
Opening Extract from...

The Flowers of the Field

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Chapter One

'Great Heavens! She's astounding!'

Thus, in typical fashion, did Ralph Tennant welcome his second child into the world on 30 September 1892 on the first-floor landing at 20 Ranelagh Road, London SW.

The baby was indeed astounding, being nearly two feet long, weighing ten and a half pounds, and sporting a shock of precociously abundant black hair. Her eyes, which were wide open, were as bright and as steadfast as boot buttons; her long-fingered hands waved and clutched like demented sea anemones and her mouth (also wide open) emitted a cry of deafening intensity: her small uvula was clearly to be observed, flickering redly in the black cavern of her throat.

Ralph took her from the nurse and held her up before him, his big hands clasped round her torso just below the armpits. The infant stopped crying. Her large head – whose crest of dark hair made it resemble a rather suffused turnip – sank into her shoulders, but even as it wobbled uncertainly there she returned her father's look with one of sturdy, sightless defiance and her legs pedalled the air energetically beneath the enveloping lacy shawl.

'A wonder,' declared Ralph, smiling seraphically at the nurse, 'a goddamned wonder, what do you say?'

'A beautiful baby girl, sir,' responded the nurse, properly.

'Are you beautiful?' enquired Ralph of his daughter, cradling her on his left arm and gazing down at her scarlet face. 'No, but you may be.' He pushed the baby's head gently to this side and that with his forefinger. There were still little scabs of dried blood and mucus in the convolutions of

the ears, and the black hair was partly matted with the same debris of the battle of birth.

'May I look, Father?'

Five-year-old Aubrey Tennant was in his nightshirt, for it was nine o'clock at night. His feet were bare, and as he spoke he lifted one of them and rubbed it up and down the opposite calf, hoping by friction to get some warmth back into it, for he was cold. He had been listening and lurking at his bedroom door for the past two hours, filled with anxiety and foreboding. He could not in his wildest imaginings – and Aubrey's imaginings were never all that wild – picture the process by which a new brother or sister made its entrance into the world. But by the number of attendants and assistants it required, he deduced it must be dramatic.

All that time he had waited, listening, rigid with cold and tension, and then he had heard the squalling – first muffled, then piercing – as his mother's bedroom door had opened and the baby had been handed to his father.

Now he stood, shivering on the landing, stoically prepared for whatever shock was about to come his way.

Both the nurse and his father turned to him, both smiled. Ralph Tennant held out his free arm.

'My dear old chap, of course you may. You've got a handsome new sister. Here she is.' Ralph hugged his son to him and bent slightly so that the boy could see the baby's face. Aubrey looked, and looked also at his father. He sighed. He saw at once how it was. He felt, and not for the first time in his young life, that he was old. Not just old by comparison with the baby, but older even than Ralph. It had always been Aubrey's impression that when the so-called qualities of youth were being handed out – gaiety, enthusiasm, insouciance and the like – his share had been given to his father. And now, gazing at the female infant who lay in Ralph's arms, he experienced a kind of weary, but not unexpected, disappointment. It was as he had feared. Another one of Them.

Ralph squeezed his shoulders affectionately. 'What do you think, old chap?'

'She's not very pretty.'

'Nonsense!' The nurse rolled her eyes and pursed her lips. 'She's a beautiful little girl.'

Ralph did not look at the nurse. Instead, he said to Aubrey, 'Quite right. She looks like a bit of scrunched-up red paper at the moment. That's the thing about babies. But she'll blossom, and spread, you'll see, and all those funny wrinkles will smooth out.'

'I see.'

'And now you ought to run along back to bed, it's cold and you should be asleep. You can see your sister again in the morning.'

'All right.' Aubrey turned and began to trail back along the passage. Then something occurred to him.

'Is Mother all right?'

'Yes. Yes, your mother is quite all right, but very, very tired. I'm just about to go in and see her. Shall I give her your love?'

Aubrey nodded. He would like to have seen his mother himself, but the air was heavy with grown-up secrets. He sighed again, and went back to his room.

Ralph addressed his daughter once more: 'Let's go and see your mother, shall we?' He headed for the bedroom door, but the nurse, a large, strapping woman, barred his way discreetly but solidly.

'Mrs Tennant had a bad time, sir.'

'I am aware of that. That is why I wish to see her now.'

'I really think it would be better to leave her be for the moment, sir,' said the nurse.

'Madam,' said Ralph, his smile taking on a metallic brightness which, had the nurse been one of his regular employees, would have quelled her utterly, 'I intend to visit my wife.'

'She's very low, sir.' The nurse had no experience of Ralph to draw on, and spoke as she saw fit.

'I am sure she is. And as I believe the estate of matrimony to have something to do with having and holding in sickness and in health, I will now go to her side if I have to shift you bodily to do it.'

The nurse had never in her life before been spoken to in this manner by a gentleman of Mr Tennant's class and position and the shock of the moment caused her to drop both her jaw and her guard, so that Ralph was able to stalk past and into his wife's bedroom without further confrontation.

Venetia's immediate thought in the few seconds after her daughter had burst into the world was: 'I shall never have another.'

'I shall *never* have another,' she said, with such emphasis that the nurse, midwife and doctor were forced to transfer their attentions from the lower part of their patient's anatomy to the upper, which they had all forgotten about in the last few hours.

'You mustn't say that, my dear,' riposted Dr Egerton lamely, although in fact he had no desire to officiate at another lying-in such as this.

When Ralph had finally been ushered from the room at the last possible moment, and under strong protest, Venetia had closed her eyes and clenched her teeth and tried to keep the image of his face in her mind's eye. She remembered someone saying, nervously, 'The shoulders are stuck fast' – it was just about the time she thought her whole body was tearing apart – and even then it had struck her as ludicrous that these people should be commenting on something she could not even see, and yet that all this pain and strife amounted to no more than that. Shoulders stuck fast.

When, with a rush and a slide, the recalcitrant shoulders were at last freed, she made her announcement.

'I shall *never* have another,' she said, and did not listen to Dr Egerton's reply.

The atmosphere in the bedroom had subtly changed. The urgency and tension of a few moments ago had been replaced by a kind of relieved bustle and business. The sheet was whipped out from beneath her and replaced, the midwife vigorously pumped her stomach for the afterbirth, while the nurse and Dr Egerton studied and packaged the baby,

whose yells of disapprobation now filled the room.

Venetia observed the tidying-up operation exhaustedly. It seemed to her that the lower part of the bed had become a kind of battlefield while the upper had remained unnaturally chaste and neat. The nurse plumped the pillows and tucked in the clean bedclothes with brisk, jerky movements. They're glad, thought Venetia. They're glad the whole messy business is over. And so am I. A momentous thought struck her.

'What is it? Tell me quick, what is it?'

The nurse came to the side of the bed. 'It's a lovely baby girl, madam.'

'A girl? It can't be!'

'A girl it is, my dear.' It was Bruce Egerton. 'And a fine big one.'

'How big?'

'Over ten pounds, I should say.'

'Oh heavens.' Venetia rolled her head to one side. She felt completely limp. Limp, and hot, and wet all over with the various effluences of birth.

'Do you want to hold the baby, madam?' The nurse held out the bundle in her arms invitingly.

'I couldn't … I haven't the strength. Just let me see, and go and show my husband.'

The nurse bent over and drew back the edge of the shawl where it shielded the infant's face. Two unblinking black eyes glared at Venetia accusingly, and a small red fist lay against the chin as though the baby pondered its fate. Venetia smiled weakly.

'Dorothea.'

'What a pretty name!' The nurse beamed round at the midwife and Dr Egerton. 'I'll go to Father.'

A few minutes later Ralph Tennant marched in with his daughter in his arms. The nurse appeared, red-faced and flustered in his wake, but Dr Egerton made a soothing gesture.

Ralph went straight to Venetia's side, sat on the edge of the bed and lifted her easily from the pillow with one arm so that she was cradled against his shoulder.

'I love you,' he said. 'And I love her. What can I say?'

'You've said it all. But oh, Ralph … never again … I feel so tired and sore. I thought I was going to die …' She began to cry weakly.

'Well you didn't die. And now you're going to have a rest and get better. Aubrey sent you his love.'

'Aubrey?' Venetia looked up abruptly. 'Poor darling, was he all right?'

'Was *he* all right? Of course he was all right! A little baffled, perhaps, but that's all. I sent him back to bed for now.'

Egerton stepped up to Ralph and touched him on the shoulder. 'Your wife must rest now, too.'

'I know, I know.' Ralph kissed his wife's head and lowered her gently back onto the pillow. He looked up at the doctor, his face bright with proprietary pride. 'How about my daughter, Bruce? Eh? She's astounding, isn't she?'

'She certainly is. A very large baby, and extraordinarily mature.'

'I should say so. Astounding.'

Venetia's last impression before she drifted into blissful sleep was of her husband and the doctor bent over the baby, their faces full of wonder and admiration.

At that tender age Dorothea Tennant – or Thea, as they called her – had certainly been the object of wonder, and not only from her parents. Venetia Tennant was a beauty and everyone who knew her was curious to see whether her daughter would grow in the same mould. That Thea did grow was certain. She shot up like a weed from the moment she could walk (which she did at eleven months), and became a tall, strong, coltish girl. She had an air of plunging through life precipitously. But a beauty? The waiting world could not honestly say that she was. Nor, most assuredly, did she have her mother's renowned quality of repose. In fact the only characteristic she had inherited from her mother was her height. For the rest she was her father's child, dark-haired, olive-skinned and big-boned. Like him, she had the greatest difficulty in standing still at

all and her customary gait was a kind of collected trot, an uneasy compromise between her own desire to charge and Venetia's admonitions about what was ladylike.

When, three years later (and in spite of Venetia's resolution), Thea's sister Dulcimer was born, the onlookers heaved a mental sigh of relief. This little girl was far more what they had hoped for – a peach-skinned, fair-haired, blue-eyed moppet who seemed from the very moment of her birth to have a knowledge of the legacy of beauty and grace that was hers.

Victorian society liked order, and when Venetia D'Acre, beautiful young daughter of a fine old Kent family, had married Ralph Tennant, industrialist, it had lifted its eyes to the heavens and despaired. Venetia, with her breeding and beauty, had long been one of the darlings of the *beau monde*. Her tantalizing air of withdrawn serenity had made her the *princesse lointaine* of most of the young men she encountered. Her remoteness stirred them into believing they loved her whether this were true or not, although to tease was the last thing Venetia intended, for she was shy: her aloofness was simply the distance she put between herself and the world.

When Ralph Tennant, ten years her senior and the owner of a huge South London light engineering factory, had met her at a charity ball, Venetia stood no chance. He pushed aside the barrier, made short work of the distance, and strode into the citadel like the general of an invading army. Within weeks he was calling her 'old thing' and had taken her and her sister to see his factory. He was huge, handsome in a dark and ruffianly fashion, and possessed of a rapacious energy. Any feeble, tactfully raised objections to his union with Venetia he summarily brushed aside. He won her heart by strength of personality and her hand by speed. He persuaded Lord and Lady D'Acre that they had already agreed to the marriage when in fact they were barely accustomed to his presence. Had he made more attempt to conform to the expectations of others they might have worried more about his social standing. As it was they were too thunderstruck by his forthright

behaviour to spare a thought for the industrial stains on his pedigree.

In a few short months Venetia D'Acre had become plain Mrs Tennant and the couple had set up house at 20 Ranelagh Road. Ralph was a rich man, and Venetia made the house elegant and comfortable. Though many may have thought the match less than ideal, Ralph made no secret of his opinion.

'I adore her. She has breeding and taste. I have money and brains. How can we fail?' he would ask rhetorically, causing ripples of well-bred shock to eddy in all directions.

As for Venetia herself, she thrived. She grew lovelier by the day; she was tranquil and imperturbable. It mattered not to her that Ralph disrupted her dinner parties, blundered into her At Homes, refused to attend country house parties – much less to shoot, a barbaric pastime – and refused, almost on principle, to agree with a living soul. Venetia rose above it all, and retained her popularity until eventually Ralph was accepted, or at least tolerated, for her sake.

But all the same, friends were pleased to note that the Tennants' third child was the image of her mother and obviously destined for great things. Dulcie, as she was known, was a prettily precocious little thing, and Nanny Dorcas was frequently called upon to present her to visiting friends at teatime. Thea did not take this hard. She was perfectly secure in her parents' love for her, and their love for each other. She was grateful to her mother for recognizing that she would far rather dig for fossils in the back garden with Aubrey than eat small polite cakes on the drawing-room sofa.

At this time, Thea was blissfully unaware that her family was at all different from anyone else's, or that there was anything unusual about her own attitudes, fostered as they were by her father. She admired and took for granted his ferocious intelligence and curiosity. She liked to be told that she resembled him, and never for a moment realized that many of the people who commented on the resemblance thought Ralph a dangerous lunatic and Venetia a little touched for marrying him.

It was only when Thea began to attend the Strathallen School for Girls in Quex Gardens, when she was eight, that the first dawnings of doubt began to appear over her hitherto untroubled horizon. To begin with, she enjoyed school, and lessons, and it was patently obvious that in this she was in a minority of one. She was at an age when the dearest wish of most little girls is to be indistinguishable from their peers. So she dutifully made paper caterpillars numbered with the days of term, and Judas-like dismembered them, a piece each afternoon, as the days went by, hoping not to be found out in her perverted pleasures.

But while she may have succeeded in concealing her thirst for knowledge, she could not alter her nature. And when asked to write an essay entitled 'A Thing of Beauty' she characteristically got the context right, but laid herself open to mockery by sub-heading it 'Joyce Cummings: A Joy For Ever'. Joyce Cummings was head girl of the Strathallen School at the time, a tall, stately young lady who in Thea's fertile imagination had taken root as a kind of hybrid of Ophelia, Isolde and the Snow Queen. The fact that Miss Cummings was also prissy, self-satisfied and narrow-minded had quite escaped her admirer, who saw in her only the ideal of female loveliness to which Thea (she reflected gloomily) could never aspire.

The essay caused a stir. For the first time Thea's guard had slipped, wholly and disastrously. Not that she was by any means the only young lady to have a crush on Joyce Cummings. But she was certainly the first to stand up and be counted in so overt a manner. And the other girls in her class, little traitors every one, whispered and sniggered and congratulated themselves on their hypocrisy.

The headmistress, Miss Violet Strathallen (younger sister to the founder), summoned Thea to her study.

'Sit down, Dorothea,' she said, indicating the spikey-legged, ramrod-backed chair reserved for offenders and petitioners.

Thea did so, tucking her long legs, ankles crossed, beneath the seat. Because there always seemed to be too much of her, and she was anxious to tidy herself away, she pulled her

pinafore well over her knees, so that it formed a kind of chute from chin to knee, down which she now stared, resignedly, at her tightly clasped hands.

'I have here your essay entitled "A Thing of Beauty",' observed Miss Strathallen unnecessarily. 'And I should like to have a word with you about it. It seems to me, Dorothea, that you have made an error of taste.'

'Yes, madam.' It was customary at the Strathallen to call the teachers madam.

'As usual, you have written vividly, although your handwriting lets you down, and I can find no fault with your description of the subject.' There was a pregnant pause during which Miss Strathallen turned the offending pages to the light and perused them in a distinctly theatrical manner. It occurred to Thea that the headmistress was actually enjoying the interview. Miss Strathallen had a large, pale, slightly downy face, like a piece of flannel, and she habitually wore grey – a grey skirt, and a grey blouse with masses of pintucks that travelled down over her formidable bosom in serried ranks, like railway lines. Her hands were also large and pale, like fish, and with a piscean clamminess as well. Thea hated to see them holding the pages of her essay; it was like being kissed by someone who revolted you.

'As I say,' went on Miss Strathallen, 'I feel that your mistake has been in the choice of subject matter. Surely it would have been better to choose something – a little less close to home?'

'I just thought—'

'No, no, let me finish.' Miss Strathallen waved an imperious hand. 'Did you not consider the embarrassment you might cause our head girl? Poor Joyce.'

'But, madam, it was a compliment surely—'

'A compliment? A compliment, to be held up as an object of vulgar scrutiny?'

'I didn't want her to be scrutinized, madam.' A slight emphasis on the first word caused Miss Strathallen to look up sharply.

'I should not like,' she said, in an impressive contralto,

'to have recourse to your parents about this, Dorothea. The incident itself does not merit it, but if you take a defiant attitude …' She shook her head forbiddingly. 'Let us leave it there. Write another essay if you please.'

'With the same title, madam?'

'Certainly, we must try to put right what has gone wrong. Choose for your subject this time something less personal – a scene, or building perhaps, or a work of art. I should like to see your faculty for critical appreciation displayed this time, instead of your emotions.' Miss Strathallen was not to know that in Thea the two were inextricably joined. The audience was at an end.

Thea managed to divert the taunts of her classmates with the aid of her bosom friend Andrea Sutton who chose, cleverly, to interpret the essay as a blow for freedom and women's rights. This last claim was potent but baffling, as the only member of the opposite sex to set foot inside the Strathallen was Mr Pardoe, the classics master, and he was so demonstrably downtrodden that he could present no possible threat to anyone. However, by these means Andrea translated Thea's darkest hour, if not into a moment of glory, at least into some kind of presentable regrouping of forces.

'You made it sound quite grand,' said Thea gratefully, as the two girls got dressed to go home at the end of the afternoon. They were invariably last to go down to the hall because they talked and talked, and because Thea almost always lost something or broke the lace on her outdoor shoes.

'What you did *was* grand,' replied Andrea. 'It was a splendid and noble thing. You wrote what was in your heart.'

The difference between the two girls was one which often gave Thea herself pause for thought. She admired Andrea, but was a little wary of her. Andrea was a political creature, even at ten, able to use non-conformity for her own ends. She would take an inbred attitude of Thea's and transform it into an objectively held opinion, or winkle out some hitherto barely noticed feeling and declare it a stance. Sometimes Thea felt herself trapped by her friend's cleverness.

In appearance the two girls were so totally unalike that Ralph Tennant was wont to burst out laughing whenever he saw them together, and advise them to go on the Halls where they would assuredly make their fortunes. Andrea was a small, thin, sandy-haired child with freckles and pale eyelashes and a high, domed forehead. She would have been painfully plain had she not made up in confidence and intelligence what she lacked in looks. She bewitched people with her precocious flow of words, her quickness and her adaptability. She was the only one of Thea's school friends who could easily hold her own at 20 Ranelagh Road. Dulcie, however, could not tolerate Andrea.

'She's boring,' was her most common criticism of Thea's friend, and easily the most unfounded.

'Of course she's not boring, anyone can see that's not true.'

'She bores me.'

'That's different.'

'She's ugly and she talks too much.' Dulcie was quite prepared to resort to outright calumny to relieve her jealousy. To her, Andrea Sutton represented the explosion of the myth that beauty and taste were all that was required of womanhood. Andrea had no looks and little breeding and yet she was popular. She had that special ability to make others feel that if they were not with her they were in some way excluded from a magic circle, where the intellectual elite forever basked in exalted light.

Towards the end of 1902 old Lady D'Acre died, and the Tennants moved to Kent to take up residence at Chilverton House. Thea became a boarder at the Strathallen and as such first tasted the dubious delights of visiting, and began to see why Andrea Sutton was as she was. Up till now Thea's sorties into the homes of friends had been confined to chaste teatime sessions divided dully into 'play', 'food' and 'conversation', only the second of which actually bore any resemblance, and that a faint one, to what she was used to at home. Now she received invitations to spend whole weeks in the homes of other girls.

The strain of those days away was unbearable. There was the jangle of alien conversation, the shock of strange food and habits, the tooth-grinding tension of finding the right moment to tip and thank the servants, and worst of all the growing conviction that her own family were different – that what she saw in other homes was the rule, and hers the exception.

Andrea Sutton's father was a bank manager and the Suttons lived in genteel middle-class comfort in Fulham. Mr Sutton was genial in a forced, artificial way; he patted Thea a lot and bent down to speak to her all the time as if she were deaf, or dumb, or both. Mrs Sutton was pale and sensible and relentlessly proper. Andrea had an older, married sister, Dorelia, whom Thea never met but whom she felt she knew because of Mrs Sutton's constant praising and magnifying of her name. The servants of the Sutton household, though far fewer than in the Tennants', had a washed-out, dreary servility that Thea found oppressive, and when she smiled at the parlourmaid on her first morning the poor girl looked so nonplussed and wretched she wished she hadn't done so.

The atmosphere at meals was such as Thea had never experienced in her life before. There was silence. Wholesome if dull fare was placed upon the table and Mr Sutton served it up. Then there was grace, a different one for each day of the week. From that moment on Thea could never look upon shepherd's pie without blessing it to her use and herself to God's service, nor contemplate boiled mutton without asking the Lord to make her truly grateful for what she was about to receive. During the meal it was customary for Mr Sutton to make remarks and pronouncements, but nothing was expected of the rest of the company but that they receive these like the tablets on Sinai, and be thankful.

'I see South American tin is up,' he would declare inscrutably at breakfast and Mrs Sutton, neat and supportive behind the teapot, would nod and smile thinly and look at the girls to check that this pearl had not been cast before swine. Thea was a sociable child, she would have been more than happy to discuss South American tin with Mr Sutton had she had the least

idea what it was, but it was perfectly clear that no response was required. In the Sutton household Arthur Sutton presided like a hearty, thick-skinned, heavy-handed god. The Hippo Deity, Thea dubbed him. She had seen a hippo at Regent's Park Zoo and had been quite struck with the resemblance.

During the day not much attention was paid to the girls, but play in the garden was strictly monitored because of 'mud etcetera' (Mrs Sutton's own phrase). Thea noticed that in her home context Andrea's composure, usually unshakeable, deserted her completely. She whined and complained and caused her mother to hold Thea up as a model of propriety on more than one occasion. Only when they were well away from parental supervision did Andrea become recognizably herself again, and at one moment in particular. This was when Mr Sutton discarded the newspaper and Andrea would choose her moment to purloin it and scamper up the stairs to the safety of her bedroom. Then both girls would spread it on the rug, kneel on the floor and pore over it, their faces suffused and their hair trailing across the page. Thea saw all too clearly now why her friend needed the solace of the printed word and the distraction of current events.

But inevitably the move to the country isolated Thea from her friends. In spite of the visiting she now lived, when at home, in an even more different and separate world. Her first sight of Chilverton House, near Ewhurst, when visiting her grandparents as a little girl, had inspired in her a tumultuous mixture of responses which was never to change. She loved it on sight, but knew instinctively that its powerful magnetic pull would affect her whole life.

It was not a grand country house by the standards of the day. It had but eight bedrooms and presided over a mere seven acres, much of which was thickly wooded. There had been house parties there, of course, and Venetia would tell her daughters about them, but they had been gentle, easygoing affairs, and not the kind where several thousand game birds met a sticky end in the course of a single afternoon. Thea's first glimpse of it, as the carriage trundled precipitously down

the steep hill off the Weald, was of its tall red brick chimneys, smoking cosily. Then its roof became more clearly distinguishable, a slate roof patched with moss and lichen. After that the carriage would disappear between tall hedges, and the house remain out of sight until one turned into the circular drive and bowled up to the front door.

Chilverton House was imposing, but never awesome. Despite its size it had been built on an essentially human and domestic scale. Two gables rose at either end, symmetrical and pleasing, like gently-raised eyebrows. The windows, of which there were many, were long and lead-paned, and the front door was approached by two shallow, rounded steps, and overhung by a grey stone porch fancifully etched with pineapples and other exotic fruit. In the summer the whole front of the house rippled and shimmered beneath a cloak of crimson creeper.

At the back of the house nectarines and pears had been trained against the south-facing wall, and their height all but masked the long narrow window which marked the half-landing of the staircase. At one end the kitchen yard was enclosed by a mossy brick wall with an archway through which might be glimpsed the black iron pump and washing hung out to dry.

Below the staircase window and slightly to the right, a double glass door led from the dining-room out onto the terrace. Like the rest of the house this terrace was pleasant, pretty, but not smart. Moss and various other unassuming country growths sprouted between the paving stones, and along the length of the low stone balustrade that bordered it several of the columns were missing, like a cheerful, gap-toothed grin. One of them had been set up as a bird-table, another as a sundial.

From the centre of the terrace the house's most imposing feature, the Elm Walk, stretched for a quarter of a mile to the gate that marked the Ewhurst boundary of the estate. Magnificent elm trees, like an arboreal guard of honour, flanked the path the whole length of its journey as they had done for

several hundred years, since the time when a Tudor manor house had stood on the same site.

The Elm Walk divided the lawn nearest the house into two distinct areas. That to the right, opposite the dining-room entrance, was a place of tranquillity and repose, shaded by lilac and laburnum, fragrant with roses, banked by rhododendrons, the grass as smooth as a carpet. That on the left was recognized as the children's province, a place for games and climbing. Swings, hoops, stumps and nets had wreaked havoc with the turf and the trees were dotted with paraphernalia – ropes, pulleys and platforms – like some eccentric gamekeeper's larder. Further down the walk the grass was allowed to grow and the garden became a rustling wilderness in summer, a mysterious wasteland in winter, occasionally cropped by horses out to grass, otherwise allowed to go its own way.

The whole place was, in short, a children's paradise: not too carefully tended but wayward, warm and welcoming – the very essence, thought Thea, of what a home should be.

It was typical of her father to move out of town just when the whole of the nation, it seemed, was moving into it, but Ralph Tennant was unperturbed. He had become wholly bewitched by motor cars, possessed two fine examples, and declared, in direct contradiction to the generally held view, that the motor car would restore the balance of society and open up the countryside again. It became a common occurrence in the small town of Bromley to see the Tennants chugging and bouncing along the street at fifteen miles per hour, Venetia with her hat tied on by a gauze veil and Ralph resplendent in Prince of Wales checks and deerstalker. When, as was not uncommon, fruit was thrown and cries of 'Stink bomb!' and 'Clear off!' were heard, Ralph would stop the car, clamber down and take issue with the objector, bringing the full force of his personality and undoubted technical knowledge to bear on the subject until his opponent conceded victory out of sheer sheepishness and ignorance.

But on Christmas Eve 1913, when Thea went into the village of Ewhurst to post a letter, she did so on her bicycle. It was a Beeston Humber, a good model – Ralph would never have tolerated anything less than sound in the mechanical line – but even so it was the most uncomfortable form of transport she could have chosen. The track – it would have been hypocrisy to dignify it with the term road, or even lane – leading from the side gate of Chilverton House to the Ewhurst road was deeply pitted, and to keep any kind of steady course at all one had to stick to a narrow ridge, a sort of hog's back of tussocky grass, down the centre. Thea put up her hand to give her hat a warning pat – the joggling of the cycle was in danger of dislodging hat, hair and all at any moment.

'Afternoon, Miss Thea!'

'Who – oh, good afternoon, William!' Thea's voice, shaken by the progress of the bicycle, came out in a kind of sheep-like vibrato. Laughing at herself, she slowed down and hopped on one foot to stop. William Rowles, the head gardener from. Chilverton House, stood in the gloom of a fir spinney, beyond a five-barred gate. With him was his seventeen-year-old son, George. Thea peered over the gate and saw that they had with them her old childhood pony, Joe.

'Hallo, Joe!' She held out her hand and George led the pony over to her. He was harnessed between a couple of rough shafts from which thick ropes trailed back into the wood. Thea fondled the pony's whiskery mouth and kissed the white blaze on his forehead. 'What are they doing to you, Joe?'

'Christmas tree, miss,' said George cryptically. It was a special pleasure for him to give this information to Miss Thea, even if it did represent a mere fraction of what he would have said. For George Rowles, pink-faced, tow-haired and six feet tall, was more than a little in love with her. Now the joy of seeing her face brighten was inexpressible, even had he had any hope of expressing it.

The Christmas tree – of course! Can I come over and see you do it?'