cheer with them, too.

She didn't know what made her look down the narrow alley at her side of the street, but what she saw had her running down it, yelling for help at the top of her voice.

Patrick Farrell limped along the street, doing his best to avoid being knocked over by the merrymakers who filled it. He was tired and his leg was hurting. Mostly he could manage without that damned walking stick, but he should have brought it with him today.

Sometimes he could ignore the pain, unlike earlier when it had dominated his life and he could only lie in the hospital bed and wait for it to stop throbbing. He shouldn't

have come so far, though, and needed to find somewhere to sit down and rest for a few minutes. He doubted he'd be allowed to sit on the steps in front of any of these elegant houses, even on a day like this.

Ah, well, he could manage. The leg was a lot better, though it would never be as good as it had been when he was a lad, running wild. The doctors said he was lucky not to have lost it. He felt lucky even to be alive, given what he'd experienced and seen during the war. Why had he made it through battle after weary battle – Arras, Ypres, Passchendaele – when so many others had died?

Most of the time, he hadn't been able to see what benefit had been gained by spending so many lives on moving a few yards this way, followed by a few yards that way. But then, he wasn't an officer, had only been an acting sergeant, so what did he know about strategy?

A bitter huff of laughter escaped him. Only what he saw with his own eyes, that's what, and no one had ever reckoned he was blind or stupid.

He'd copped a Blighty at the battle of Amiens, and been so weary of killing that he'd been *glad* the leg wound was bad enough for him to be sent home to Britain and discharged from the Army. He'd done his bit for his country, nothing to be ashamed of there. Who cared if he had to limp for the rest of his life? He'd survived, hadn't he?

He pulled out his pocket watch, a bit battered but still a good timekeeper. The war was about to end and he'd been discharged only a few days ago, so he'd not have to wait around for demobilisation like so many others.

Luckily the Army had paid for him to stay in a hostel for a few weeks. He needed that respite to build up his strength.

He raised his hand in response to an older woman with a smiling face sitting in a car waving at everyone, then nodded a greeting to a couple of soldiers in shabby uniforms passing by.

They glanced at his lapel before they smiled back. He fingered the silver war badge he always wore there. He'd been told by the discharge committee to wear it proudly. He didn't know about 'proudly' but he'd damned well earned it, hadn't he? And at the very least it had stopped people looking at him as if he was malingering and ought to be in uniform.

Eh, what was he going to do with himself after he left the hostel? He hadn't worked that out yet. His poor old mam had died last year, so he'd no home to go back to. He doubted he even had any possessions, either. Not if his younger brother had anything to do with it. Hagan had failed the medical and been jealous when Patrick passed it and went off to war. Fancy being jealous of that!

Patrick sighed. He had some money saved, because he wasn't stupid enough to drink all his wages. But there wasn't nearly enough for what he really wanted to do.

Realising he was standing still again and people were having to edge round him, he decided to move a few paces further up the street to where there seemed to be an alley. It'd surely have a wall he could lean against, or even a dustbin or box he could sit on to rest his leg.

That's when he heard the screaming – a woman's voice and it wasn't screaming in pleasure, but in terror. The sound was drowned out by the hubbub in the street, but you couldn't mistake it once you moved out of the melee.

He jerked forward, forgetting his gammy leg and nearly

falling over as it gave way. Steadying himself against the wall, he looked down the alley and saw two women struggling with a big fellow. One of them had her clothing torn and there could be only one reason for that.

Yelling, 'Hoy! Stop it!' at the top of his voice, he set off running, a lopsided gallop, but it still covered the ground.

To his dismay the attacker shoved the women aside and turned towards him, raised fists clenched. Oh, hell! He could hardly stand upright let alone fight his way out of trouble.

But the taller of the two women must have noticed his limp because she came after her attacker rather than picking up her hat or helping her companion, who was desperately scabbling to set her clothes straight.

The man laughed as he knocked Patrick over then kicked him in the ribs. He raised his foot to kick again, but the woman surprised him by clouting his head from behind with a big handbag and knocking him off balance. Then she picked up a chunk of stone and waved it threateningly.

Patrick tried to get up and someone leant out of a window and yelled that the police were on their way. It couldn't have been true on a day like today, but it did the trick. The attacker cursed and ran off. At the end of the alley, he shoved his way into the crowd and disappeared without any of the joy-makers turning to look what he was running from.

Whoever had yelled closed the window again.

The woman who'd helped Patrick got down on her hands and knees beside him. 'Are you all right? Did he hurt you?'

He forgot himself for a moment as he took in the glory

of hair that had cascaded down when her hat was knocked off. It was beautiful, just beautiful, that dark, gleaming hair was. Then he realised she was waiting for an answer and pulled himself together. ‘Yes, I’m fine, thank you.’

She dropped the stone and helped him up.

He tried to joke about it. Sometimes it was joke or weep. ‘Fine rescuer I am, eh? I can hardly walk, let alone fight.’

‘You still tried and you distracted him. I’m grateful for that. I think you made the difference just by being here.’

He caught sight of the other woman, who was weeping and trying to hold her torn clothes around her upper body. ‘I think your friend is more in need of help than me.’

‘She’s not my friend. I don’t know who she is. When I saw her being attacked, I went to help. I thought the man would go away if I ran towards them screaming, but he didn’t.’ She shuddered. ‘He laughed as he grabbed me and said he’d have us both. And he was so strong I couldn’t get free. I’d better go and see to her. Don’t go away.’

As if he could! His leg and ribs were throbbing and he felt sick with the jabbing pain. He prayed that brute hadn’t made his leg worse. He’d had more than enough of doctors and hospitals.

She went back to the other woman, pulled off her own coat and wrapped it round her, then picked up her fallen hat and crammed it on her head anyhow. It was crooked and the hair was still loose about her shoulders.

She guided the weeping stranger back to where Patrick was standing and gave her a little shake. ‘Now, calm down. You’re all right now. We’ll look after you.’

It sounded a bit harsh, but if she hadn’t spoken sharply, the other woman might have had full-blown hysterics.

'I'm Georgie Cotterell.' She looked at him, waiting.

'Patrick Farrell.'

They both turned to the other woman, who was still mopping her eyes.

'Rosie Baggett.' She looked down at herself and began sobbing again.

'You're all right now! Do try to stop crying or everyone will stare at us.'

'But he's torn my clothes. They'll go mad at me for that when I get back. I come out without permission, too. I'll lose my place for sure.'

'You're a maid?'

'No, miss. I'm a machinist in a workshop.'

He couldn't help smiling. She'd addressed Georgie as '*miss*' automatically, clearly recognising the voice of authority. He'd lost the habit of kowtowing to anyone. When you fought alongside a man, you didn't care whether he had been a gentleman or a coal heaver in civilian life; you only cared whether he'd hold fast. What had mattered most of all out there had been helping one another stay alive.

Patrick hadn't even wanted to kill the enemy, just to stop them killing him. He reckoned they were probably conscripts, like him, and wishing themselves out of the carnage.

'Where were you going when you came to help us, Mr Farrell?' Georgie asked, keeping an eye on the other woman and patting her back gently a couple of times.

'Nowhere in particular. They turn us out of the hostel during the day if it's fine. I wanted to join in the celebrations, like everyone else. Only I walked a bit too far.' He grimaced

and rubbed his leg. It wasn't throbbing as badly now but it still hurt, dammit.

'You're recovering from a wound?'

'Yes. It got me out of the Army as well as bringing me back to England. I've three more weeks in the hostel, then I have to find a job and somewhere else to live.'

'What did you do in the Army?'

'Transport. Mechanic and driver, whichever was needed. Acting sergeant at the end.'

She smiled, such a lovely smile, it made something in him jerk to attention, something that had been quiescent for a good while. A woman like her was way beyond his reach but he could admire her, couldn't he?

'I've been driving too, Mr Farrell, taking wounded men here, there and everywhere in London for the past eighteen months.'

'Wounded officers, no doubt?' No one like her had ever driven him around, that was sure. He'd been crammed into ambulances or into the backs of lorries most of the time.

'Yes. Not other ranks, unfortunately, though they deserved it just as much. Look, we can't stay here. My home is just along the street. If we go there, we can all have a cup of tea. I'll find you something to wear, Rosie, and you can rest that leg, Mr Farrell.'

He hesitated. 'Won't your parents object?'

'No. There's just my father and he works for the government. He's at the bureau even today, though he did leave a little later than usual.' For the first time she wondered why. He was usually so punctual, leaving the house at eight o'clock sharp, much earlier than most people in his position. But she'd heard him using the telephone

and talking to Mathers in that quiet voice he used when he didn't want to be overheard.

'Must be an important job.'

'I suppose it is. He never talks about his work, even to me, but it's behind-the-scenes war work.'

'Well, good luck to him. It takes all sorts to win a war. If we hadn't had backup and supplies, we'd have got nowhere.'

Georgie looked at Mr Farrell, really looked this time. He was gaunt and strained, like many of those who'd been in the thick of the fighting and come home injured. But he'd probably be quite good-looking if he were fit and put on a bit of weight. He was tall, with brownish hair of an indeterminate shade that was neither brown nor auburn – rather a nice colour. His eyes were brown, too, and he had a firm, well-shaped nose. He didn't have an educated accent but he wasn't at all servile towards her and she liked that.

It didn't seem right that on a day like this someone who'd been wounded for his country should just be turned out on the streets, so she added, 'We'll have something to eat while we're at it.'

'Thank you, miss. That's very kind,' Rosie looked down at herself. 'This blouse will be good only for the ragbag now, that's for sure.'

Everyone started cheering just then and Georgie glanced at her fob watch. 'Eleven o'clock. The war is officially over.'

A man passing by gave her a quick twirl round, cheered and walked on. He had such a happy smile she didn't feel at all threatened by him.

Two women – one young, one old – stopped to kiss Mr

Farrell's cheek and the older one glanced at his badge and added a thank you for serving his country. Lots of people were embracing one another, strangers or not. That felt odd, but nice.

Georgie didn't know what made her do it, but Mr Farrell looked so haunted that she gave him a hug and kissed his cheek in her turn.

He stared down at her with a slow smile. 'Thank you.' Then he returned her kiss.

He wasn't aiming for her lips but she moved her head and his mouth lay on hers for just a few seconds. She felt hot with embarrassment that he might think she'd done that on purpose.

He pulled back and sucked in a quick breath. 'Sorry. I meant that for your cheek.' He turned and gave Rosie a gentle hug. 'Peace at last, eh?'

She nodded and blew her nose.

Georgie wanted to touch her lips because his had been so warm that she still seemed to feel them on hers. How strange! When her former fiancé, now dead thank goodness, had kissed her, she'd hated it. She would never have got engaged to him if her father's wife hadn't nagged her so unremittingly that it had seemed as if anything would be better than continuing to live with *her*.

'I don't need to trouble you and your family. I can manage to get back to the hostel,' Mr Farrell said.

'The streets are so crowded, you won't find it easy to get anywhere at the moment, and I can see that your leg is still hurting. Much better for us all to go back to my house until things calm down. You must be getting hungry and I know I am.'

He gave a slight shrug, accepting the truth of what she said. 'That's very generous of you, Miss Cotterell. I'd be grateful for a bite, I must say.'

Their eyes met and his were serious, thoughtful, as if he was trying to understand her and her motives. Then he glanced at her lips and gave her another of those faint, apologetic smiles.

She wasn't sure she understood why she was doing this, only that she wanted to help him. Him and all like him who'd put their lives on the line to defend their country, she added hastily in her mind.