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opening extract from

A Song for Summer

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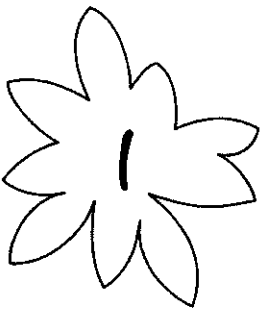

In a way they were born to be aunts. Emancipated, eccentric and brave, the Norchester sisters lived in a tall grey house in Bloomsbury, within a stone's throw of the British Museum.

It is a district known for its intellectuals. Blue plaques adorn many of the houses, paying tributes to the dead dons and scholars who once inhabited them and even the professors and librarians who were still alive walked through the quiet London squares with the abstracted look of those whose minds are on higher things.

No. Three Gowan Terrace, the home of Charlotte, Phyllis and Annie Norchester, belonged firmly in this tradition. It was a three-storey house of amazing discomfort. The furniture was dark and disregarded; the bedrooms contained only narrow beds, desks and outsize typewriters; in the drawing room the chairs were arranged in rows to face a large table and a notice board. Yet in its own way the house was a shrine. For

the sisters, now middle-aged, had belonged to that stalwart band of women who had turned their back on feminine frippery, and devoted their whole beings to the securing of votes for women.

Charlotte, the oldest, had been for six weeks on hunger strike in Holloway Prison; Phyllis had spent more time chained to the railing of the hated women's gallery in the Houses of Parliament than any other suffragette; and Annie, the youngest, had knocked off the helmets of no less than seven policemen before being dragged away, kicking and protesting, to join her sister in prison.

It had been a glorious time. Victory had come in 1918 when the heroic work of women in the Great War could no longer be gainsaid. But though women had had the vote now for some twenty years, the sisters were faithful to the cause. The curtains – in the suffragette colours of purple, green and white – might be frayed and dusty but they would never be removed. The picture of their leader, Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst, still hung in the dining room, though she herself had been dead for many years and was now a statue on Victoria Embankment. Rubbing themselves down with the frayed, rough towels in the bathroom with its cake of carbolic soap and rusty geyser reminded them of those heady days being hosed down by brutal wardresses in prison; the boiled fish served to them by the elderly cook general scarcely differed from the food they had thrown out of the windows of their cells as they began their hunger strike. And the suffragette

motto, *They Must Give Us Freedom Or They Must Give Us Death* was still written in large letters on a poster in the hall.

But if they played the 'Do you remember?' game as they sat in their Jaeger dressing gowns drinking their cocoa, Charlotte and Phyllis and Annie never forgot how much was still owed to women even though the vote was won.

Charlotte had qualified as a doctor and was now Senior Registrar at the Bloomsbury Hospital for Women – a brisk and busy person who wore her stethoscope as society women wore their pearls. Phyllis was the principal of a teacher training college and Annie was the only female professor of Applied Mycology, not only in the University of London, but in the whole of Britain.

They might thus have rested on their laurels, but they did not. Every week there were meetings in the ice-cold drawing room: meetings to proclaim the need for more women in Parliament, in the universities, on the committee of the League of Nations. Lecturers came to discourse on the evils of female circumcision in Bechuanaland, on the shamefully low intake of women in the legal profession, on the scandalous discrimination against girls in Higher Mathematics. Leaflets were circulated, articles written, meetings addressed and as the Twenties moved into the Thirties and the canker of Fascism arose in Germany and Italy and Spain, women were urged to declare themselves against Hitler with

his dread doctrine of *Kinder, Kirche und Kuche* which threatened to put them back into the Middle Ages.

But it was during this decade that something disquieting began to be felt in Gowan Terrace, a development as unexpected as it was difficult to deal with, and it concerned Charlotte's only daughter, Ellen.

None of the Norchester sisters had intended to marry but in the year 1913 a brave and beautiful women named Emily Davison threw herself under the King's horse in the Derby to draw attention to the suffragette cause, and was killed. It was at her funeral that Charlotte found herself standing next to a good-looking gentleman who, when she faltered (for she had loved Emily), took her arm and led her from the open grave. His name was Alan Carr, he was a solicitor and sympathetic to the movement. They married and a year later their child was born.

It was, fortunately, a girl, whom they named Ellen, and Alan had time to dote on her and spoil her before he was killed at Ypres. The baby was enchanting: plump and dimpled with blonde curls and big brown eyes – the kind of person found in paintings leaning out of heaven and bestowing laurel leaves or garlands on deserving mortals down below.

What mattered, however, was that she was clever. Every possible kind of intelligence test proclaimed that all was very well and her mother, Dr Carr, and her aunts, Phyllis and Annie, spared no effort to stimulate the little creature's mind. This girl at least should not struggle for her opportunities. Oxford or Cambridge

were a certainty, followed by a higher degree and then who knew . . . an ambassadorship, a seat in the cabinet – nothing was out of Ellen's reach.

So they did not, at first, feel in the least alarmed. All little girls picked daisies and arranged them in paste jars, usually in inconvenient places, and Dr Carr, bidden imperiously by her daughter to smell them, duly did so though the scent of daisies is not easily perceived by someone accustomed to the strong odours of lysol and chloroform. It was natural for little girls to bake buns and Ellen, perched on a stool beside the usually morose cook general with her curls tied in a handkerchief, was a sight that her mother and her aunts could appreciate. Children made little gardens and planted love-in-a-mist and forget-me-nots, and for Ellen to claim a patch of earth in the sooty square of ground behind the house which all the sisters were far too busy to cultivate, was natural. But children's gardens are generally outgrown and Ellen's little patch extended until she had cultivated a whole flower bed and then she found cuttings of honeysuckle and clematis and trained them to climb up to the first-floor windows.

Then again there was the question of the maids. It was of course all right for children to help servants: servants after all were a kind of underclass and should have been liberated except that it wasn't easy to see how to run a house without them. But it soon became clear that Ellen *enjoyed* making beds and polishing the grate and setting fires. They would find her folding sheets and putting her nose voluptuously against the

starched linen. Once when the maid was ill they came across her with her school uniform hitched up, scrubbing the floor, and she said: 'Look, isn't it beautiful, the way the light catches the soap bubbles!'

Did she perhaps do altogether too much looking? The sisters had read their Blake; they knew it was desirable to see the world in a grain of sand and eternity in an hour. But the world in a scrubbing brush? The world in a bowl of fruit?

'Perhaps she's going to be a painter?' suggested Aunt Phyllis.

A great woman painter, the first female president of the Royal Academy? It was a possibility.

But Ellen didn't want to paint apples. She wanted to smell them, turn them in her hands and eat them.

Other members of the sisterhood were called in, honorary aunts to the child, and consulted: Aunt Delia, an inky lady who ran the Left Book Club Shop in Gower Street, and the headmistress of Ellen's school, a full-bosomed and confident person whose bottle-green girls were the most academically motivated in London.

'She *is* clever, isn't she?' Dr Carr demanded. 'You wouldn't lie to me, Lydia, after all we've been through together.'

And Lydia, who had shared a cell with Charlotte after they threw a brick through the windows of No. 10 Downing Street, said:

'I tell you she is very bright indeed. Her last exam results were excellent.'

But at the end of the following term Ellen came to

her and asked if she could take cookery lessons in the Sixth Form.

'Cookery! But my dear, that's just for the girls who aren't going to university.'

'I don't want to go to university,' said Ellen. 'I want to go to a domestic science college. A proper one where they teach you to sew and to cook and clean. I want,' she said, opening her soft brown eyes in a look of entreaty, 'to use my hands.' And she spread them in the air, as pianists spread their fingers over an invisible keyboard, as if cooking was equivalent to the playing of a Chopin étude.

In facing this crisis, Ellen's mother and her aunts knew whom to blame. A woman who was the embodiment of everything they disliked in their sex: an abject doormat, a domestic slave, a person without a mind or will of her own – an Austrian peasant who kept house for Ellen's grandfather and whom Ellen, since the age of six, had inexplicably adored.

The grandfather in question did not come from the Norchester side of the family. He was Alan Carr's father; a scholar engaged in a great work, the compilation of a glossary of Greek fishes, which seemed unlikely to be completed before he died. He had travelled to Vienna shortly after the end of the war to consult some manuscripts in the Hofburg library and had taken lodgings in an inn in Nussdorf, where Henny, the landlady's daughter, had looked after him. She was a quiet, fair girl, gentle and deft, who both admired and

pitied the serious Professor, for he had lost a son in the war and a wife soon afterwards with cancer.

When he returned to Britain he asked her if she would come and keep house for him and she agreed.

No house was ever so 'kept' as Walnut Tree Cottage in Wimbledon. Henny cooked the Professor's meals and washed his clothes and polished his furniture but she did much, much more. She found the pieces of paper with their Greek hieroglyphics which he had dropped on to the floor; she warmed his slippers; she cultivated the little London garden in which, inexplicably, there was no sign of a walnut tree.

'Well, you see, he is a very clever man and I like to make him comfortable,' was the only defence she could put up against the shocked comments of Ellen's family.

After she had been with him for three years the Professor said he thought they should be married.

Henny refused. She was not of his world, she said; it would not be suitable. She had shared his bed from the start, understanding that this was as important to gentlemen as the proper preparation of their food and the certainty of hot water for their baths, but when visitors came she retreated to the kitchen which alone she had claimed for herself and turned into a replica of the country kitchen in the Austrian mountains where she had grown up.

Ellen was six years old when she was first taken to Wimbledon. Wandering away from the drawing room where literature was being discussed, she found Henny with a cullender in front of her, shelling peas.

Afterwards Henny always remembered the child's first words. She did not say 'I want to help,' or 'Can I help?' She said: 'I *have* to help.'

So it began. In Henny's kitchen with its scrubbed table and red and white checked curtains, its potted geranium and cuckoo clock, she spent the hours of her greatest happiness. Together she and Henny tended the little garden with its rockery of alpine flowers; they baked *Krapfen* and *Buchteln* and embroidered cross-stitch borders on the towels. Ellen learnt to hang up muslin to make *Topfen* and that cucumber salad could have a smell – and she learnt that it was all right to be pretty. Being pretty had worried her because she had noticed that when visitors came and praised her silky curls or big brown eyes, her mother and her aunts had not been pleased. But Henny laughed and said being pretty came from God and gave people pleasure and it meant one had to brush one's hair and buff one's nails just as one had to scour out the saucepans to keep them shining.

Henny held coloured stuffs against her face and said, look how it brings out the gold of your eyes, and without her saying a word about love, Ellen knew that Henny loved her, and loved the selfish old Professor with his Greek fishes, and learnt that this much discussed emotion could be about doing and serving and not about what one said.

One day they were making *Apfel Strudel*. The white cloth was spread on the table and they were lifting the paper-thin dough from below . . . lifting it with spread

fingers so slowly, so gently, making it thin and ever thinner without once letting it go into holes, and Henny stopped for a moment and said more seriously than she usually spoke: 'You have a real talent, *Hascherl*. A proper one.'

Even so, when the time came to choose her career, Ellen didn't have the heart to rebel; she took her Higher Certificate and went to Cambridge to read Modern Languages because she spoke German already and was extremely fond of chatting. As it happened, not much chatting went on during her tutorials and her supervisor found the Austrian dialect in which she recited Schiller's poetry singular in the extreme. But she liked Cambridge well enough – the river and the Backs, and the friendly young men who paid her compliments and took her punting and asked her to dances. She learnt to deflect their proposals of marriage and made good friends among her fellow students, the shopkeepers and the ducks.

With Kendrick Frobisher she was less adroit. He was a blond, serious, painfully thin young man of twenty-eight with pale blue eyes, and belonged to her life in London, where he assiduously attended the meetings at Gowan Terrace, addressed envelopes, and showed a proper concern for the Higher Education of Women.

Kendrick was the youngest son of a domineering mother who lived in Cumberland and had, when she was a young woman, personally delivered a camel on the way to church. This had happened in India, where

she grew up, the daughter of an army colonel stationed in Poona. The camel was pregnant and in difficulties and though she was only nineteen years old, Kendrick's mother had unhesitatingly plunged an arm into its interior and done what was necessary before passing on, indifferent to her blood-stained dress and ruined parasol, to worship God.

Returning to Britain to marry a landowner, this redoubtable woman had produced two sons, young men who hunted, shot, fished and would presently marry. Then came Kendrick, who was a disappointment from the start – an unsporting, pale, nervous boy who was bullied at school and read books.

In the London Library, researching the minor metaphysical poets on whom he was planning a monograph, or at the many lectures, art exhibitions and concerts he attended, Kendrick was happy enough, but real people terrified him. It was causes that he espoused, and what more worthy cause than the education of women and the emancipation from slavery of the female sex?

So he started to attend the meetings in Gowan Terrace and there found Ellen handing round sandwiches.

'The egg and cress ones are nice,' she said – and that was that.

Because he was so obviously a person that one did not marry, Ellen was not careful as she was with the young men who kissed her in punts. It seemed to her

sad to have a mother who had delivered a camel on the way to church, and Kendrick had other problems.

'What is your house like?' she asked him once, for he lived in a small bachelor flat in Pimlico and seldom went home. 'Wet,' he had answered sadly.

'Wetter than other houses?' she wanted to know.

Kendrick said yes. His home was in the Lake District, in Borrowdale, which had the highest rainfall in England. He went on to explain that as well as being wet, it was red, being built of a particular kind of sandstone which became crimsoned in the rain.

Realising that it could not be easy to live in a wet red house with two successful older brothers and a mother who had delivered a camel on the way to church, Ellen was kind to him. She accompanied him to concerts and to art galleries and to plays without scenery, and smiled at him, her mind on other things, when he paid her compliments.

These were not the ordinary kind: they involved Kendrick in hours of pleasurable research in libraries and museums. Ellen's hair had darkened to an unsensational light brown and she had, to her great relief, largely outgrown her dimples, but in finding painters and poets who had caught the way her curls fell across her brow, or the curve of her generous mouth, he was on fertile ground.

'Look, Ellen,' he would say, 'here's a portrait of Sophronia Ebenezer by Raphael. Or it may only be by the School of Raphael,' he would add conscientiously.

'The attribution isn't certain. But she's tilting her head just like you tilt yours when you listen.'

In the delectable Nell Gwyn Kendrick discerned the curve of Ellen's throat and her bestowing glance, and Wordsworth's lines: 'She was a phantom of delight' might have been penned with her in mind. Even music yielded its images: the Scherzo of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony seemed to him to mirror precisely her effervescent capacity for joy.

Aware that he was enjoying himself, Ellen was caught quite unawares when he followed her into the kitchen one day as she was making coffee and forgetting Sophronia Ebenezer and Nell Gwyn and even Beethoven, seized one of her hands and said in a voice choked with emotion: 'Oh Ellen, I love you so much. Won't you please, please marry me?'

Too late did Ellen reproach herself and assure him that she did not love him, could not marry him, did not intend to marry anyone for a very long time. It would have been as well to try to deprive Sir Perceval of his quest for the Grail as persuade Kendrick that all was lost. He would wait, if need be for years, he would not trouble her, all he asked was to serve her family, address even more envelopes, attend even more meetings – and be allowed to glimpse her as she went about her work.

Ellen could hardly forbid him her mother's house; there was nothing to do except hope that he would grow out of so one-sided a passion. And during her last

year at university something happened which put the erudite young man entirely out of her mind.

Henny fell ill. She had terminal cancer and Professor Carr, whom she had served with her life, proposed to send her to the geriatric ward of the local hospital to die.

Like many peasants, Henny was terrified of hospitals. Ellen now stopped trying to please her relatives. She left college three months before her finals and told her grandfather that Henny would die in her own bed and she would nurse her.

She had help, of course, excellent local nurses who came by day, but most of the time they spent together, she and Henny, and they made their own world. Herr Hitler was eliminated, as was Mussolini, strutting and braying in Rome. Even the clamour of King George's Silver Jubilee scarcely reached them.

During this time which, strangely, was not unhappy, Henny went back to her own childhood in the lovely Austrian countryside in which she had grown up. She spoke of the wind in the pine trees, the cows with their great bells, about her brothers and sisters, and the *Alpenglühen* when in the hour of sunset the high peaks turned to flame.

And again and again she spoke about the flowers. She spoke about the gentians and the edelweiss and the tiny saxifrages clinging to the rocks, but there was one flower she spoke of in a special voice. She called it a *Kohlröserl* – a little coal rose – but it was not a rose. It was a small black orchid with a tightly furled head.

'It didn't look much, but oh Ellie, the scent! You could smell it long before you found the flowers. In the books they tell you it smells like vanilla, but if so, it's like vanilla must smell in heaven. You must go, *Liebling*. You must go and put your face to them.'

'I will, Henny. I'll bring back a root and –'

But she didn't finish and Henny patted her hand and smiled, for they both knew that she was not a person who wanted things dug up and planted on her grave.

'Just find them and tell them . . . thank you,' said Henny.

A few days later she spoke of them again: 'Ah yes, *Kohlröserl*,' she said – and soon afterwards she died.

Ellen didn't go back to finish her degree. She enrolled at the Lucy Hatton School of Cookery and Household Management and Henny was right, she did have talent. She graduated *summa cum laude* and her mother and her aunts and Kendrick Frobisher watched her receive her diploma. As she came off the platform with her prizes, grace touched Dr Charlotte Carr, who was a good woman, and she threw her arms round her daughter and said: 'We're all so proud of you, my darling. Really so very proud.'

And three months later, in the spring of 1937, answering an advertisement in the *Lady*, Ellen set off for Austria to take up a domestic post in a school run by an Englishman and specialising in Music, Drama and the Dance.