

Drama Comes to Prior's Ford

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Extract

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Main Characters

Meredith Whitelaw – A professional actress ‘resting’ in Prior’s Ford for a year

Genevieve (Ginny) Whitelaw – Meredith’s daughter

Kevin and Elinor Pearce – Live in Daisy Cottage, beside the Gift Horse gift shop. Kevin is a retired journalist and the leading light of the local drama club. Elinor makes the club’s costumes

Joe and Gracie Fisher – The new landlord and landlady of the Neurotic Cuckoo. They live on the premises with their widowed daughter **Alison Greenlees** and her young son **Jamie**

Ingrid and Peter MacKenzie – Ingrid owns the local craft shop, the Gift Horse. She and Peter, a college lecturer, have two daughters, **Freya** and **Ella**

Jenny and Andrew Forsyth – Jenny helps in the Gift Horse. She and Andrew, an architect, have a son, **Calum**

Maggie Cameron – Jenny Forsyth's teenage stepdaughter

Helen and Duncan Campbell – Helen records the village news for a local newspaper. Duncan is the gardener at Linn Hall, the 'big house'. They have four children, **Gregor, Gemma, Lachlan** and **Irene**

Clarissa Ramsay – A retired teacher and a comparative newcomer to Prior's Ford. Recently bereaved, she is travelling the world before settling down in Willow Cottage

Sam Brennan – Lives in Rowan Cottage and runs the local Village Store. Pining for his partner, **Marcy Copleton**, who left the village after they fell out

The Reverend Naomi Hennessey – The local Church of Scotland minister. Lives in the manse with her godson, **Ethan Baptiste**

Bert and Jess McNair – own Tarbethill Farm and work it with their two sons, **Victor** and **Ewan**

Fliss and Hector Ralston-Kerr – live with their son **Lewis** in ramshackle Linn Hall

Alastair Marshall – An artist, lives in a small farm cottage on the outskirts of the village

Jinty McDonald – Wife to **Tom McDonald**, mother to a large brood, and willing helper in Linn Hall

The red Post Office van provided a welcome splash of colour in the grey December landscape as it drove down the lane from Tarbethill Farm and turned left towards the village of Prior's Ford. Entering the village, it passed the primary school, its playground swarming with rosy-cheeked children bundled in duffel coats and anoraks burning off their early-morning energy. Several came running to the railings, reaching through the bars to wave to the driver, who tooted his horn at them.

An hour or so later, having delivered post in the neat little village and to the cottages and farms further afield, the van headed back towards its depot, leaving behind a paper trail of letters bearing good tidings for some, bad tidings for others, and a heart-felt plea that was to change one family's comfortable existence for ever.

In the village store-cum-Post Office, Sam Brennan turned his back on the shoppers browsing along shelves and pulled off the elastic band holding the day's post together. He skimmed swiftly through the bundle, finding only bills and

junk mail, but no envelope with his name written on it in a familiar hand.

Almost three months had passed since Marcy Copleton had walked out on him and still there was no word of where she was, how she was, when she was coming back – *if* she was coming back.

He went through the post again, hoping against hope that the letter he sought might have got caught up in something else and been bypassed. But again, the search was fruitless.

‘Morning, Sam!’ a cheerful voice called, and he tried to pin a smile on his face as he turned back to where a customer waited, a full wire basket slung over her arm.

Perhaps tomorrow, he thought as he unpacked the basket and pressed keys on the till. Until then, he was faced with another day of waiting.

Another twenty-four hours.

In his isolated farm cottage, Alastair Marshall abandoned the half-finished painting on the easel as soon as the single letter came through the letter box. Wiping paint from his hands he opened the envelope and began to read.

Dear Alastair, Clarissa Ramsay had written. Here I am, in Honolulu on the first lap of my year's adventure. It has been wonderful so far – the cruise from San Francisco was perfect and everyone on board ship so friendly. Next stop West Samoa. It is hard to believe that if I was still in Prior's Ford I would be enduring winter weather . . .

A photograph slipped from between the pages and fell to the floor. Alastair picked it up and looked down at the smiling middle-aged woman, wearing a blue summer dress, and standing before a mass of flowering bushes.

The young artist ran the tip of a finger over the happy face. The first time he had laid eyes on this woman, almost

exactly a year before, she had been grey and haggard, steeped in despair and unhappiness. Now, her eyes sparkled and her skin glowed; now she was beautiful, and she didn't look much older than his own thirty-four years.

He laid the photograph and letter down and reached for the sketchbook never far from his hand. Normally he painted landscapes to be sold, if he was lucky, to summer tourists, but now he began to sketch the woman in the photograph.

At Tarbethill Farm, Jess McNair had poured her morning mug of tea and was filling three more mugs, larger than hers, when her husband Bert and their two sons arrived, the dogs hot on their heels and eager to get to the Aga's warmth.

'Idle buggers,' their master growled at them, and both collies, mother and son, flattened their ears and slid apologetic glances at him from the corners of narrowed eyes before subsiding gratefully on to the old rug that had covered the flagged floor for as long as anyone could remember. Jess's mother-in-law had made the rug when she was a young bride; it had had a pattern then, but nobody remembered now what it had looked like.

As the farm dogs nosed in beside him, Old Saul struggled to his feet slowly and painfully in order to give his master's reddened lumpy hand a swift lick. He had been born on the farm when Bert was a comparatively young man; now, they were both slow-moving and rheumatically. Old Saul had the best of it – he was retired and spent most of his days by the Aga while Bert struggled on with help from Jess and their sons, Victor and Ewan.

'Somethin' smells good, Ma,' Ewan said now, rubbing chilled hands together and sniffing the warm air.

'Pancakes.' It was generally agreed by the women of Prior's Ford that nobody could make pancakes like Jess McNair.

‘Mind an’ put plenty butter on ’em.’

‘Don’t you read the papers, Dad?’ Ewan asked, winking at his older brother as Jess began to lather butter on the still-warm pancakes. ‘Butter’s bad for you. Gives you cholesterol and all sorts.’

‘Get away with ye – I’ve eaten it all my life an’ I’ll eat it till the day I die.’ Bert tugged his old cap, put on every morning when he got dressed and kept on until he undressed again at bedtime, more securely over his thinning grey hair. He pulled out one of the chairs set round the scrubbed kitchen table and dropped into it, picking up his mug, to which Jess had already added milk and sugar, just as he liked it.

‘Post’s in.’

‘Haven’t you opened it yet?’

‘I opened a letter from our Alice; she’s doin’ fine, but the rest’s for you.’

‘I thought women were supposed to be nosy.’

‘If you got hand-written letters smellin’ of perfume, Bert McNair, I’d open them, but I’m not bothered with the other sort. They’re on the dresser, d’you want them over?’

‘I do not, for it’ll only be beggin’ letters and bad news. It can wait.’

Even in wintertime there are things to be done on a farm, and as soon as they had downed their tea and had three pancakes apiece, Victor and Ewan went back to work while Bert picked up the post and began to rip envelopes open with a yellowing thumbnail.

‘Bills, bills an’ bloody bills,’ he said gruffly.

‘Is the cheque for the milk not due today?’ Jess asked. Like her husband, she was weathered from an outdoor life, and her hair, too, was grey and beginning to thin. ‘It’s usually in by this time.’

‘Aye, it’s here.’ Bert took it from its envelope. ‘But for all there is, it might as well not be. Puttin’ that into the bank’s like throwin’ a pebble in the river. I’d like to hear what the bloody supermarket owners’d say if it cost *them* more to provide their produce than they were paid for it.’ He wrenched at his cap, pulling it down almost to the bridge of his nose. ‘We can’t go on like this, Jess.’

‘We’ll weather the winter. We always have.’

‘Aye, but it gets harder every year. Brussels an’ our own governments an’ the supermarkets between em’s dug a mass grave for farmers. I reckon they’ve just about tipped us into it now. We’re goin’ to have to talk things over with the lads before the soil starts bein’ shovelled in on top of us.’

Bert stamped to the outer door, opened it and roared, ‘Out!’ with such ferocity that the dogs leapt to their feet and bolted past him and into the yard. Even Old Saul woke from his doze with a start, his head and legs flailing in a vain try at jumping to attention before he gave up and dropped back to the rug.

When Bert had gone, slamming the sturdy wooden door behind him, Jess watched from the window as he strode off across the yard. His eyes were on the ground and his head almost lost between shoulders that had once been straight and broad, but were now bowed.

Once he had rounded the byre and disappeared from sight she went to the table and picked up the envelopes, going through them one by one. Bert was right – the bills outweighed the single cheque; it was happening too often. They couldn’t go on like this.

Old Saul whimpered slightly and she went to him, bending to run a hand over his side. ‘Settle yourself, lad, you’ve done your bit,’ she said, and his tail flopped against the rug in gratitude.

Jess went back to the window and looked out at the farmyard. The sky was low and heavy and the cold wind fluttered the feathers of the few hens pecking among the cobbles.

She suddenly shivered, as if the wind had managed to find its way inside and was blowing through her snug, safe kitchen.

Jenny Forsyth and Helen Campbell got off the afternoon bus in Main Street, each loaded down with Christmas shopping. As they turned down River Lane, Helen talked about her plans for the latest chapter in her novel. Helen's big ambition was to become a writer, and for more than a year she had been taking a postal writers' course. She had recently sold her first short story to a woman's magazine, but her plans for fiction writing had been put on hold when the abandoned granite quarry near to the village was almost reopened.

Against her will, Helen had become the secretary of the local protest committee, a job that led to a meeting with one of the reporters on the *Dumfries News*, a weekly local newspaper.

When plans for the quarry were dropped she had been asked to write a weekly column on the happenings in Prior's Ford. The good thing was that it brought in some much-needed money. The drawback was that it got in the way of the novel writing.

'Come in for a cup of tea,' Jenny offered as they came to the parting of the ways.

'The children'll be home from school in half an hour,' Helen said doubtfully; then, succumbing to temptation, 'but I'll just pop home and hide these things while you put the kettle on.'

Helen hurried off to the left, into Slaemuir council estate, while Jenny turned right into the more affluent Mill Walk estate. Once Jenny had put her own shopping away and

switched the kettle on she collected the post from the doormat. Two letters addressed to her husband Andrew were placed on the telephone table while she opened the single letter addressed to her personally.

When Helen arrived a few moments later, a radiant Jenny whisked her into the house. 'You'll never guess what's happened!'

'You've won the Lottery?'

'Better than that!'

'There is nothing better than that,' said Helen, who had four children to feed and a husband on a low wage.

'There is!' Jenny waved a letter at her friend. 'Maggie's coming to live with us!'

'Maggie? Are you talking about your wee step-daughter?'

Jenny nodded, her eyes suddenly filling with tears of joy. Her first husband had been a bully, and the only happiness Jenny had known during their brief marriage came from Neil's small daughter from his first marriage. She had finally run away from Neil, but had never stopped missing Maggie. A few months earlier, Neil's brother Malcolm had discovered where she lived, and Jenny had heard from him that Neil was dead, and Maggie living with his parents.

'Malcolm's written to say that his father's ill and his mother can't look after Maggie as well as him, so they want us to take her. Oh, Helen – I'm getting Maggie back – for good this time!' Then, suddenly remembering why Helen was there, 'Come into the kitchen, it won't take a minute to make the tea.'

'Jenny—' Helen followed her into the spacious kitchen, 'Maggie's not the wee girl you knew. She's about twelve now, isn't she?'

'Fourteen. It'll be great to have a daughter! We can go shopping together, and— Oh, it'll be lovely!'

‘You’ll have to talk this over with Andrew.’

Jenny spooned loose tealeaves into the teapot and added boiling water. ‘He’ll be thrilled.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Of course I am – he knows how bad I felt at having to leave her. She was such a sweet little girl.’

‘She’s not a little girl any more.’

Jenny was setting mugs out on the kitchen counter. ‘We’re the only people who can take Maggie. Malcolm’s wife has multiple sclerosis, and without us to take her she might have had to go into care.’

‘What about Calum? You have to think of him as well.’

‘But it’ll be so good for him. We were never happy about him being an only child, but we just didn’t get lucky again.’ She poured tea into the mugs. ‘Now, he’s going to have a sister!’

‘Who’s going to have a sister?’ Calum asked from the kitchen doorway, and both women jumped.

‘That’s not the school out already, is it?’ Helen asked.

‘Yes, that’s why I’m home,’ nine-year-old Calum explained patiently. ‘Mum, who’s—?’

‘That means the children are home and I’m not there. Jenny, I have to rush.’

‘Your tea!’

‘Must go – talk to Andrew,’ Helen said, and fled.

As Helen crossed River Lane and ran towards her own house the school bus bringing the older Prior’s Ford children home from Kirkcudbright Academy stopped outside the village store. Its uniformed passengers flowed off, some of them lingering on the pavement.

‘Wow!’ Jimmy McDonald said, and they all turned to look at the long, sleek car coming along Main Street. A young

woman was at the wheel with an older woman, beautifully dressed and immaculately groomed, in the passenger seat.

As the car passed the teenagers Steph McDonald stepped forward, beaming, and stooped down to wave in at the passenger window. The older woman turned, smiled at her, and lifted a gloved hand in an elegant salute.

‘Who’s that, Steph?’ Freya MacKenzie asked.

‘Oh, its Mrs . . . it’s . . . you know her!’

‘No I don’t.’

‘Did you see the way she waved? Just like the Queen.’ Jimmy sniggered.

Steph was knitting her brows, trying to think of the woman’s name. ‘She’s— Oh, we’ve all seen her around the village!’

‘Not in that car,’ Jimmy said, while Ethan Baptiste, the Jamaican godson of local minister Naomi Hennessey, herself part-Jamaican, added, ‘I’d know if I’d ever seen that car around here. Right, Jimmy?’

‘Right on, Ethan.’

They began to straggle off to their homes, Steph still racking her brains, while the car turned into Adams Crescent and stopped at the first house, a pretty two-storey detached villa set in a neat garden.

The driver, a dark-haired girl, got out and went round to open her passenger’s door. The woman who had caught Steph’s attention emerged gracefully from the car, smoothing down her pearl grey, fur-collared coat, and surveyed the house carefully.

‘Willow Cottage,’ she said in the husky voice known to millions of avid television soap fans. ‘A pretty name, don’t you think, Genevieve?’

‘It’s as good as any.’

‘I just hope that this Mrs Ramsay has got taste. I couldn’t

bear to live in a house that has no taste, even though it's only for a short while.'

'You saw the photographs, Mother. It's fine.'

Meredith Whitelaw shot her daughter a pained look. 'Genevieve, how often do I have to tell you to call me Meredith?'

'And how often do I have to ask you to call me Ginny?'

'You're too old to call anyone "Mother"!'

'I hate Genevieve. Do I look like a Genevieve?'

Meredith eyed her daughter's cropped hair, only just framing a square face with not a spot of make-up on it.

'You were a beautiful baby – how was I to know that you were going to take after your father?' Then as a blood-curdling yowl came from the back seat she opened the rear door and brought out a cat basket.

'Gielgud, my poor darling! Poor liddle pussums. Did Mummy forget you, den?'

A pair of furious blue eyes glared at her through a space in the basket and the Siamese began a steady low grumble.

'Just one more minute, sweetie, and you'll be out of that nasty nasty basket – promise!'

As Ginny hauled cases and bags from the car's roomy boot, Meredith turned to survey the village green and, beyond it, the sleepy Main Street. Above the shop roofs, rounded hills could be glimpsed, their tops wreathed in cloud.

'Sweetie,' she said to the cat rather than to her daughter. 'I rather believe that we're going to enjoy living in this pretty little backwater. Though methinks that we just might have to spice things up a little . . .'