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Opening extract from **Poppy**

Written by
Mary Hopper

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www.bloomsbury.com

www.maryhooper.co.uk

Chapter One

Poppy sat, bolt upright and uncomfortable, on one of the carved, wooden chairs in the blue drawing room of Airey House in the village of Mayfield. In front of her, looking equally out of place, sat Molly, the other parlourmaid. They were winding wool: Poppy had her arms outstretched with a long loop of wool around each hand, Molly was winding it into a ball, from right to left and back, catching Poppy's eye every now and again and giving her a *look*. Each time she did this, Poppy would have to glance away quickly or risk giggling.

Sitting around them in easy chairs were the ladies of the Mayfield Comforts Group, knitting balaclavas, gloves, socks and mufflers as fast as they could for the boys at the front. Since Poppy and Molly could only manage straight knitting – and because every garment apart from mufflers involved turning corners – Mrs Violet de Vere, matriarch of Airey House, had thought it best to ask her two parlourmaids to wind balls of wool

from the long, loopy skeins. Being seated with servants was a little awkward for the comforts group ladies, for they couldn't speak as openly as they might have wished, but Mrs de Vere had realised that times were changing and she prided herself on being a modern employer. Also, by including Poppy and Molly, she had ensured that everyone was helping the war effort. That was important.

The ladies carried on clicking needles and Poppy and Molly wound on. Poppy thought of all the things she could be doing instead of sitting under the watchful eyes of the comforts group – and all the duties she would be scrambling to catch up with that afternoon, for an hour was a long interlude in a busy parlourmaid's day.

When their time in the drawing room was up, Mrs de Vere raised her eyebrows and gave Poppy a nod. This meant she and Molly were to disappear, change into their lace-trimmed afternoon aprons and return with pots of tea and a sponge cake. Once restored to their usual stations in life, the two girls served the ladies silently and deferentially and everyone was much more at ease.

As they poured and passed, the talk among the ladies was centred on the war, of course. Far from being 'over by Christmas' as everyone had predicted, it was escalating in many unforeseen ways, most recently with the bombardment and loss of life in Scarborough and the surrounding area. The ladies knew of several brave young men who had enlisted already, having been

persuaded by Lord Kitchener that their country needed them. Mrs Trevin-Jones actually had a son fighting at the front, so her views on the war were treated with the utmost respect. Young Peter Trevin-Jones had not won any medals yet but the stories of his exploits suggested that it could only be a matter of time.

‘My cousin’s boy, Gerald, has taken a commission in the cavalry,’ one lady interjected, having heard enough of Peter. ‘He’s been riding horses since he was two, so we expected no less.’

‘Well, my grandson tried to enlist but, sadly, they wouldn’t have him,’ said another.

‘Too young?’

‘I don’t believe there *is* such a thing!’ came the reply. ‘One is supposed to be over eighteen but apparently they don’t even ask for identification. No, he had fallen arches so he wouldn’t have been able to march. He was furious.’

‘I expect his mother was pleased, though . . .’ said another lady.

This was fiercely denied. ‘His mother thought that fighting for his country would make a man of him. After all, what more noble ambition could there be for a boy?’

There were some murmurs of assent and a few sighs, too. Passing round porcelain teacups, Poppy wondered if her brother, Billy, might join up and, if so, whether war might make a man out of *him*.

Thinking about Billy always made Poppy rather cross, for he still hadn’t managed to find himself a proper job.

He wouldn't consider going into service (he dismissed this as 'licking the boots of lords and ladies') and though he considered himself too good for factory work, he was not willing to go to evening classes to gain any paper qualifications for anything else. By the prudent pulling of strings, his uncle had managed to get him an interview for an office job, but Billy, being in a bad mood, had not interviewed well. He came back saying that the chief clerk was a stuffed shirt and he wouldn't take the job even if it was offered. Which it wasn't.

Poppy, however, had been working for the de Vere family ever since she left school at fourteen. She had won a scholarship to the local college, but with no father, and the college uniform and books costing more than her mother earned in a month of making cardboard boxes, she hadn't been able to take it up. At Airey House, the de Veres' home in Mayfield, just outside London, Poppy had started off in the kitchens and then, proving herself capable, had been elevated to a parlourmaid.

Slices of Victoria sponge were being eaten with silver forks when the door to the drawing room burst open and Mr Frederick de Vere, the youngest of the four de Vere children, came in looking cross. He was dressed in hunting gear – an old tweed jacket, plus fours and high leather boots – and looked unkempt in a rather dashing way. His appearance caused a little flurry of delight among the ladies of the circle, who sat up straighter and smiled indulgently at the sight of him. Poppy did *not* smile indulgently – she thought that *Master* Freddie (as

he was still called by most of the servants) was over-indulged by his mother and spoilt by his father. But then, that was the lot of all the de Vere children.

‘Freddie!’ cried Mrs de Vere, pleased that he’d arrived in time to be admired.

‘Mother.’ Freddie spoke in a leaden tone, then bent to kiss her powdery cheek. ‘There’s no one in the kitchen and I’m near starved to death.’ He straightened up, caught Poppy’s eye and gave her a wink.

Flip-flop. Poppy’s heart skittered inside her and she turned away quickly, hoping she hadn’t gone red. This had happened two or three times lately: he’d smiled at her for no apparent reason or pulled a quizzical face – and what he meant by it she couldn’t imagine.

Freddie raked his hand through his hair, which was thick, fair, and fell into his eyes. ‘Surely there should be someone who can fix a chap a bit of cold meat when he wants it.’

‘Oh, of course, darling!’ cried his mother. Her eyes – and those of the other ladies in the room – fell on the two maids. ‘Well, Poppy?’ she asked.

‘Please, ma’am, there’s no one there because it’s Cook’s afternoon off,’ Poppy said.

Freddie pushed his hair back. ‘I’m utterly starving . . .’

Poppy, wondering how difficult it would be for him to investigate the contents of the larder himself, looked towards Mrs de Vere for guidance.

‘If you wouldn’t mind fixing him something, Poppy,’ said Mrs de Vere. She smiled round at the group. ‘These boys, you know! Always ravenous.’

‘Let him eat properly while he can,’ Mrs Trevin-Jones said wisely. ‘Peter has been existing on nothing but bully beef and hot water for *months*.’

Poppy picked up one of the trays and made for the door. As she did so, Freddie darted forward, pulled open the door and, making a mock bow, ushered her through.

‘And no ox tongue, thank you, Poppy,’ he said, his voice following her down the passageway. ‘Just a knuckle of ham and maybe a few slices of roast beef.’

The door closed, but not before she heard one of the ladies asking Freddie what he intended to do for the war. The question was innocent enough, but most of the ladies present had been wondering why the two de Vere boys were still at home. They’d both attended good public schools and Jasper, the elder, had been to Oxford, but neither, as yet, had volunteered to serve his country, despite the fact that they were guaranteed commissions in a prestigious regiment. Both had, in fact, applied for exemption from military service on the grounds that they were needed at home to help manage the de Vere estate.

As Poppy arrived downstairs, Mrs Elkins, the de Veres’ cook, was just hanging up her overcoat. She turned and surveyed Poppy, who was frowning deeply, then said, ‘Oh dear, who’s ruffled your feathers?’

‘Master Freddie!’ Poppy said.

‘Not him again?’

‘He’s so . . . so impudent!’

‘Oh, he’s not that bad,’ Mrs Elkins said, removing her felt hat. ‘It’s the way he’s been raised. They ask and we

provide.' She frowned slightly at Poppy. 'And it doesn't do to talk about any of the family like that, miss.'

'He seems to think we're all here to –'

'That's exactly what we *are* here for,' said Mrs Elkins. 'What else?' There was a jangle from the dining-room bell. 'Now, whoever's that? Would you go, dear?'

'That's him!' Poppy said. 'I bet that's him. He's gone into the dining room.'

'I'll make up a tray,' Mrs Elkins said, and she began to unpack the basket she'd come in with.

The bell rang again.

'Won't be a moment!' Cook trilled, though of course no one upstairs could hear her. The bell rang twice more and she sighed. 'Run up, Poppy, will you? Say I won't be a moment.'

Poppy groaned. 'Can't he just . . .'

Mrs Elkins turned and raised her eyebrows at her. Poppy went.

Entering the large dining room, which was empty except for Freddie standing by the bell pull, Poppy bobbed a curtsy. If only he wasn't quite so good-looking, she thought. If only his hair wasn't so floppy or his eyes such a deep brown . . .

'Yes, sir?'

'I just wanted you to know that I was in here, in the dining room.'

Poppy hesitated, fighting against an inner desire to say that she wasn't entirely daft. She managed another

curtsey – the slightest curtsey possible. ‘Yes, thank you, Master Freddie.’

He smiled. ‘You know, just *Freddie* will do.’

‘Oh. Well.’ Surprised and rather alarmed, Poppy took a step towards the door. ‘Cook is back now, and if you’ll allow me to go down again then we’ll bring you up a tray.’

She would get Molly to do it, she thought, or Mrs Elkins. What with the wink, and then being told she could call him Freddie, she felt all of a dither. Besides, it really wasn’t proper for him to tease her in this way. It was almost as if he was . . . But no, *that* was ridiculous.

Chapter Two

Stanley and Lily Pearson had not intended to call her after a red field flower. Wanting to give their children plain names, they had already decided that if the coming baby was a girl, she would be called Ann. When she arrived after several hours' labour, however, red in the face and screaming, with a few wispy, gingery curls, the midwife said, 'Look at this one – red as a poppy!' and the name had stuck. Her earlier carrotty hair had softened over the years to a gentle pink-blond, but Poppy still had the complexion of a redhead, with fine, almost translucent skin and green eyes. She was born just a year before Billy, and then two further girls had come into the family, Jane and Mary, then another boy, who died after a few weeks.

There were four de Vere children also. Mrs de Vere liked things orderly and considered it a fine achievement to have produced two children of each sex: the girls first, then the boys, with an almost exact two-year gap between

each of them. The girls, Bonita and Susannah de Vere – long-haired and, at that time, rather insipid – had come out in London society at sixteen, had had a photographic portrait in *Country Life* and attended Queen Charlotte's Ball. Here they and other pretty, well-bred girls had sashayed about in white gowns, hoping to bump into eligible young men and be proposed to. Just as tradition dictated, they had curtseyed to a huge white birthday cake, danced every dance, fallen in love and, quite soon after, been married. Bonita's husband was titled, but Susannah's was rich, and each girl considered herself the luckier. They had done very little with their days until war had been declared, but now Bonita was working as a recruiter, undertaking clerical work at her local town hall for the boys who wanted to join up. Susannah, her husband's farm having lost a dozen workers to the war, had helped form a group of young women into the beginnings of the Women's Land Army to ensure there were enough workers to bring in the harvest. Both girls found work outside the home surprisingly invigorating and were no longer insipid.

All the de Veres were back at Airey House for Christmas 1914, though Mrs de Vere had deliberately played down the festive table and it was not, as in previous years, groaning under the weight of stuffed goose and capon, fruit trifles and crème caramels. Rationing had not yet been introduced, but Poppy and everyone else knew that to pile a dining table with luxury foods was not appropriate during wartime. Thus the Christmas

tree in the hall (which came from the estate) was simply hung with homemade crêpe-paper flowers and some little wooden robins which Freddie had carved. Instead of rich plum puddings for the festive period, Mrs Elkins had made cakes from leftover bread and soups which didn't taste of very much. Everyone ate up without fuss, feeling that by doing so they were somehow aiding the war effort.

On the morning of 26th December, the de Veres' servants were summoned into the blue drawing room to receive their Christmas boxes and take a small glass of sherry with the family. The gifts were always the same: male servants received a half bottle of whisky, female staff a pair of leather gloves. There were fewer staff this year as Mrs Reid the housekeeper had gone to be a bus conductor, several young valets had joined the army and two of the female house servants had gone to work in a munitions factory. The thought of life outside the de Vere household, of becoming independent whilst helping the fight in some small way, was becoming more and more attractive to all the servants, especially as it now seemed that the war was not going to end anytime soon.

Mrs de Vere spoke about the difficulties and shortages the family had faced in the past months and, handing the staff their gifts, thanked them for their loyalty and said that, whether peace or war prevailed, the family trusted they could rely on them in the coming year.

The servants made murmurs of assent, finished their sherry and turned to file out, at which point Jasper

de Vere got to his feet and raised his hand to halt them. 'One moment, if you please.'

Everyone stopped.

He gestured around the room. 'There's something I wish to say not only to my parents and family, but to you all . . .'

Poppy knew what was coming before he said it, merely from the proud tone he used.

'I have today heard from the War Office that they have been good enough to offer me a commission in the Royal Engineers. Mother, Father, I am to serve my country as a second lieutenant in the British Army.'

'Oh!' Mrs de Vere flushed pink. 'Oh, my darling!'

Mr de Vere moved to slap his son on the shoulder. 'Jolly good show,' he said. 'I'd go myself if they'd have me!'

The servants began clapping. Poppy noticed that the only one who didn't look frightfully pleased about it all was Freddie. This was not, she quickly realised, because he was going to miss his brother, but because it made him, still at home carving robins when his country was crying out for recruits, look rather pathetic. However, he would have an even better excuse for not going to war now, as the only son left to help his father on the estate.

Poppy, staring at him and thinking about his life, was startled when Freddie turned and looked directly at her. There was a certain look on his face and afterwards she tried to put a name to what sort of a look it had been: vulnerable, enquiring . . . and somehow *interested*. She

couldn't exactly explain *how* he'd looked, but it was not the usual sort of look between a de Vere and a parlour-maid. Her cheeks went pink and, looking away, she pretended to study her new gloves. How had that happened, she wondered. How had he gone from being merely the younger de Vere boy to someone who could quicken her heart?

The applause from the servants died down and, before they could move off again, Mr de Vere rose to his feet. 'This seems an opportune time to pass on an item of news about the war,' he said. 'In the *Telegraph* this morning there was a report of a Christmas truce on the front line.'

'Oh, how marvellous!' cried Mrs de Vere.

'Apparently,' continued her husband, 'yesterday – Christmas morning – our Tommies and the German soldiers called greetings to each other, then ventured out of their trenches into no-man's-land to exchange food and souvenirs. It's said that they played games of football, England against Germany – bartered cigarettes and shook hands for a happy new year.'

'There!' said Freddie. 'Perhaps it's true what some people are saying: that the war isn't so serious and soon everyone will be home again.'

'I fear it *is* serious,' said his brother, a trace of reproof in his tone. 'Hundreds have already been killed at Marne.'

'Yes, of course, dear,' said Mrs de Vere, as if sensing a little tension between her two boys. 'I'm very much afraid that they have.'

‘At any rate, the generals didn’t approve of the cease-fire,’ said Jasper. ‘Any fraternisation between Tommy and Fritz is frowned upon.’

‘Quite,’ said Mr de Vere, who’d had several glasses of port wine. ‘They think that if the lads get too friendly they won’t be so keen to knock the blasted bejesus out of each other!’

At this Mrs de Vere raised her eyebrows at her husband. Everyone fell silent and the servants finally left the room.

A group of guests had been invited for afternoon tea on New Year’s Day. There had been much discussion between Cook and Mrs de Vere on what, exactly, this tea should consist of. The latter wanted to strike the right note: mindful of the war, but not too frugal with the iced fancies in case she was deemed as lacking in hospitality.

At four o’clock, going into the drawing room bearing the best silver teapot, Poppy was all-over anxious to see one particular person, for a Miss Philippa Cardew and her family were amongst the guests. This Miss Cardew – so rumours below stairs had it – was in line to marry Master Freddie. (‘Money marrying money,’ Mrs Elkins told Poppy. ‘No love involved – you mark my words – just land and country houses.’)

Setting down the tea tray on the polished table, Poppy took in the visitors at a glance and knew immediately

which one was Miss Cardew, for she was the only female of the right age and, besides, was terribly attractive and stylish, with bobbed hair which fell straight and shiny to her jaw in the new fashion. She was wearing a bias-cut dress in bright emerald silk with a full pink rose pinned at the neckline, and had matching pink satin boots with a row of buttons running up the sides.

Poppy was somewhat taken aback. Just an alliance of land and country houses, Mrs Elkins had said, and Poppy had somehow imagined Miss Cardew as a solid, frumpy country girl, with bird's-nest hair and thick knitted stockings. She hadn't prepared herself for the possibility of beauty.

The likelihood of Freddie and Miss Cardew becoming engaged was discussed over the servants' tea break, but Poppy, despite being full of thoughts on the matter, did not volunteer any opinion either way.

At five o'clock she was delighted to have her mood lifted when Cook remembered that a letter for her had been delivered by second post. It was from Miss Luttrell, her old English teacher.

*The Pantiles,
Mayfield, Herts*

31st December 1914

*My dear Poppy,
Thank you for your Christmas card. I was pleased to
hear of your doings and know that you and your family*

are all well. I still occasionally see your mother when I am popping in and out of the village shops and we always exchange the latest news. News about you, I mean!

Poppy, as you know, I was very disappointed that you could not go on to take a higher qualification at college, but I have recently heard of an exciting and fulfilling opportunity that I think would be perfect for you – and would also offer training of practical use after the war. I know you are content at the de Veres', but I long to see you doing something which would use your intelligence and really stretch you. I am also of the opinion that as many of us as possible should be helping the war effort. There! Have I aroused your curiosity?

I know you have very little spare time but wondered if you would be able to meet me on your next day off. I am about to leave Mayfield for some weeks to stay with my sister in Kensington, and thought that a meal in London would be a treat for both of us. There is a Lyons Corner House in the Strand, opposite Charing Cross station – perhaps you could meet me there?

If you are interested in hearing what I have to say to you, please do drop me a line with a suggested date. In the meantime, allow me to wish you the compliments of the season.
Yours truly,

Enid Luttrell

‘Ooh, you’ve got a letter!’ Molly said, trying to look over her shoulder. ‘Who’s it from? Is it a *love* letter?’

‘No, of course not! It’s actually from my old English teacher,’ Poppy explained. ‘She’s retired now, but we still keep in touch – she’s a dear old stick.’

‘But what does she want?’

Poppy smiled. ‘To stand me dinner! Lyons Corner House in the Strand.’

Molly’s eyes widened. ‘Grand!’

‘She’s probably going to give me a lecture on women’s suffrage.’ On Molly looking at her blankly, she added, ‘You know, women getting the vote. She was very keen on that before the war started.’

‘Oh well,’ said Molly. ‘It’ll be worth it for the lunch!’

Poppy smiled and nodded, then folded the letter and her new gloves and tucked them both carefully into her apron pocket. She wouldn’t think about Miss Cardew and she wouldn’t think of Freddie. She would think of Miss Luttrell’s letter and the possibility of an exciting and fulfilling opportunity . . .