

# Talk of the Village

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Extract

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# 1

Praise be! Ralph had come home at last. Muriel stood gazing up at his bedroom window, Pericles beside her on his lead impatiently awaiting his morning run. The bedroom curtains were closed, so he was still in bed. She'd checked his house every morning for the last five days and now her vigil had been rewarded. Muriel glanced at her watch, a quarter to nine. She'd take Pericles for his usual walk and then when she'd dried his feet and shut him in the house, a visit to the Store would be next on her agenda. A nice home-made cheese cake, some fresh rolls, with some of Jimbo's special oak smoked ham on the bone would make a nice lunch for her and Ralph.

As Muriel gazed up at Ralph's bedroom window she felt an unexpected surge of excitement. It filled her heart and spread all over her. Suddenly she wanted Ralph's arms around her and thought it would be the best thing that had ever happened. So reassuring, so comforting, so right, yes, that was it, so right for her and for him too, she hoped. Muriel tried to imagine what Ralph's face looked like, but the image of it had almost disappeared from her memory. Surely that couldn't happen in one month. Then the clean sharp smell of his after shave seemed to envelope her and with it his face and the whole feel of him came back to her. He was the first man, no, the first person she had wanted to be close to in all her life. How could she have said no so emphatically. This business of not knowing her own mind would have to stop. Sometimes she really was a fool.

Pericles, bored with waiting, lay down on the pavement. Muriel felt the pull of the lead and looked down at him. 'Ralph's back Perry, isn't that lovely? Come along let's be off. Quickly now, no time for lying down.' Pericles stood up and shook himself, but the red wool coat he wore stopped it from being the refreshing activity he had hoped for. He trotted after Muriel pleased that her dilly-dallying was over.

As they walked past the Store, Jimbo came out to inspect his window display.

He raised his straw boater. 'Good morning Muriel. How's things?'

'Very well thank you, Jimbo. Isn't it a lovely day?'

'It is indeed. You seem very chipper this morning, looking forward to the New Year Party?'

'New Year . . . oh yes, that's right, I am. I'll be in later.' She left Jimbo still assessing his new display. Harriet came out to join him.

Harriet tucked her arm in his. 'Darling, I really think you've done the best display ever. I like the way you've tilted that basket with the dried flowers, and the way you've stacked the cheeses, kind of haphazard but planned if you get my meaning. Very effective.' She peered closely at the flower arrangement. 'I seem to recognise those dried poppy seed heads. Jimbo! They're from my display on the landing, it will be ruined now. Really. The corn dollies are a nice touch, bit out of season but appropriate.'

'Considering I was in a merchant bank a little more than three years ago plaiting nothing but paper, I've got quite good at this window lark haven't I?'

'Well, if this doesn't sell off the Christmas cheeses I don't know what will. We'll do a tasting shall we?'

'Why not? Organise it if you please.'

'Certainly sir. Oh there's Linda. 'Morning Linda.'

Linda waved to the two of them. Jimbo with his striped apron, his white shirt and the bow tie matching the ribbon on his straw boater, bowed to her, Harriet in her 'taking out the Range Rover to pick up the fresh supplies from the farms outfit', curtsied and the three of them laughed.

Harriet said, 'They're queueing for their pensions already Linda.'

'Sorry I'm late.' Linda rushed in to begin the business of the day. Harriet went to start up the Range Rover and Jimbo went inside, well satisfied with having stayed up until twelve the night before to finish the window.

An hour later the door bell jangled and Jimbo looked up from serving a customer to find Ralph had entered the Store. Ralph was thinner, much thinner but tanned, his white hair even whiter if that was possible. But he was looking as aristocratic as ever. His holiday, or whatever it was that had made him disappear so surprisingly, had obviously done him good.

Jimbo went to shake hands with him.

'Delighted to have you back Ralph, we've missed you, specially over Christmas. How are you?'

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'Very well, thank you Jimbo. You appear to be in tip top condition. Nothing seems to have changed in my absence.'

Jimbo clapped his hand to his forehead in mock despair. 'I slaved until midnight last night doing that window display and you say nothing has changed!'

'Blame it on jet lag, I've not come round yet.'

'Been somewhere exciting?'

'Visiting friends. I need to shop for my breakfast, Jimbo, I've nothing fresh in at all.'

'Oh, I see . . . didn't Muriel get you anything in?'

'No, she doesn't know I'm back.' Ralph took a basket and began collecting what he needed from the shelves. Jimbo went to serve another customer.

When Ralph went to the cash till to pay for his breakfast Jimbo wished to ask why he had gone off so suddenly, but a tactful phrase simply wouldn't come to mind, so he had to reluctantly open the door for him and wish him good morning. In the hurly-burly of a busy pre-New Year shopping spree, Jimbo scarcely noticed that Muriel had been in to buy lunch. Working without Harriet, combined with having given his part-time girl an extra day off for working so hard before Christmas, he battled on by himself with little time for conversation. Muriel on her part was glad to escape without having to give an explanation of why she was buying two slices of cheese cake instead of her usual single slice.

When she got home she put the ham in the fridge and the cheese cake out on the worktop to defrost and then having been in the bathroom to titivate herself and spray on some of the perfume Caroline, dear Caroline, had given her on Christmas Day she sauntered as casually as she could down to Ralph's house. She wore her new, well, newest coat, wine red with a black fur collar and carried the black leather bag Ralph had brought her back from London. Muriel's fair hair, well, nearly white hair, peeped out from under her fake fur hat. She hoped her dark red lipstick didn't exaggerate her pale skin. One day I shall try some blusher she thought, but right now she was blushing without any artificial aid and trembling inside too. Oh good, he was up. The knock on Ralph's door had not been loud enough. She tried again. Oh dear, that was enough to wake the dead. The door was opened abruptly and there he stood, smiling tentatively down at her, his lovely fine-boned hands held out in greeting.

'Muriel my dear, come in.' As he took her hand Muriel burst into tears. She hadn't expected to, so she'd no handkerchief available. Ralph gave her his own and his thoughtfulness made her cry even more.

'Oh, Ralph, I have been a fool. Such a fool.'

'Never, Muriel, never a fool my dear.'

'Yes, yes. A complete fool.' She wiped her eyes dry and smiled shakily at him. 'Could you possibly come for lunch?'

'I've just finished breakfast, but for you I'll eat lunch too.'

'Oh not yet, I meant later about one o'clock.'

'I'll bring some wine shall I?'

Muriel was scandalised. 'In the middle of the day?'

'You drank it in the middle of the day when we were in Rome.'

'Of course I did. Yes then, bring some wine.'

'So be it.'

Muriel studied his face. She reached out to touch his arm. 'Ralph you've lost weight, have you been ill?'

'In my heart.'

'Your heart? Have you got heart trouble?'

'Don't you remember almost the last word you said to me?'

Filled with sadness she answered, 'I said, "No". Forgive me for causing you so much pain. I did say I'd been a complete fool. I'm sorry I was so dreadfully unkind.' Muriel reached up, pecked his cheek and said, 'See you shortly.' She spun round and went out before she could reveal any more of how she felt. As she hurried along Church Lane past the Rectory Caroline came out and almost collided with her.

Caroline clutched hold of her. 'Steady Muriel.' They both laughed at each other. 'Where are you going in such a hurry?'

'Oh Caroline, I'm going to take your advice.'

'My advice? What about?'

'Ralph's home and I'm going to do what you said and orchestrate a proposal!'

'About time too. Peter will be delighted. He hasn't had many weddings to conduct lately, he was saying the other day he'd be losing his touch.'

'Oh dear, yes of course. Oh dear. I must be off I've got lunch to get ready. Oh dear. Oh my goodness.'

'Muriel, do try to be happy, it's the first day of the rest of your life.'

'Of course, yes . . . what a lovely idea. Yes, of course it is. Bye bye.'

Caroline watched her dash off down Church Lane. Today was the first day of the rest of Caroline's life too, but she hadn't wanted to take away from Muriel's happiness by telling her. Today she, Caroline Harris would become a mother. A real honest to goodness mother of two. She and Peter were going at two o'clock to collect the twins from the hospital. Never again would she have to worry about Peter not having the children he wanted, because now he had his very own two children. Alexander and

Elizabeth. Alex and Beth. Beth and Alex. Caroline stood watching Jimmy's geese as they grazed on the village green. In her mind's eye she could see the twins snuggled in their cots in the hospital, their tiny hands clenched tight, their eyelids fluttering a little as they slept. Thank God they'd decided to put weight on instead of losing it. Maybe they'd not fed eagerly because they were grieving for their mother. No that couldn't be it, could it? Still, they'd finally decided to feed well and gain weight so she needn't worry about them now. Just to get them home. Home! That sounded wonderful. She decided she was going to make a really successful job of bringing up the twins. Try to make them each feel they were the only one that counted. Full of anticipation she pushed open the door of the Store, in her pocket the list she'd made of the food she needed to fill the freezer before she became too busy to shop.

As Caroline dumped yet another basket of food by the till Jimbo asked, 'My word Caroline, I know Peter's a huge chap and has a big appetite but this is ridiculous. Do you know something I don't know? Is there going to be a siege or something?'

'Can you keep a secret?'

'Cross my heart and hope to die,' said Jimbo suiting the action to the words.

'I'm stocking the freezer because . . . well, we hardly dare believe it but the twins are well enough to come home, and we're collecting them this afternoon. I'm sure they'll be OK but you never know with them being so tiny, do you?'

'Caroline, I'm delighted for you.' He came round from behind the counter and hugged her.

Harriet coming out from the storeroom grinned. 'That's enough Jimbo please, hugging the customers. Whatever next? Is this a new sales gimmick? As the rector's wife, you ought to know better than to encourage him Caroline!'

Jimbo whispered, 'Hush Harriet, Caroline is collecting the twins this afternoon.'

'Oh how wonderful. I won't tell a soul or you'll be overwhelmed with visitors. Everyone is so excited and I'm so jealous of you having new babies in the house. I feel quite broody. We've made sure we've plenty of "new baby" cards in stock haven't we Jimbo?'

Caroline pulled their legs about their sharp eye for business. Having paid for the food she realised she should have brought her car round. 'I don't know what I'm doing this morning, I'm a complete idiot and so is Peter. He tried to start his car without the keys in this morning and wondered why it wasn't moving. Then he realised he'd left the Commu-

ion wine behind and had to come back for it. If we're like this before the twins come home, what will we be like afterwards?

Harriet assured her that things would all work out, and suggested she should bring everything across to the Rectory in the Range Rover which was still outside.

'Thanks very much. I appreciate that. Bye Jimbo.'

Mother's clock was striking a quarter to one when Muriel heard Ralph at the door. She checked her hair and face in the little mirror she kept for the purpose in her tiny kitchen and hastened across the living room to open the door. The small dining table in the window was already laid, all she needed to do was put the food on it.

Momentarily the two of them were silent as they looked at each other across the threshold.

'Shall I come in?'

'Oh yes, I'm so sorry, please, yes, please come in.'

'I'm early, I know, but I couldn't wait to come.'

'It doesn't matter, everything's ready. I shall never learn to be late. Sit down Ralph and I'll put the things on the table. Oh you've brought the wine.'

'Yes, I've had it in the fridge since you called, it should be just right.' Their hands touched as she took the bottle and Muriel felt as though she'd had an electric shock.

'Oh Ralph.' She stood on tip toe and pressed her lips to his. When she stepped back her face was flushed and she apologised. 'I'm so sorry, I beg your pardon. You sit down, I'll get on and make the coffee.' A wisp of hair came down across her forehead. Flustered and embarrassed she reached up to push it away only to find Ralph taking hold of her hand and putting it to his lips to kiss.

'It tastes of ham, smoked ham. Let me see, yes, that's right, vintage Jimbo Charter-Plackett.'

Muriel laughed. 'That's right.' She scurried away into the kitchen hoping for a moment's respite but Ralph followed her in. Being such a small kitchen Muriel felt smothered by his presence there. She was acutely aware of him and couldn't avoid savouring the smell of his after shave or was it cologne or . . . She turned to pick up the coffee pot and bumped into him. In a moment his arms were round her and they were kissing as if their lives depended on it.

'Muriel, Muriel, I have missed you.' Ralph buried his face in her neck and she reached up to stroke his head.

'I've missed you too Ralph. If you still feel the same I desperately want to change that "No" to a "Yes".'

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Ralph drew back and looked closely at her. He cupped his hands around her cheeks and said, 'Muriel Hipkin are you proposing to me?'

'Well, yes, I think I must be.'

'Hallelujah. What a day. Let's open the wine and drink a toast.'

He expertly removed the cork, poured them each a glass and raised his in a toast to her.

'To Muriel, my best beloved.'

'To Ralph, *my* best beloved.' Muriel sipped her wine and then said hesitantly, 'You haven't answered me yet.'

'The answer, my dear, is yes. I shan't let you forget you proposed though. Who would have imagined the day would come when you did that?'

'If my mother knew what I'd done she be ashamed of me.'

'Mothers don't always know best. To save you any further shame I'll ask you. Muriel Hipkin will you marry me immediately?'

'Yes. A thousand times yes.'

After lunch, during which they'd interrupted almost every mouthful to say something meaningful to each other, Ralph with a twinkle in his eye said, 'Do you remember when we were children I used to tease you about that initial "E" in your name and you would never tell me what it stood for. I used to try to guess, Ethel, Eloise, Edna, Enid, Elise, Evadne, Elsie . . . but you never told me. Seeing as I am shortly, very shortly, to become your husband will you tell me now?'

'Husband, oh my word. Oh dear, I shall be Lady Templeton. Oh, Ralph, what have I done?'

'Nothing yet, but you still haven't told me what the "E" stands for.'

'I have to have something of mystery about me, anyway it's so excruciating I can hardly bear to think about you knowing.'

'More wine my dear?' As he leant across to fill her glass he said, 'Still, I shall know on our wedding day because Peter will have to use your full name. I can wait.'

'Will he really? Oh dear, the whole village will know then.'

'Don't worry it will only be a nine days wonder.'

'Ralph!'

'By the way Muriel, in my male arrogance I assumed that when I proposed you would say yes . . .' Muriel reached across the table and stroked his hand. 'I am sorry about that, but you wouldn't have wanted me to say yes before I was sure would you?'

'No, my dear I wouldn't, so I made arrangements to buy Suzy Meadows' house as a surprise . . .'

'Oh Ralph, really? I thought you were going to buy Toria Clark's cottage.'



'So I was, but I decided it wouldn't be big enough for a married man. It's all signed, sealed and delivered now, or it will be by the end of next week, so I intend moving shortly. Do you think you could live in Suzy's old house or would you prefer somewhere else?'

'Oh no, I've always liked her house.'

'We could always redecorate if you wish.'

'No, certainly not, I like it as it is. I shall really enjoy working in her garden.' Muriel couldn't help feeling sad at the prospect of leaving her beloved cottage. 'I shall miss my view of the churchyard. When I sell this house I hope the person who buys it loves it like I do.'

'We could live here if you want,' said Ralph.

'Certainly not, it wouldn't be suitable. And there isn't room for all your things and mine.'

'Well, I have got boxes and boxes in store which I have never looked at since I came home to England.'

'Well, there you are then, we need Suzy's house.'

After lunch Muriel cleared away. Ralph helped and they washed the dishes together talking about where he had been, and trying to decide where to go for their honeymoon.

'That does seem a foolish word to use, Ralph, for people as old as we are.'

'I'm hoping that even though we are older we shall still have a wonderful time together. It's the first time for both of us Muriel, so it can be as exciting or as dull as we choose to make it.'

Muriel was worrying and didn't know how to phrase the next thing she wanted to say. To give herself time she tested the little plant she kept on her window sill to see if it needed more water. She felt Ralph's hand on her arm. He turned her round and held her close and then stood away from her and smiled. 'You're very quiet, is there something you want to say?'

'Not just now . . .'

'Have you got some doubts?'

'Oh, no. No. It's not that.' Muriel rinsed the tea pot out again and dried it till it gleamed. It had been mother's favourite pot. She could almost see her mother's face reflected in the shining brown roundness of the pot. Her mother had never discussed anything to do with being a woman, not in all her life. Muriel realised she was as ill prepared for marriage at sixty-four as she had been at sixteen.

'I'm still here.' Ralph was leaning against the washer, arms folded, patiently studying her face.

'Ralph, you'll have to help me. I shall need help, you see, to get it right. I

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don't understand how to feel inside myself, because I've never had those kind of feelings. I don't know how it feels to want a m . . . I think passion is the word I mean. It's an old fashioned word but that's what I mean. I know you want us to be truly married, and so do I but . . .' Muriel blushed bright red and turned away from him to look out of the window. Her winter garden was just beginning to get a little colour, she could see the snowdrops peeping green through the soil. But soon she'd be leaving it for a whole new life and it would be someone else's winter garden. The enormity of what she'd done struck her and she felt intensely shy of the future. Why had she used the word passion? Now she'd have to face up to something she had avoided thinking about all her life.

'Muriel,' Ralph said gently, reminding himself as he spoke of the gentle delicacy of Muriel's nature and not wishing to trample all over it with some kind of hearty ho! ho! "it'll be all right on the night" kind of speech. 'I love you and you love me and because of that we'll make our married life absolutely lovely and satisfying in every way. We shan't rush things, we'll go steadily because that way we shall both reap rich rewards. I'll help you to feel passion, my dear, and I do love you all the more for your reticence. You can have confidence in me.'

'I can, can't I? You'll look after me, won't you Ralph?'

'Of course.'

'Please Ralph, let's go and see Peter about getting married. Can we get a special licence or something? If we wait a long time I shall get doubts and want to change my mind.'

'Very well, we'll go and tell Peter you can't wait to get married and which is his first free Saturday.'

'Ralph! You mustn't say I can't wait.'

'Well, I certainly can't.'

'Neither can I! I'll get my coat.'

They arrived at the Rectory door still laughing.

It seemed a while before Peter answered their knock. 'Why, Ralph, hello. Caroline said you were back.' He shook Ralph's hand. 'Lovely to see you, you're looking well. Have you had a good trip? We missed you over Christmas. Come in both of you. Hello Muriel, God bless you.'

'Hello Peter. Ralph has something to say.'

'Can we talk privately?'

'Certainly, come into my study. I'd offer you tea but Caroline's busy at the moment. Have you come to tell me something exciting? You both look very pleased with yourselves.'

Peter led the way into his study, and sat his two visitors in the easy chairs and then himself in his chair by the desk. Ralph cleared his throat,

took Muriel's hand in his and asked Peter if he could fit in a wedding ceremony during the next few weeks.

'What? Oh I am delighted, absolutely delighted, I couldn't be more pleased. That's really great. Wonderful.' He stood up to shake Ralph's hand and then kissed Muriel on both cheeks. 'Just what we've all been waiting for. Is it a secret or can I tell Caroline?' Muriel nodded.

He opened the study door and shouted, 'Caroline, can you spare a minute?'

The moment Caroline saw the two of them in the study she knew they had come to arrange their marriage.

'Don't tell me, let me guess. You're getting married. I'm so pleased for you both, so very pleased. Peter, this calls for champagne.'

'Well, we have that bottle ready in the fridge for tonight. We don't *have* to wait till then do we?'

'In fact it might be best to have it now while all's quiet.'

Muriel looked curiously at the two of them. 'All's quiet? What's going to happen tonight?'

Caroline and Peter grinned at each other. 'You've only just caught us in, we've been to the hospital this afternoon . . .'

Muriel stood up quickly full of joy. 'You've been for the twins!'

'Yes.' Caroline hugged Muriel and she in turn hugged Caroline and then Peter.

'Oh where are they? Please let me see them.'

'Come on then, you too Ralph.' The four of them went upstairs into the nursery to gaze with love and admiration on Alex and Beth, each firmly tucked up in matching swinging cribs. Alex lay quietly sleeping, wisps of his bright blond hair just showing above the blanket, his tiny fists held close to his face. Muriel gently drew the blanket back and saw he still strongly resembled Peter, and felt uncomfortable at the thought of what the villagers would make of that. She rather hoped no one would notice. Loud sucking noises were coming from Beth's crib, and when Muriel peeped in she saw that little Beth had her thumb in her mouth.

Muriel clapped her hands with glee. 'Aren't they lovely Ralph? Just perfectly lovely. You must both feel so happy to have them safely home.'

'We are, but I'm terribly nervous. They'll be waking up any minute now for a feed and I shan't know where to begin, but we'll learn, we'll have to.' Caroline tucked the blanket a little more firmly around Alex and smoothed her hand around the top of Beth's head.

'How much do they weigh now, Caroline?'

'Alex is five pounds two ounces and Beth only just five pounds. But

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they are gaining a little every day now, thank the Lord. We'll go get that champagne before they wake up.'

They touched glasses and Peter said, 'May God bless all four of us on this very special day in our lives. Ralph echoed his thoughts with 'God bless us all and give us all great happiness in the future.' Muriel clinked her glass with Caroline's and said 'Amen to that.'