Opening extract from

The Secret Countess

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PROLOGUE

In the fabled, glittering world that was St Petersburg before the First World War there lived, in an ice-blue palace overlooking the river Neva, a family on whom the gods seemed to have lavished their gifts with an almost comical abundance.

Count and Countess Grazinsky possessed – in addition to the eighty-roomed palace on the Admiralty Quay with its Tintorettos and Titians, its Scythian gold under glass in the library, its ballroom illuminated by a hundred Bohemian chandeliers – an estate in the Crimea, another on the Don and a hunting lodge in Poland which the countess, who was not of an enquiring turn of mind, had never even seen. The count, who was aide de camp to the tsar, also owned a paper mill in Finland, a coal mine in the Urals and an oil refinery in Sarkahan. His wife, a reluctant lady of the bedchamber to the tsarina, whom she detested, could count among her jewels the diamond and sapphire pendant which Potemkin had designed for Catherine the

Great and had inherited, in her own right, shares in the Trans-Siberian Railway and a block of offices in Kiev. The countess's dresses were made in Paris, her shoes in London and though she *could* presumably have put on her own stockings, she had never in her life been called upon to do so.

But the real treasure of the Grazinsky household with its winter garden rampant with hibiscus and passion flowers, its liveried footmen and scurrying maids, was a tiny, dark-haired, bird-thin little girl, their daughter, Anna. On this button-sized countess, with her dusky, duckling-feather hair, her look of being about to devour life in all its glory like a ravenous fledgling, her adoring father showered the diminutives which come so readily to Russian lips: 'Little Soul', of course, '*Doushenka*', loveliest of endearments but, more often, 'Little Candle' or 'Little Star', paying tribute to a strange, incandescent quality in this child who so totally lacked her mother's blonde, voluptuous beauty and her father's traditional good looks.

Like most members of the St Petersburg nobility, the Grazinskys were cultured, cosmopolitan and multilingual. The count and countess spoke French to each other. Russian was for servants, children and the act of love; English and German they used only when it was unavoidable. By the time she was five years old, Anna had had three governesses: Madame Leblanc, who combined the face of a Notre Dame gargoyle with a most beautiful speaking voice, Fräulein Schneider, a

devout and placid Lutheran from Hamburg – and Miss Winifred Pinfold from Putney, London.

It was the last of these, a gaunt and angular spinster with whose nose one could have cut cheese, that Anna inexplicably chose to worship, enduring at the hands of the Englishwoman not only the cold baths and scrubbings with Pears soap and the wrenching open of the sealed bedroom windows, but that ultimate martyrdom, the afternoon walk.

'Very bracing,' Miss Pinfold would comment, steering the tiny, fur-trussed countess, rigid in her three layers of cashmere, her padded capok lining, her sable coat and felt *valenki* along the icy quays and gigantic squares of the city which Peter the Great had chosen to raise from the salt marshes and swamp-infested islands of the Gulf of Finland in the worst climate in the world.

'Not at all like the dear Thames,' Miss Pinfold would remark, watching a party of Lapps encamped on the solid white wastes of the Neva – and receiving, on the scimitar of her crimsoned nose, a shower of snow from an overhanging caryatid.

It was during these Siberian walks that Anna would meet other children who shared her exalted martyrdom: pint-sized princelings, diminutive countesses, muffled bankers' daughters clinging like clumps of moss to the granite boulders of their English governesses. Her adored Cousin Sergei, for example, three years older than Anna, his face between the earmuffs of his *shapka*, pale with impending frostbite and outraged manhood

as he trudged behind his intrepid Miss King along the interminable, blood-red facade of the Winter Palace; or the blue-eyed, dimpled Kira Satayev, hardly bigger than the ermine muff in which she tried to warm her puff-ball of a nose.

Yet it was during those arctic afternoon excursions that Anna, piecing together the few remarks that the wind-buffeted Miss Pinfold allowed herself, became possessed of a country of little, sun-lit fields and parks that were for ever green. A patchwork country, flower-filled and gentle, in which a smiling queen stood on street corners bestowing roses which miraculously grew on pins upon a grateful populace . . . A country without winter or anarchists whose name was England.

Anna grew and nothing was too good for her. When she was seven her father gave her, on her nameday, a white and golden boat with a tasselled crimson canopy in which four liveried oarsmen rowed her on picnics to the islands. Each Christmas, one of Fabergé's craftsmen fashioned for her an exquisite beast so small that she could palm it in her muff: a springing leopard of lapis lazuli, a jade gazelle with shining ruby eyes . . . To draw her sledge through the park of Grazbaya, their estate on the Don, the count conjured up two silken-haired Siberian yaks.

'You spoil her,' said Miss Pinfold, worrying, to the count.

'I may spoil her,' the tall, blond-bearded count would reply, 'but is she spoilt?'

And the strange thing was that Anna wasn't. The little girl, wobbling on a pile of cushions on the fully-extended piano stool to practise her *études*, gyrating obediently with her Cousin Sergei to the beat of a polonaise at dancing class or reciting *Les Malheurs de Sophy* to Mademoiselle Leblanc, showed no sign whatsoever of selfishness or pride. It was as though her mother's cosseting, the fussing of the servants, her father's limitless adoration, produced in her only a kind of surprised humility. Miss Pinfold, watching her charge hawk-eyed, had to admit herself defeated. If ever there was such a thing as natural goodness it existed in this child.

When Anna was eight years old, the gods tilted their cornucopia over the Grazinskys once again and, in the spring of 1907, the countess gave birth to a son whom they christened Peter. The baby was enchanting: blue-eyed, blond as butter, firmly and delectably fat. The count and countess, who had longed for a son, were ecstatic, friends and relations flocked to congratulate and Old Niannka, the ferocious Georgian wet nurse with her leather pouch containing the mummified index finger of St Nino, filled the house with her mumbling jubilation.

Seeing this, Miss Pinfold moved closer to the Countess Anna, as did Mademoiselle Leblanc and Fräulein Schneider and the phalanx of tutors and grooms and

servants who surrounded the little girl, waiting for jealousy and tantrums.

They waited in vain. To Anna, the baby was a miracle of which she never tired. She had to be plucked from his side at bedtime and would be found in her nightdress at dawn, kneeling beside the cot and telling the baby long and complex stories to which he listened eagerly, his head pressed against the wooden bars.

Love begets love. As he grew, Petya followed his sister everywhere and his cry of: 'Wait for me, Annoushka!' in lisping Russian, entreating English or fragmented French echoed through the birch forests round Grazbaya, along the tamarisk-fringed beaches of the Crimea, through the rich, dark rooms of the palace in Petersburg. And Anna *did* wait for him. She was to do so always.

As she moved from the idyll of her childhood into adolescence, Anna, still looking like an incandescent fledgling, only ran harder at the glory that was life. She fell in love with her handsome Cousin Sergei, with the blind piano tuner who tended the count's Bechsteins, with Chaliapin who came to sing gypsy songs in his dark and smoky voice after the opera. She became a Tolstoyan, renouncing meat, finery and the anticipated pleasures of the flesh. It was a bad time for the Grazinskys, as Anna hobbled round the palace in brown worsted and a pair of unspeakable birch bark shoes said to have been made by the Great Man himself in the year before he died. Fortunately, before her feet sustained permanent damage, Diaghilev brought his

dancers back from their triumphant tour of Europe and Anna, who for years had hung out of her parents' blue and silver box at the Maryinsky *being* the doomed Swan Queen or mad Giselle, now took up with passion the cause of the rogue impresario and the dazzling, modern ballets which stuffy St Petersburg had condemned out of hand.

'Oh, how beautiful it is! *Chto za krassota!*' was Anna's cry during these years: of the glistening dome of St Isaacs soaring above the mist, of a Raphael Madonna in the Hermitage, a cobweb, a remarkably improper négligé in a shop window on the Nevsky Prospekt.

There seemed no reason why this fabled life should ever end. In 1913 Russia was prosperous and busy with the celebrations to mark three hundred years of Romanov rule. In the spring of that year, Anna, holding down her wriggling brother Petya, attended a Thanksgiving Service in Kazan Cathedral in the presence of the tsar and tsarina, the pretty grand duchesses and the frail little tsarevitch, miraculously recovered from a serious illness. A few days later, she helped her mother dress for the great costume ball in the *Salles de la Noblesse* . . .

'It'll be your turn soon, *mylenka*,' said the pleasure-loving countess as she fastened the famous Grazinsky emeralds over her old *boyar* dress of wine-dark velvet and set the sun-shaped, golden *kokoshnik* on her abundant hair. For, of course, she had planned Anna's debut for years, knew to the last hair of their well-born heads

the young men she would permit to address, and ultimately espouse, her daughter.

There was just one more year of picnics in the birch forests round Grazbaya, of skating parties and theatricals with Sergei, now in his last year at the exclusive *Corps des Pages*, and pretty, frivolous Kira and a host of friends.

And then the archduke with the face of an ill-tempered bullfrog and the charming wife who had so dearly and unaccountably loved him, were assassinated at Sarajevo. To the Russians, accustomed to losing tsars and grand dukes time and time again in this way, it seemed just another in an endless succession of political murders. But this time the glittering toy that was the talk of war slipped from the hands of the politicians . . . and a world ended.

Overnight, meek, devoted Fräulein Schneider became 'the enemy' and had to be escorted to the Warsaw Station under guard. Mademoiselle Leblanc, who had aged parents, also left to return to France. Miss Pinfold stayed.

'God keep you safe, my Little Star,' the count whispered to Anna, holding her close. 'Look after your mother and your brother,' – and rode away down the Nevsky, looking unutterably splendid in his uniform of the Chevalier Guards. Three months later, he lay dead in a swamp-infested Prussian forest, and the flame that had burned in his daughter since her birth, flickered and died.

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They carried on. The countess, aged by ten years, organized soup kitchens and equipped a fleet of ambulances at her own expense. Although Anna was too young to enrol officially as a nurse, she spent each day at the Georguievski Hospital, rolling bandages and making dressings. As the shortages and hardship grew worse, Miss Pinfold increasingly took over the housekeeping, organizing the queues for bread, the foraging for fuel.

When the revolution came and the Bolsheviks seized power from the moderates, the Grazinskys fared badly. They had been too close to the court and, with no one to advise them, they tarried too long in the two rooms of their looted palace which the authorities allowed them to use. It was only when Petya was stoned on the way home from school that they finally acted and joined the stream of refugees fleeing northwards through Finland, east to Vladivostock, south to the Black Sea and Turkey.

The Grazinskys went south. They had entrusted the bulk of their jewels to Niannka, the count's Georgian wet nurse, who was sent ahead with a king's ransom in pearls, emeralds and rubies hidden in her shabby luggage.

The old woman never arrived at their rendezvous. They waited as long as they dared, unable to believe that she had betrayed them, but were eventually compelled to travel wearily on. In March 1919 they reached Sebastapol, where Miss Pinfold retired behind a palm tree to fish, from the pocket of her green chilprufe

knickers, their last remaining jewel, the Orlov diamond, and persuaded the captain of a Greek trawler to take them to Constantinople.

A month later, they reached England.

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'You *cannot* be a housemaid, Anna,' said Miss Pinfold firmly. 'It is quite absurd. It is out of the question.'

'Yes I can. Pinny. I *must*. It is the only job they had vacant at the registry office. Mersham is a very beautiful house, the lady told me, and it is in the *country* so it will be healthy, with fresh air!'

Anna's long-lashed Byzantine eyes glowed with fervour, her expressive narrow hands sketched a gesture indicative of the Great Outdoors. Miss Pinfold put down the countess's last pair of silk stockings, which she had been mending, and pushed her pince-nez on to her forehead.

'Look, dear, English households are not free and easy like Russian ones. There's a great hierarchy below stairs: upper servants, lower servants, everything just so. And they can be very cruel to an outsider.'

'Pinny, I *cannot* remain here, living on your hospitality. It is monstrous!' Anna's 'r's were beginning to roll badly, always a sign of deep emotion. 'Of course I

would *rather* be a taxi driver like Prince Sokharin or Colonel Terek. Or a doorman at the Ritz like Uncle Kolya. *Much* rather. But I don't think they will let women—'

'No, I don't think they will either, dear,' said Pinny hastily, trying to divert Anna from one of her recurrent grievances. 'And as for living on my hospitality, I've never heard such nonsense. If you and your mother stayed here all your lives, I could never repay the kindness your family has shown to me.'

They were sitting in the tiny parlour of the mews house in Paddington which Pinny, by sending home her savings, had managed to purchase for her old age. Pinny's sister, who had been living there, had tactfully gone to stay with a cousin. Even so, the little house was undeniably crowded.

'It's all right for Mama, Pinny. She isn't well and she's no longer young. But I . . . Pinny, I need to work.'

'Yes, Anna, I understand that. But *not* as a housemaid. There must be something else.'

But in the summer of 1919 there wasn't. Soldiers back from the war, women discharged from the armament factories and work on the land – all haunted the employment agencies seeking jobs. For a young girl, untrained and foreign, the chances were bleak indeed.

The Grazinskys had arrived in London two months earlier. Virtually penniless, their first thought had been for Petya. The countess had caught typhus in the squalor of the transit camp in Constantinople and was too weak to do anything but rest, so it was Anna who

had braved the Grand Duchess Xenia at court and extracted from that old friend of her father's the offer of Petya's school fees at a famous and liberal public school in Yorkshire.

But for herself Anna would take nothing.

'You will see, Pinny, it will be all right. Already I have found a most *beautiful* book in your sister's room. It is called *The Domestic Servant's Compendium* by Selina Strickland, and it has two thousand and three pages and in it I shall find out *everything*!'

Miss Pinfold tried to smile. Anna had always been in possession of 'a most beautiful book': a volume of Lermontov from her father's library, a Dickens novel read during the white nights of summer when she should have been asleep.

'If you would just be patient, Anna. If you would only wait.'

Anna came over and knelt by Pinny's chair. 'For what, Pinny?' she said gently. 'For a millionaire to ride past on a dapple-grey horse and marry me? For a crock of gold?'

Pinny sighed and her sister's budgerigar took advantage of the ensuing silence to inform anyone who cared to listen that his name was Dickie.

'All the same, you cannot be a housemaid,' said Pinny, returning to the attack. 'Your mother would never permit it.'

'I shan't tell my mother. I'll say I've been invited down as a guest. The job is not permanent; they're taking on extra staff to get the house ready for the new

earl. I shall be back before Petya comes home from school. Mama won't notice, you know how she is nowadays.'

Pinny nodded, her face sombre. The last year had aged and confused the countess, who now spent her days at the Russian Club playing bezique and exchanging devastating ideas on how to economize with the other emigrés. Her latest suggestion, attributed to Sergei's mother, the Princess Chirkovsky – that they should buy chocolate cake from Fullers in *bulk* because of the discount, had given Anna and Pinny a sleepless night the week before.

'You'd better keep it from Petya too,' said Pinny drily, 'or he'll leave school at once and become an errand boy. He only agreed to go because he expects to support you in luxury the day he passes his school certificate.'

'No, I certainly shan't tell Petya,' said Anna, her face tender as always when she spoke of her brother. Then she cast a sidelong look at her governess, seeing if she could press her advantage still further. 'I think perhaps it would be sensible for me to cut off my hair. Short hair will be easier under a cap and Kira writes that it is becoming *very* chic.'

Kira, whose family had fled to Paris, now had a job as a beautician and Anna regarded her as the ultimate arbiter in matters of taste.

But Pinny had had enough. The comical dusky down that had covered Anna's head in early childhood had become a waist-length mantle, its rich darkness

shot through like watered silk with chestnut, indigo and bronze.

'Over my dead body will you cut your hair,' said Winifred Pinfold.

Three days later, carrying a borrowed cardboard suitcase, Anna trudged up the famous avenue of double limes towards the west facade of Mersham, still hidden from her by a fold of the gentle Wiltshire hills.

The day was hot and the suitcase heavy, containing as it did not only Anna's meagre stock of clothing, but all two thousand and three pages of Selina Strickland's *Domestic Compendium*. What the Torah was to the dispersed and homesick Jews and the Koran to the followers of Mahommet, Mrs Strickland's three-volume tome, which clocked in at three and a half kilos, was to Anna, setting off on her new career in service.

'"Blacking for grates may be prepared by mixing asphaltum with linseed oil and turpentine,"' she quoted now, and looked with pleasure at the rolling parkland, the freshly sheared sheep cropping the grass, the ancient oaks making pools of foliage in the rich meadows. Even the slight air of neglect, the Queen Anne's lace frothing the once-trim verges, the ivy tumbling from the gatehouse wall, only made the environs of Mersham more beautiful.

'I shall curtsy to the butler,' decided Anna, picking up an earthworm which had set off on a suicidal path across the dryness of the gravel. 'And the housekeeper. Definitely I shall curtsy to the housekeeper!'

She put down her case for a moment and watched a peacock flutter by, displaying his slightly *passé* tail to her. There was no doubt about it, she was growing *very* nervous.

'"The tops of old cotton stockings boiled in a mixture of new milk and hartshorn powder make excellent plate rags,"' repeated Anna, who had found that quotations from The Source helped to quieten the butterflies in her stomach. '"A housemaid should never wear creaking boots and—"' She broke off. '*Chort!*'

The avenue had been curving steadily to the right. Suddenly Anna had come upon the house as abruptly as William Kent, the genius who had landscaped the grounds, intended her to do.

Mersham was honey-coloured, graceful, light. There was a central block, pillared and porticoed like a golden temple plucked from some halcyon landscape and set down in a hollow of the Wiltshire hills. Wide steps ran up from either side to the great front door, their balustrades flanked by urns and calm-faced phoenixes. From this centre, two low wings, exquisite and identical, stretched north and south, their long windows giving out on to a terrace upon which fountains played. Built for James Frayne, the first Earl of Westerholme, by some favourite of the gods with that innate sense of balance which characterized the Palladian age, it exuded welcome and an incorrigible sense of rightness. Anna, who had gazed unmoved on Rastrelli's gigantic, ornate palaces, looked on, marvelled and smiled.

The next moment, blending with the pale stone, the blond sweep of gravel, a huge, lion-coloured dog tore down the steps and bounded towards her, barking ferociously. An English mastiff with a black dewlap like sea coal and bloodshot eyes, defending his master's hearth.

'Oh, hush,' said Anna, standing her ground and speaking softly in her native tongue. 'Calm yourself. Surely you can see that I am not a burglar?'

Her voice, the strange, low words with their caressing rhythms, got through to the dog, who braked suddenly and while continuing to growl at one end, set up with the other a faintly placating movement of the tail. Slowly, Anna put up a hand to his muzzle and began to scratch that spot behind the ear where large dogs keep their souls.

For a while, Anna scratched on and Baskerville, shaking off five years of loneliness while his master was at war, moaned with pleasure. When she picked up her case again he followed her, butting her skirt lovingly with his great head. Only when he saw that, unbelievably, she had turned from the front of the house and was making her way through the archway which led towards the servants' quarters did he stop with a howl of disbelief. There were places where, as the earl's dog, it was simply not possible for him to go.

'Snob!' said Anna, leaving him with regret.

She crossed the grassy courtyard and found a flight of stairs which seemed to lead towards the kitchens.

'I shall curtsy to *everybody*,' decided Anna and went bravely forward to meet her fate.

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Waiting to see what the London agency had sent them this time, were Mrs Bassenthwaite, the housekeeper, and the butler, Mr Proom.

Their expectations were low. They had already received, from the same source, an under-gardener who had fallen dead drunk into a cucumber frame on his first day and a footman who had attempted to hand a dish of mutton cutlets gloveless and from the *right*. But then, having to recruit servants from an agency was in every way against the traditions of Mersham and just another unpleasantness resulting from the dreadful war.

Mrs Bassenthwaite was a frail, white-haired woman who should have retired years earlier but had stayed on to oblige the Dowager Countess of Westerholme, shattered by the loss, within a year, of her adored husband and handsome eldest son. She was a relic of the splendid days of Mersham when a bevy of stillroom maids and laundry maids, of sewing girls and housemaids had scurried at her lightest command. Once she had prowled the great rooms, eagle-eyed for a speck of dust or an unplumped cushion, and had conducted inquests and vendettas from which ashen-faced underlings fled weeping to their attics.

But now she was old. The austerities of war, the informality of modern life, its motors and telephones confused her and she increasingly left the running of Mersham to the butler, Mr Proom.

There could have been nobody more worthy. Cyril Proom was in his fifties, a bald, egg-headed man, whose

blue eyes behind gold spectacles gazed at the world with a formidable intelligence. An avid reader of encyclopaedias and other improving literature, Proom, like Mrs Bassenthwaite, had once been head of a great line of perfectly drilled retainers: under-butlers and footmen, lamp boys and odd men, stretching away from him in increasing obsequiousness and unimportance.

To this epoch, the war had put an end. More than most great houses, Mersham had given its life's blood to the Kaiser's war. Upstairs it had taken Lord George, the heir, who fell at Ypres six months after his father, the sixth earl, succumbed to a second heart attack. Below stairs it had drained away almost every able-bodied man and few of those who left were destined to return. A groom had fallen on the Somme, an under-gardener was drowned at Jutland; the hall boy, who had lied about his age, was blown up at Verdun a week before his eighteenth birthday. And if the men left to fight, the maids left to work in munitions factories, in offices or on the land; creating, as they departed, a greater and greater burden for the servants who remained.

It was during those years that Proom, sacrificing the status it had taken a lifetime to acquire, had rolled up his sleeves and worked side by side with the meanest of his minions. With the rigid protocol of the servants' hall abandoned, Jean Park, the soft-spoken head kitchen maid, was even persuaded to step into the shoes of Signor Manotti, the chef, who returned to his native land.

Lady Westerholme had done what she could to ease the pressure on her depleted staff. She shut up the main body of the house and retired, with the earl's ancient uncle, Mr Sebastien Frayne, into the east wing, trying, amid a welter of planchettes and ouija boards, to follow her loved ones into their twilit world. Inevitably, her sadness and seclusion and the economies forced upon her by two lots of death duties took their toll. The shrouded rooms through which only the dog, Baskerville, now roamed, grew dusty and cold; in the once trim flowerbeds, wild grasses waved their blond and feathery heads; the proud peacocks of the topiary grew bedraggled for want of trimming. Finally, when the armistice was declared the servants, waiting anxiously for news, wondered if Mersham was to share the fate of so many great houses and go up for sale.

For the whole hope of the House of Frayne now lay in the one surviving son, Lord George's younger brother, Rupert. The new earl had spent four years in the Royal Flying Corps, his life so perilous that even his mother had not dared to hope he might be spared. But though his plane had been shot down, though he'd been gravely wounded, Rupert was alive. He was about to be discharged from hospital. He was coming home.

But for good? Or only long enough to put his home on the market? Remembering the quiet, unassuming boy, so different from his handsome, careless elder brother, the servants could only wonder and wait. Nor were there any clues in the instructions the new earl had sent from his hospital bed: the state rooms were

to be re-opened, everything that needed to be done to bring Mersham up to its old standard was to be done – but any new staff engaged to make this possible were to be strictly temporary.

And hence this agency, which up to now had spelled nothing but disaster and whose latest offering had just been admitted to the housekeeper's room.

Anna had curtsied – she had curtsied *deeply* – and now stood before them with clasped hands, awaiting her fate. And as they studied her, the butler and the housekeeper sighed.

Neither of them would have found it easy to describe the characteristics of a housemaid, but they knew instinctively that despite her navy coat and skirt, her high-necked blouse and drab straw boater, this girl had none of them.

The entry on 'Slavonic Painting' in his *Encyclopaedia of World Art* gave Proom a head start on Mrs Bassenthwaite in accounting for the long, lustrous eyes framed in thick lashes the colour of sunflower seeds. It threw light, too, on the suppliant pose of the narrow, supple hands, the air of having simultaneously swallowed the sins of the world and a lighted candle which emanated from the new housemaid. The saints on Russian icons, Proom knew, were apt to carry on like that. There, however, the religious motif suddenly came to an end. Though Anna had attempted to skewer her hair back into a demure knot, glossy tendrils had escaped from behind her strangulated ears, and the

bridge of her attenuated Tartar nose was disconcertingly dusted with freckles.

'Your name is Anna Grazinsky?' said Proom, consulting the paper from the agency, already aware that he was playing for time. 'And you are of Russian nationality?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I see here that you have no previous experience of housework?'

'No, sir. But I will work very hard and I will *learn*.'

Proom sighed and glanced at Mrs Bassenthwaite, who lightly shook her head. For the girl's accent, with its rolling 'r's and lilting intensity, quite failed to disguise her educated voice, as did the shabby coat and skirt the grace of her movements. 'Inexperienced' was bad; 'foreign' was worse . . . but a *lady*! This time the agency had gone too far.

'I'm afraid you may not understand how hard you would be expected to work,' said Proom, still somehow hoping to avoid his fate. 'We are taking on temporary staff for a period of intense cleaning and refurbishment prior to the Earl of Westerholme's return. During this time no formal training would be given and you would be expected to make yourself useful anywhere: in the kitchens, the scullery, even outside.'

'Like a tweeny?' enquired Anna, gazing at him out of rapt, tea-coloured eyes.

Tweenies had loomed large in the English novels of her childhood: romantic, oppressed figures second only to Charles Kingsley's little chimney sweeps in their power to evoke sympathy and tears.

Proom and Mrs Bassenthwaite exchanged glances. Neither of them felt equal to explaining to Anna that nothing so mundane as a tweeny would have been allowed within miles of Mersham, these unfortunates being confined to lowly middle class households employing only a housemaid and cook.

'I really think, Miss Grazinsky,' said Mrs Bassenthwaite, leaning forward, 'that you would do better to look for a different type of employment. A governess, perhaps.'

Anna stood before them, silent. It was not, however, a passive silence, reminding Proom inexorably of a puppy he had once owned *not* asking to be taken for a walk.

'I *promise* I will work,' she said at last. 'Most truly, I promise it.'

The butler and the housekeeper held steady. If there is one thing dreaded by all experienced servants, it is a gently bred female below stairs.

Then Anna Grazinsky produced a single word. 'Please?' she said.

Mrs Bassenthwaite looked at Proom. After all, they were only taking her on as a temporary measure. She nodded and Proom said, 'Very well. You can have a month's trial. Your salary will be twelve and six a week – and *there's no need to keep on curtsying*!'

Anna had been dreading a dormitory shared with the other maids, who would despise her, but she was assigned a little attic tucked under the domes and urns

and chimneys that adorned Mersham's roof. It was stuffy with its one small window, but scrupulously clean, containing an iron bed, a chair, a deal chest and a rag rug on the floor. A brown print dress and two starched aprons were laid out for her with a white mob cap. Another uniform, black alpaca with a frilled muslin cap and apron, hung behind the door for 'best'.

She unpacked quickly, placing Selina Strickland's tome on the chair beside her bed. It was very hot there, under the roof, and very silent. And suddenly, standing in the tiny room, sealed off from the body of the house and the world she had once known, she felt so bereft and homesick that tears sprang to her eyes.

Her father's well-remembered voice came to save her. 'When you're sad, my Little Star, go out of doors. It's always better underneath the open sky.'

She went over to the window and pushed it open. If she pulled herself up she could actually climb out on to the ledge that ran behind the balustrade . . .

A moment later she was standing there, one arm round a stone warrior and sure enough it was better, it was *good* . . . Mersham's roof, glistening in the sunshine, was a gay and insouciant world of its own with its copper domes and weathervanes, its sculptured knights at arms. The view was breathtaking. Facing her was the long avenue of limes, the gatehouse, and beyond it, the village with its simple, grey church and trim houses clustered round the green. On her left were the walled gardens and the topiary; to her right, if she craned round her warrior, she saw a landscape out

of an Italian dream: a blue lake curving away behind the house, a grassy hill topped by a white temple, an obelisk floating above the trees . . . She could smell freshly cut grass, the blossoming limes, and hear, in the distance, a woman calling her chickens home.

One could be happy here, thought Anna. Standing there, on the roof of his house, watching the honey-hued stone change colour with the shadows of the clouds that raced across the high, light sky, Anna Grazinsky addressed the absent and unknown earl: 'I will make your house very beautiful for you,' she said. 'I promise. You will see!'

Then she climbed down into the room again and picked up the brown print dress. It was too large, but the apron would hold it in and she'd manage for now. The cap, though, was a problem. Whatever angle she put it on, it slipped drunkenly, if not unbecomingly, over her ears.

'But first I will go and wash,' decided Anna, for she had grown hot and grubby on the roof – and set off to search for a bathroom.

It was a foolish and unproductive quest. Since the lovely Palladian house had first been built, in 1712, there had been many improvements – but a bathroom on the servants' floor was not among them.

Rather more servants than usual had gathered in the kitchen for a quick cup of tea as Anna came downstairs. For, of course, news of her foreignness, her

general unsuitability, her gaffe about the 'tweeny' had spread like wildfire.

The kitchen at Mersham was a huge room, high and vaulted, with a battleship of a range, a gigantic dresser full of gleaming pewter and a wooden table large enough to be a skating rink. Standing at the table now, crumbling pastry like small rain through her deft, plump fingers was Mrs Park, the soft-voiced, gentle countrywoman who had replaced the chef, Signor Manotti. The fact that she was in every way unworthy to succeed so great a man was Mrs Park's continuing despair. No cook ever had less 'temperament' or more skill. Unable to pronounce the French names of the exquisite dishes she sent to the table, she could never believe she was not failing some culinary god with her Englishness, her simplicity, her female sex. Everyone loved her and she had made of the kitchen, so often a forbidden and defended fortress, the place where all the servants came to rest.

Beside Mrs Park sat the first footman, James, one of the few who had returned from the war. Under the guidance of Mr Proom, whom he revered, James had worked himself up from lamp boy to his present eminence. He had started life as a scrawny and undersized Cockney and it was Proom, seeing in the lad a real potential for self-development, who had brought him a pamphlet describing the body building exercises used by the current Mr Universe. Since then, James had never looked back. The state of his gastrocnemius and the progress of his wondrously swelling biceps were

matters of continuing concern to the maids, who bore with fortitude the knowledge that the real glories – the fanning of his trapezius across the small of his back, the powerful arch of his gluteus maximus – were, for reasons of propriety, forever lost to them.

Next to James sat Louise, the head housemaid, and below her the under housemaids, buxom giggly Peggy and her younger sister, Pearl. Sid, the second footman, sat opposite James; Florence, the ancient scullery maid, was filling her bucket by the boiler; Win, the simple-minded kitchen girl, who nevertheless understood Mrs Park's lightest word, was perched humbly on a stool near the foot of the table. Even Proom, who habitually took tea in the housekeeper's room, had lingered by the dresser, busy with a list.

Light footsteps were heard coming down the flagged stone corridor and Anna appeared in the doorway.

Louise, the pert and acerbacious head housemaid, was the first to see her.

'Here comes the tweeny!' she said.

'Now, Louise,' admonished Mrs Park gently, removing her hands from the bowl of pastry. 'Come in, dear, and have a cup of tea.'

But Louise's gibe had in any case fallen flat. Anna smiled with pleasure, came forward to curtsy to Mrs Park and, when bidden to sit down, slipped into a place below Win's at the very foot of the table.

The servants exchanged glances. Whatever was

going to be wrong with the new housemaid, it had to be admitted that it wasn't snobbery or 'side'.

The next day Anna began to work. It was work such as she had not known existed: not as a nursing orderly in the hospital in Petersburg, not as a waitress in the transit camp in Constantinople. Between the myriad, airless, servants' attics tucked away beneath the balustrades and statuary, and the kitchens, pantries and cellars that ran like catacombs under the body of the house, was a world which knew nothing of either. Here were the great state rooms: the famous library, the picture gallery with its Van Dykes and Titians, the gold salon and the music room. It was to the spring cleaning of these rooms, shuttered and shrouded during the war, that Proom had assigned Anna.

'She won't last two days,' prophesied Louise, the ginger-haired and prickly head housemaid. 'You'll see, she'll be back in London with her tail between her legs before the week's out.'

But Peggy and her sister Pearl were not so sure. There'd been a sort of *look* about the Russian girl.

That first day Anna rose at five-thirty, snatched a piece of bread and jam in the servants' hall, and by six, clutching her housemaid's bag, had followed Louise, Peggy and James, loaded with buckets, stepladders, druggets and mops, up to the library.

Mersham's library was world-famous. Its satin-wood bookcases, its pedestal desk and writing tables were made by Chippendale and reckoned to be among his finest work. A sumptuous, moss green Aubusson

stretched to the windows of the south terrace and on the barrel-vaulted ceiling the Muses swam most decoratively.

'Oh, what a beautiful room!' exclaimed Anna, only to get a sour look from Louise, who was briskly pouring soda into a bucket.

''ere,' she said, handing Anna a bucket of steaming water and a cloth. 'Start on this geyser, and don't drip!'

'This geyser' was Milton in old age, whose marble head stared thoughtfully and somewhat snottily from a plinth between the windows. When Anna had rinsed and dried the poet's face, the convolutions of his wig and the lacework on his Puritan collar, she moved on to Hercules resting – unnecessarily, she could not help feeling – on a slain lion, whose mane had most horribly collected the dust. Next came the overmantel depicting scenes from Dante's *Inferno*.

'Better wring your cloth out harder for those,' advised Louise, looking with disgust at the tortured souls writhing in agony across the chimney breast. 'Bloomin' sculpture! I hate the stuff.'

By this time Anna's water was black with dirt and she had carefully to carry her bucket down a long parquet corridor, across the blue john and jasper tiles of the great hall, down the service stairs and through a green baize door into the scullery, where Florence, the ancient scullery maid, filled it for her. She was crossing the great hall again when Fate dealt her an undeserved blow in the form of Baskerville, who discovered her with yelps of joy in a place where it was meet and right

for her to be and padded passionately after her into the library. Nor could James, trying to dismantle the chandeliers, or Louise, cleaning the windows, prevent him from lying like a felled ox across the foot of the stepladder on which Anna, scrubbing Plato, Aristotle and Cicero in a niche above the door, was precariously perched with her bucket.

By lunchtime Anna's back ached and her hands were sore but she persevered and she kept – though this was harder – silence. It was late in the afternoon when, moving a silver photograph frame to safety, she found herself staring for the first time at the long-awaited earl.

The photograph, taken just before the war, showed two young men standing on the steps that led to the front door. The older was strikingly handsome, with regular features, springing hair and an easy smile. The other, who was hardly more than a boy, was slighter, darker, and had turned half-away as though looking at a landscape visible to him alone.

'That's Lord George, the one that was killed,' said Peggy, coming over to her and pointing at the older of the two. 'He was a smasher! My, didn't we half have to run for it when he was around!'

'And this is the new earl?' queried Anna. 'His brother?'

'That's right. Mr Rupert, he was then. He's much quieter like. Got a lovely smile, though.'

'He looks nice, I think,' said Anna, and stepping

over the recumbent Baskerville, she began to scrub the cold and protuberent stomach of Frederick the Great.

Just before it was time to pack up for the day, Proom appeared silently as was his wont and took Louise aside.

'Any difficulties?' he asked, inclining his head towards Anna.

'Not really,' said Louise reluctantly. 'Except for that bloomin' dog following her about. She's as green as they come, of course, but she hasn't stopped, not for a minute. And I must say you don't have to tell her anything twice.'

On her third day at Mersham Anna discovered that the butler, so regal and authoritative in the servants' hall, suffered from a bedridden and deeply eccentric mother, with whom he shared a cottage in the stable block.

She had spent the whole day in the windowless scullery washing, piece by exquisite piece, the Meissen dinner service – a tedious and frighteningly responsible job with which Proom, rather to his own surprise, had entrusted her. Seeing her pallor and the circles under her eyes, Mrs Park had sent her out to the kitchen garden with a message for the under-gardener, Ted.

Anna was on her way back, crossing the stableyard, when a pot of geraniums flew out of an upstairs window and crashed into pieces at her feet. Retrieving the remains of the shattered pot and going to investigate, she found herself in the presence of an ancient, ferocious old lady, glaring like a beleagured ferret at

the end of a high brass bed. Mrs Proom's appendix, removed ten years earlier in Maidens Over Cottage Hospital, stood in a glass jar on a shelf above her head; various lumps under the counterpane indicated that she had taken the silver to bed in case of burglars.

'Who are you? Why are you dressed like that? Where's Cyril? I want my tea!' she began.

'I am dressed like this because I am a housemaid. Mr Proom is decanting the claret and I will bring your tea if you permit,' Anna replied.

Half an hour later, Mr Proom, noticing with foreboding the remains of the broken flowerpot and wearily ascending the stairs to his mother's room, found her absorbed in a game of dominoes in which the new housemaid was cheating, with an expertise which shattered him, so as to let the old lady win.

'I'm sorry I'm late, Mother,' he began.

'Sh! Be quiet, Cyril. I don't need you,' said the old woman, gleefully moving a piece.

Only when Anna had left did she ask again: 'Who is that girl? Why is she dressed like that?'

'I've told you, she's the new housemaid, Mother.'

'Rubbish,' said Mrs Proom.

Anna had been at Mersham for a week before she met the first member of the family. In addition to the Lady Mary Westerholme, the dowager countess, Mersham had for many years provided sanctuary for the present earl's great uncle, the Honourable Mr Sebastien

Frayne. It being Louise's day off, Anna was instructed to take up his tea.

'You want to listen outside the door,' Peggy told Anna. 'There'll be some music playing on the gramophone. If it's that stuff all loud an' wailin' an' women shrieking and that, you want to watch out. Specially there's one called the Libby's Tott or something. If he's playing that you want to keep the tray between you an' him and put it down and run quick. But if it's that stuff that sounds like church, you know, all on the level and not much tune, then it's all right to have a chat. Not that it's ever more than a bit of a pinch and a grope, but you not being used to it like . . .'

It was with a sinking heart that Anna, pausing outside Mr Sebastien's door, heard the unmistakable sound of the *Liebestod* issuing forth. Isolde was dying and she was dying hard. Bravely, Anna knocked and entered.

Mr Sebastien Frayne was reclining on a large Chesterfield, his eyes closed in ecstasy, his hands folded over a large stomach. He was close on eighty and seldom left his room, which resembled the den of a musical badger, strewn with manuscript paper, ashtrays, music stands and books. There was egg on his dressing gown and his white hair was dotted with cigarette ash, but the eyes he turned to the door were the blue and candid eyes of a child.

'I have brought you your tea, sir,' said Anna, above the soaring voice of the soprano issuing from the huge horn.

Mr Sebastien's eyes gleamed. A new maid. At first sight unpromising in her absence of curves, but on closer inspection not unpromising at all. In fact intriguing. How did she manage to get a dimple in a face so thin?

'Put the tray down here,' said Mr Sebastien craftily, moving closer to the edge of the sofa and patting the low table beside him.

Anna advanced. Suddenly the music surged and gathered force, its *leitmotif* transfigured in one of Wagner's brilliant changes of key and, as the bereaved soprano prepared to fall ecstatically upon her lover's corpse, Anna gave a deep sigh and said, 'Oh, say what you will, but it is *beautiful*.'

Mr Sebastien looked at her sharply, his seduction campaign of tired lecheries momentarily forgotten.

Anna was standing in the middle of the room, the tea tray clasped to her breast, her huge, peat-coloured eyes shining. 'Who is it singing? Not Tettrazini, I think?'

'Johanna Gadski,' said Mr Sebastien. 'The best Isolde in the world, without a doubt.'

'My father didn't care for Wagner. He found it too excited.' The music had made Anna dangerously forget her status. 'He and Chaliapin used to argue and argue.'

'Come here,' said Mr Sebastien, his eyes razor-sharp under the bushy white brows.

She came forward and put down the tray. The music was mesmerizing her; she had turned to the gramophone like a plant turns to the light. Now she was right beside him. He could put an arm round her waist, pull her down on to the sofa, give her a kiss . . .

‘Stay and listen,’ said Mr Sebastien, not touching her, ‘it’s nearly over. Sit down.’

‘I must not sit down,’ said Anna. ‘I am the maid.’ Even Wagner could not efface the thought of Selina Strickland’s views on a maid sitting down in the presence of her employers. But the music held her and, caught in its toll, she compromised and slipped to her knees beside the sofa, her elbows resting on the arm.

When it was over she sighed deeply and turned to him, her face mirroring the drowned look of someone returning from another world. ‘It is kind of you to let me listen,’ she said. ‘It is hard to live without music.’

‘There is no need at all for you to do so,’ said Mr Sebastien. ‘I have a good collection of records. I would be delighted to play you anything you choose.’

Anna shook her head. ‘Were you a professional musician?’ she asked.

‘I wanted to be,’ said Mr Sebastien. ‘I played the piano and the cello and composed a bit. I think young Rupert gets his love of music from me. But they wouldn’t let me. In those days, the aristocracy wouldn’t let their sons do anything sensible and I was too feeble to rebel.’

‘Oh, I know, it is monstrous!’ said Anna. ‘I also have suffered in this way. I wanted so *much* to be a ballet dancer and they would not let me. Although,’ she went on, anxious to be fair, ‘it would not have been possible in any case because my toes were not of equal length.’

'I have some ballet music also,' said Mr Sebastien craftily. '*Casse Noisette* . . . *The Sleeping Beauty* . . .'

'And Stravinsky, do you have? Is it recorded already? *The Rite of Spring*?'

'No, I do *not*,' said Mr Sebastien. 'In my opinion *The Rite of Spring* is a work totally lacking in melody or sense.'

'But *no*!' Anna's cry rent the air. For a moment it looked as though, Selina Strickland notwithstanding, she would stamp her foot. 'It is not *true*. One must be *modern*!'

'If to be modern is to be cacophonous, discordant and obscure,' began Mr Sebastien . . .

Battle, most enjoyable, was joined.

Anna, coming down half an hour later, fearful of a reprimand, was greeted by an interested cluster of faces. The Russian girl was flushed and she was muttering beneath her breath.

'He grabbed you, then,' said Peggy. 'Well, I warned you.'

'No, no, he did not touch me,' said Anna absently. Then the full impact of what she had just said hit her. 'It is because I am not pretty!' she said tragically.

And Mrs Park, who had taken less than twenty-four hours to forget that Anna was a foreigner and a lady, said, 'Now don't be foolish, dear. Just drink your tea.'

For the Dowager Countess of Westerholme, Proom, who had stood behind her chair as second footman

when she came to Mersham as a bride, would probably have laid down his life. Nevertheless, when about ten days after Anna's arrival he was told by Alice, the dowager's maid, that someone was to go to the village and inform Mr Firkin, the sexton, that his deceased wife did not want him to give away his top hat, he was not pleased.

The dowager was a small, vague woman in her fifties with silver hair, wide grey eyes and a penchant for the kind of tea gowns and flowing chiffon scarves which so often seem to go with a belief in spiritualism. Though somewhat lacking in intellect, she was a deeply kind and compassionate person, who bore with fortitude the fact that none of the dauntingly trivial messages which she faithfully took down in automatic writing came either from her revered husband or adored eldest son. Of late, instead, her boudoir had turned into a kind of clearing house in which the Deceased, unable to bypass so willing a recipient, made their wishes clear to her. And as often as not, these involved posting off to the vicar or the grocer or the undertaker with letters marked URGENT in the dowager's sprawling hand.

'I can't spare any of the men today,' Proom told Alice. 'We've got all the pictures in the long gallery to re-hang and the music room's not started yet.'

'Well, someone's got to go,' said Alice.

'Why don't you send the tweeny,' said Louise, who was mixing furniture polish in the pantry opposite.

'She's nutty on fresh air and it'd get that dratted dog out of the house for a bit.'

Entering the dowager's drawing room half an hour later, Anna found herself in a familiar world. Her own mother's apartments had contained just such a clutter of occasional tables, potted plants, embroidered screens and piled-up magazines. Only the planchettes and astral charts were different.

'Come in, my dear. You're the Russian girl, aren't you? Now I want you to take a very important message. It's for Mr Firkin, the sexton. Can you find his house, do you think? It's just opposite the church with the walnut tree in the garden.'

'Yes, my lady, I'm sure I can.'

'Good. Now I want you to tell him that a message has just come through from his wife. At least I think it must be his wife. She said her name was Hilda and I'm sure Mr Firkin's wife was called Hilda. Yes, I know she was because . . .' She broke off and began to rummage in her *escritoire*. 'Now where was I?'

'You were going to give me a letter, my lady.'

'That's right; here it is. The poor woman really sounded desperately worried. For some reason she cannot bear the idea of him giving away his top hat. It's strange how these things seem to go on mattering, even on the Other Side.'

Anna took the letter and bent to pick up the scarf that had slipped from the dowager's shoulders. She was rewarded by a charming smile, which changed, suddenly, to a look of intense scrutiny.

'My goodness! Really that is *most* remarkable. Just stand over there, dear, where I can see you properly.'

Puzzled, Anna went to stand by the window.

'Most unusual, really, quite amazing. You can be very, very, proud.'

'Proud of what, my lady?'

'Your aura. It's one of the purest and most beautiful I've seen. Especially the orange. Only it isn't orange so much as *flame*. But a very gentle flame. Like candlelight. Like starlight, even.' She broke off. 'Oh dear! What *is* the matter? What have I said?'

'It's nothing,' said Anna, wiping away the sudden tears. 'I'm so sorry. It's something my father used to call me. I will go and find Mr Firkin straight away.'

Forgetting, for once in her life, to curtsy, Anna fled.

And so, day by day, Mersham yielded to the energy and attack of its staff and grew more beautiful. The shutters were thrown open to the light, Ted brought tubs of poinsettias and lilies into the house. The silver table pieces, burnished by James to unbelievable perfection, were returned to the state dining room, the freshly washed chandeliers sparkled in the sunlight. The men took their liveries out of mothballs; new aprons were assigned to the maids.

Till, on a hot night in mid-June, Anna, who had that day polished the one hundred and thirty-seven banister rails of the great staircase, crawled along the interminable parquet floor of the long gallery with her tin of beeswax and turpentine and beaten fifteen Persian

rugs, opened her attic window, leant her weary head on her arms and said to the absent earl:

'It is ready now. You can come.'

And the next day, he came.