

June 1952

The old man had been treading couch grass in the field since dawn, halting now and then to hack a nettle stalk with his dull scythe. Sometimes, he'd inspect the heads of flowering weeds and peer back, agonized, towards the house, as though he'd sighted a pernicious species long presumed extinct. Arthur Mayhood watched him from the steps of his back porch. It was the sort of clear, bright morning that made him recognize how close he was to happiness – a wholesome sunlight over Ockham that seemed as thick as tallow, and the verdancy of every acre in his view like something rendered for a postcard. If he looked far enough into the distance, he could forget the dire state of his farm and feel good about himself again, remember what it was that brought him out here in the first place. There was so much to do at Leventree that he'd not anticipated. It had been less than a year, all told, and the house was in good order, but trying to restore the land had broken him, one fruitless day after another. A stubborn part of him used to believe he was invulnerable to the drudge of manual labour: for as long as he still had the use of one good arm, he could manage twice the work of anyone. Well, that streak in him was gone now, too. Lately, he'd resolved to take whatever crumb of help or wisdom anyone could throw at him. The old man was a case in point.

His name was Hollis and he'd shown up in the yard at six a.m., as promised, wearing a large straw sunhat on a string across his back. A glower had set upon his face as he'd considered the condition of the fields a moment, but his feelings

had remained unspoken. In the dawn light, he'd seemed thinner than he had the day before, his complexion rough as grout. He'd said he wouldn't mind a cup of tea himself before they made a start on things – 'Seeing as you've got one on the go already' – so they'd stepped into the kitchen, eyeing one another, for as long as it had taken to drink up. There'd been some discussion of the lovely weather they'd been having, but the topic had run dry.

Hollis had glanced up towards the ceiling. 'Mrs Mayhood a late riser, is she?'

'Not usually,' Arthur had replied.

'Thought I'd say hello while I was here.'

'She's gone to town to fetch a part. How loud's your voice?'

The old man had snickered. 'Saw your tractor out there in the garage. If it were a horse, I'd shoot it.'

'Wish I had the luxury.'

'What's the part she's after?'

'Damned if I know.'

'Just to Leatherhead, she's gone?'

'Yes.'

'Could've put it in the post for you.'

'I think she wants to barter down the price.'

'Well, good for her.'

This had been as much of an exchange as could be wrung from the old man. There was a dourness to him that seemed reflexive, born of wretched luck in days gone by. Civility and candour were the best assurances for men like Hollis – it had been the same with lads in borstal and a fair few of the sergeants in his company – while others favoured toadying and politicking. In Arthur's view, a bit of gruffness in a fella was a sign he wanted to be taken seriously. As they'd gone out to the yard together, he'd suggested that the windbreak was the place to start: 'I think it might be causing us more problems than it's helping.'

The old man had nodded. 'If you say so.' They'd moved off together, heading for the bank of ash trees at the far side of the meadow, but then Hollis had stopped walking. 'There are two ways we can go about this. Either I can tell you what you want to hear or I can tell you what I really think – which one suits you best?'

'The truth is all I need for now.'

'Then stay put here. I'll have a wander on my own.'

There was a time, barely a week ago, when Arthur might've been embarrassed to expose the dearth of progress he had made at Leventree. He didn't like to advertise his limitations, even if he could admit to them. But replenishing the grounds of this old place – just making the land functional again – was going to take more than his reserves of industry and patience. It required native wisdom. Men like Hollis had a vast resource of local knowledge and experience to draw from, inherited from their fathers and grandfathers. It was in their bones and blood. They could gauge the character of a soil by sight and feel. But Arthur had no instinct for this type of work. He'd learned the rudiments from books and tried to put the complicated business into practice. He'd scrutinized the survey map a hundred times, inserted augers to determine depth, variety, but ask him the condition of his soil today – the very thing upon which Leventree relied – and he couldn't give an answer. Florence always said he ought to be more tolerant of his failings and celebrate his talents: 'You're not a farmer, you're an architect. There's not a man round here who knows the right end of a T-square, let alone could run a farm and keep a practice going all at once – you're too hard on yourself.' Still, he couldn't help suspecting there were people back in London who were taking a dim view of him already. Another city exile with delusions he could work the land: the countryside was teeming with them.

Florence had been first to notice he was struggling. Was there anything she couldn't glean from the small shifts in his behaviour, or had he just become transparent? Two, three months ago, he'd been out scything nettles in the north field, more or less where Hollis was hunched over now, and she'd whistled in that way she always did when summoning him in for supper: a spike of noise that sent birds bolting from the hedges. He'd traipsed in and washed the dirt from his fingers, then sat down at the kitchen table, where she'd laid out a spread of Sunday's leftovers and a fresh-baked loaf for him to tear the crust off. Bringing the water jug, she'd said, 'You want to get a proper tool for it, or borrow one. Won't be hard to find if you'd just ask around. It's not the sort of work that you can do without the right equipment.'

The mere mention of the dismal job that he was doing out there in the weeds was injuring, and he'd not taken kindly to her suggestions for improvement. He'd found the old scythe in the hay barn with a box of other ancient implements, none of which he knew the purpose of, or even how to hold correctly. 'It'd go a damn sight quicker if I understood what I was doing,' he'd said. 'Perhaps I'm letting them all seed by cutting them. They'll likely reach our doorstep by next year, you watch.'

'I wish you'd let me help you.'

'You've enough to do. We need that tractor working.'

'I've still got the extras notice for the Proctors to type up.'

'Leave it. I can get to that tonight.'

'As well as their corrections? You're exhausted.'

'One big pot of coffee, I'll be fine. See if you can't get that engine going while I'm at it.'

She'd gone quiet then, busying herself at the range, wiping down the surfaces.

'What is it, Flo?'

'I'm just wondering when I agreed to being the resident

mechanic. We were supposed to share the work. I thought that was the point.'

He'd set his fork down a little abruptly. 'The tractor's a priority and you're the only one who's got the nous to fix it.'

'Yes, but I can still do other things. The letter to the subcontractor – let me do that, surely?'

'Suit yourself.'

She'd gone quiet again. 'I was thinking we could sell the Austin.'

'Don't be daft. We can't be driving to meet clients in the wagon.'

'Why not? We'd get something a bit more modest, spend the difference on the tractor.'

'Your father wouldn't like that very much, God rest him.'

'No, I know, but –' She'd slung the dishcloth into the sink. 'Maybe you could wait until the Savigears arrive? Attack those weeds together?'

'I'm not going to give them that impression.'

'What impression?'

'That I let a pile of weeds defeat me.'

'Well, I don't wish to sound unkind, but they'll be in their sixties by the time you've cleared that field. Sometimes the best thing is to admit you're beaten and seek help. I'm going to put the word out in the village.'

'You bloody well are *not*.'

But his wife knew better than to listen when he got indignant. She'd never been too proud to ask for help, because she rarely needed it – Florence was the most proficient person in his life and also the least interested in other people's judgements. Her face was known to everyone from Ockham to West Horsley, and that was all the currency she needed. One afternoon, while he was hacking at the weeds again, she'd taken it upon herself to go into the village and announce their

problems to the landlord at the Barley Mow. Arthur had begun receiving visitors soon afterwards.

At first there'd been a few well-meaning strangers, asking for a daily rate: strawberry pickers, orchard workers, planters with chapped faces and bruised fingernails – he'd turned them all away. Then his neighbour to the east had rolled into the front yard in a flatbed wagon, honking the horn. He'd had a team of farmhands sitting in the back with a variety of tools, and an expression like a tank commander sizing up a bridge. 'We heard you had a weed problem,' he'd said, scanning the north field. 'That where you want us to begin?'

But Arthur's self-defensiveness had overtaken him; a coldness had spread slowly through his body. 'I think I've got to grips with it now, thank you.'

'Doesn't look that way from where I'm standing. Let us pitch in with you.'

The men had all been staring down at him from the back of the wagon, half-amused, about to jump.

'No,' he'd said. 'Thanks very much, but no.'

His neighbour had climbed out, ensnaring both his thumbs inside his belt loops. 'Seems to me as though you've got a lot of couch grass there that needs uprooting. Thistles, brambles, nettles, all sorts on the verges. That'd take me near enough a fortnight to sort out by myself, and I'm not half as –' He'd paused to find the right articulation. 'As *encumbered* as you are, so . . . Look, the offer stands. Between the six of us, we'll have it weeded out by supper.'

'It's all right, I'll manage.'

'Are you sure? Don't let your pride get in the way.'

But grand gestures of charity, when made like this, were only meant to glorify the giver – that was something Arthur had learned in his youth. 'Sorry to waste your time,' he'd said.

His neighbour had sucked in the air and spat a disc of phlegm

towards the ground. 'Is your wife home? I've known Flo since she was -'

'Florence knows my feelings on the subject.'

'All right, then, we'll leave you to it. But tell Flo we dropped in.'

'Will do.'

He'd guessed that she was somewhere in the house, observing from a window. The four men in the back had turned away, laughing, and his neighbour had thrown up his hands and climbed into the driver's seat. They'd semicircled in the yard and rolled off in a spray of dust.

Later, when he'd tried to justify his actions to his wife, he'd found her strangely muted on the subject. All she'd said was, 'Better get an early start on it tomorrow, then. We've other jobs that you're neglecting.' And so he had. In the cool of dawn, he'd gone out with a scythe and spade to pulverize the beanstalk nettles on the fringes of the fields, some of which had grown above six feet, and he'd razed them all by sunset, dug them out, come in with his cheeks and ears stinging, bubbled with an orange-peel texture, his palm raw with blisters underneath the glove, the whole of his good arm pulsing. It had been a satisfying day, but the worst of it was still ahead. Couch grass was a dogged weed to shift. According to his books, the only certain means of purging it (without the use of chemicals, which he and Florence were opposed to) was to tease it out with a hand fork, one devious white root at a time. The north field was almost three acres.

He'd tried not to wake up in a defeated frame of mind. He'd tried to ignore the aches and pains and rashes. He'd tried to pull his boots on and stride out every morning, steeled, envisioning the north field bare and primed for cultivation by week's end. But the couch grass had conquered him slowly, drained his energy and self-esteem. There were certain tasks

that didn't lend themselves to single-handed men: he'd struggled to get purchase on the fork to prise the roots out, and when he'd finally managed it, they'd broken into fragments, leaving him to forage in the dirt on bended knee. His prosthetic had been useless, slipping, hanging by its straps; a more secure appliance for the job was needed. The muscles all along his back had locked up. His knuckles had begun to seize: they'd swollen to the size of chestnuts. After three days, he'd carved out a channel, running east to west, about the width of a cinema aisle – and he couldn't bear to look in its direction, let alone pick up his fork and carry on again tomorrow.

So, that evening, he'd driven to West Horsley, walked into the Barley Mow, and heard the conversations fade as he came through the doorway. He'd ordered a pint of mild and the landlord had prepared it for him wordlessly, taking his payment and returning his change. Then: 'How're things going at your place? I heard you had some trouble.'

'Nothing that some petrol and a lighter couldn't fix,' he'd answered.

The landlord had winced. 'That bad, eh?'

'At the moment.'

'Well, perhaps you shouldn't be so stubborn. Let folk help you out a bit.'

'You're right, I know. And I appreciate them taking pity on me.' He'd sipped his mild, which tasted watered-down. 'But there's a trick to learning, isn't there? I mean, you can't depend on other people all the time. You've got to put the graft in, work it out alone, even if you get it wrong.' He'd paused then, getting the impression he was being listened to for listening's sake. 'What I'm saying is, if I'm going to fail at something, I like to know exactly why. And now I do.'

'How's that?'

He'd lifted up the baggy sleeve on his right side, patting at

the space where his arm used to be. 'I need to wait till this grows back, you see.'

The landlord's grin had been uncertain. 'Best keep watering it, then.'

'Exactly. One pint at a time.'

He'd seen a lot of dingy public houses, growing up, and never understood the fuss that people made about them; but sitting there at the bright counter with his glass of Truman's, speaking his mind amid the rumbling conversations, he'd felt somewhat consoled. The landlord had returned to the back pages of his *Advertiser*, browsing the classifieds with one lens of his spectacles held up to the print; he'd had a pencil viced inside the hinges of his jaw and, now and then, Arthur could hear the shucking noise of him inhaling his own drool. At some point, years ago, this man had been a patient of Flo's father. It was strange to think that every filling in that mouth – and likely everybody else's in the building – had a faint connection to his wife. As a child, she used to help her mother mix the mercury amalgam. There were people in these parts who still canted their heads when they addressed her, lightening their voices, as though she was that kindly little girl with plaits who'd sat at the reception desk in summer holidays. But Arthur had no such associations. Everyone he knew when he was young was either dead or far away or out of touch.

He'd been counting out his pennies for another pint when a voice had carried to him from along the bar: 'You must be that architect I've heard so much about. Doing up that place of Mr Greaves's.' And he'd turned to find a weary-looking fella on a stool, hunched over an ashtray with a mound of fag ends large enough to fill an urn. This old man had smoked his rollie with a pleasing eccentricity, clamping it between his thumb and middle finger like a dart.

'I am. Who's asking?'

'Hollis. Geoffrey Hollis.' The old man had stared back at him, but softly. 'Used to know your in-laws a long time ago.'

'Is that right?'

'Oh yes, he'd a lovely way did Mr Greaves. Always made you comfortable. Until you heard the drill go on.'

Arthur had smiled and signalled to the landlord for another. 'You must know my wife, then, too.'

'Not seen much of her since . . . it would've been a good few years back now. I always liked her. Everybody did.' The old man had stamped out his rollie. 'Are you still looking for a bit of help there on the farm?'

'I am. You offering?'

'Depends on what needs doing.'

'Killing weeds, for starters, but it's good advice I'm after really. Someone who can show me the best way of doing things. There must be tried and tested ways I haven't tried or tested yet.'

'Ah, you're looking for short cuts.'

'No, I promise you, I'm not afraid of the hard work. Most jobs I can manage on my own. But if you read a thousand books on farming, all of them assume you're doing it two-handed. So I'm having a few difficulties.'

'Right, I get you. That's a shame.'

Arthur had fished out a shilling from his pocket, planted it beside the pennies on the counter. This had been the cheeriest he'd felt in weeks. He'd slid his pint along the bar to stand with the old man. 'Thing is, if you're able to help out, I can't afford to pay you. All that I can offer is a trade. Building work, carpentry, plumbing – I'm your man for that. Planning applications, surveys, drawings. Say the word.'

'Sounds fair,' Hollis had answered, 'but I don't have need for anything like that.'

‘Then maybe you know someone else who does? Family, friends, it’s all the same to me.’

‘I’ve got a brother down in Devon, but he hates my guts.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be. I deserve it.’

And he’d been about to turn away when Hollis had come back at him: ‘You haven’t even asked if I’m a farmer. I suppose you must be desperate.’

He’d admired the old man’s leaning gait, his calloused hands, the worked-in quality of his shirt, whose whiteness had become a shade of buttercream. ‘I just presumed. From the way you were talking.’

‘As it happens, I’ve been working farms round here since I was in short trousers. Never managed to save up enough to get a piece of land to call my own – liked the horses and the fights too much, and probably a bit too much of *this* –’ Hollis had lowered his eyes down to his drink, muttering his words into his chest as if he were incanting the Lord’s Prayer. ‘But give me a fair patch of earth and I can get the best out of it.’

‘That’s exactly what I’m looking for. I’ll wash your windows, clean your gutters, anything you like.’

‘No need. I’m only in a caravan. But, tell you what – d’you have running water?’

‘We do.’

‘Is it hot?’

‘If you’re patient.’

‘All right. Let me have a bath round your place every Sunday, we’ll be even.’

‘That’s it?’

‘That’s it.’

Arthur had leaned over for a handshake, but there’d been an awkward meeting of their fingers – the rules of modern civilization were unfavourable to lefties.

‘Can’t promise you that I’ll work miracles, but I’m not short of good ideas.’ With this, the old man had gathered his cardigan, his tobacco pouch, his keys. ‘Tomorrow morning do?’

‘Yes. Perfect.’

They’d shaken hands again with more assurance.

‘I’ll be over nice and early. Sun’s up around six-ish.’

If a measure of good people is how true they are to what they promise, Geoffrey Hollis didn’t disappoint. His arrival in the yard had been so spiriting that Arthur found himself revisiting the numbers in his head: was there not some way that he could budget for the old man’s expertise? What position could they offer him? Caretaker? Agrarian consultant? *Farm supervisor*. Perhaps a day a week on basic wages to begin with? Once the next cheque from the Proctors cleared, he could section off a portion of the funds – it’d be worth it in the long run.

The sun was slanting down now on the old man’s giant straw hat. He was out there in the north field with the scythe across one shoulder, going about his quiet survey of the land, unhurried. As he approached the fringe of grass that spilled into the yard, he crouched to dig his hands into the soil again, holding the dry earth up to his nose as if to breathe in its bouquet, then tossing it aside. The more that Arthur watched him, the more relieved he felt. Not just because he’d found someone who knew what he was doing with his land, at last, but because its problems were no longer his to bear alone. There was even an uplifting tune the old man hummed as he strolled back towards the house – a repetitious melody like something from a hurdy-gurdy – and it reminded Arthur of those perfect afternoons he’d spent with Flo on Southport pier when they’d been courting.

He didn’t get up from his seat on the back porch, but let Hollis approach him, humming, until he came to rest at the foot of the steps, leaning on the pilaster. He couldn’t see the old man’s

eyes beneath the brim of his enormous hat, and couldn't gauge much from the straightness of his mouth as he went on with his hurdy-gurdy tune.

'Well, come on, what's the verdict?' Arthur asked. 'Do I have to torch the place, or what?'

Hollis lifted a tobacco pouch from his back pocket. 'It's not half as bad as I expected. Not the best, but we can save it.'

'Are you sure?'

The old man pursed his lips. 'Yup, we can bring this back to life in no time.' He was curling a cigarette paper now in his dry-looking fingers, stuffing it with pinches of Old Holborn. 'Your soil's in fairly decent nick, considering. You've got a clay loam, but it's not too heavy – we can spread some sand to lighten it, plough in some manure if need be. Main thing is, it's nice and black – you've got no drainage problems I can see.' He licked the paper's edge and sealed it with his thumb. 'Wouldn't mind a glass of water, if you'd be so kind.'

Arthur stepped inside to fetch it. When he came back out, the old man was smoking peacefully, sitting on the top step with his hat off. 'Here.'

'Thank you.' Hollis gulped down the entire glass in one. 'Dry mouth all the time, these days. I think there's something wrong with me.'

'Maybe you should knock those on the head.' Arthur gestured at his rollie. 'I gave them up a while ago. Wasn't easy, but I got my breath back.'

'No chance. Got me through a lot, these things.'

'You must've seen a bit of action in your time.'

'I have indeed.' The old man picked a fleck of loose tobacco off his tongue. 'Langemark, for all the good it did me. Where'd they ship *you* off to?'

'North Africa, at first. Then France and Belgium. And a bit of Holland.'

‘Quite a picnic, that.’

‘For all the good it did me.’

The old man nodded gravely. ‘Holland’s where you lost the arm, is it?’

‘I got off lightly, too.’

‘I know the feeling. Where’d it happen?’

‘In a town called Ravenstein.’ He could see that Hollis wanted more, so he surrendered the whole story, thinking it might help his cause. ‘I was in the Sappers. Our platoon was taking down a bridge. Thick snow and ice for miles. None of us had any feeling in our fingers and our coats were worse than useless. We were shifting iron transoms, unloading them in six-man teams. Suddenly, I think, *My God, we’re taking fire*, because the fella up ahead drops to the ground as though a sniper’s had him. Micky Davis was his name. We called him Plank. He’d only been with us a month or two, since we came back through Normandy. Well, Plank had gone and lost his footing in the snow. And once he let go of the transom, so did everyone. Except for me. They reckoned I was lucky it was just my arm got trapped.’

‘Still, it must’ve hurt like billy-o.’

‘You can’t imagine. Anyway, I try not to relive it, if I can. It catches up with me sometimes and I get moody. But not often. I prefer to keep my eyes on the horizon.’

‘That’s the way. No looking back. You can’t dwell or it kills you.’

He hadn’t known the old man long enough to start inquiring, but he got the sense – from nothing really, just the downcast tone in which he spoke sometimes – that Hollis’s regrets outweighed his satisfactions. Here was a man who’d given up most of his days on earth to tending it, making it pay dividends for someone else, and Arthur didn’t want to be the next one to exploit him.

'All right, then. My soil is fine – that's welcome news,' he said, sitting in the shade beside him. 'What about the weeds?'

'They're about the worst I've seen, but we'll get rid of them. I'm afraid the old ways are the only ways I know: a bit of mowing and a lot of pulling. We could try smothering them for a while with tar paper, see if it softens the roots. It all depends how fast you need the money.'

'From the crops, you mean?'

The old man looked at him. 'Didn't notice any livestock. Just your hens.'

'Oh, we're not trying to make a profit here. It's all a matter of subsistence.'

'Let me check I've got this right,' said Hollis. 'You're not *selling* what you grow?'

'Not unless we have a surplus. Even then, we'll donate what we can to folk who need it.'

'Well, what kind of farm is this supposed to be?' The old man clutched the rail and pulled himself up to his feet. 'I'm not going to put my back out for a hobby. There's folk who'd give their – well, they'd *kill* to have a bit of land like this to make a living from.' He handed back his empty glass. 'I'll have to think about it.'

'It's not a hobby, I assure you. It's going to be our livelihood. Mine and Flo's. It's just a little different from the ways you might be used to.' Arthur had to follow him into the yard. 'Let me walk you to the gate. If I can't convince you by the time we reach the road, then I won't bother you again. And you can still have your hot bath here every Sunday, no matter what's decided.'

At the pace the old man was walking off, his hat was dragging on its string, biting his throat. It was only when his lighter and tobacco pouch slipped out of his back pocket that he stopped at all, noticing the clatter on the gravel. He picked up

his belongings with a flash of his long arm, then stood up, saying, 'Let me tell you something, Mr Mayhood. You had best consider what you plan to do with all this space. Because there's too much here for you to manage on your own and not enough for you to take for granted.' He dusted off the pouch, blew on his lighter and inspected it for scratches. 'You seem a decent bloke to me – and I mean that – but you can't go about the job of farming like you go about the job of being an architect. The ground will eat you up.'

'I understand that.'

'No, see, I don't think you *do*. Not yet.'

Arthur grinned at him. 'Farm supervisor.'

'Excuse me?'

'That's what your title's going to be. And we're going to discuss a proper wage for you. As soon as I get payment from a few things I've been doing.'

Hollis crossed his arms. 'You've a peculiar way of going about things, you know that?'

'So I've heard.' He didn't know what sort of explanation would be satisfactory – there was a sudden coolness to the old man's attitude that was approaching disapproval. A bit of forthrightness was called for now. 'You've got to understand, we've risked an awful lot to move our practice here, and that's what this place is: a practice, not a farm. We're trying to make a little Taliesin here in Ockham, which I don't expect will mean that much to you. But it's everything to us. This farm, sustaining it – that's central to our cause. We need our land to function just as well as what goes on inside the draughting room. And there isn't much that I don't know about designing buildings, but when it comes to farming, well – you've seen, you *know*. I'm struggling to cope.' An early heat was settling around them. He felt the perspiration at his temples. It was going to be another glorious June day.

‘You’re not as hopeless as a few I’ve seen,’ the old man said. ‘You’ve got the guts for it, I’ll give you that.’ He heaved out a sigh, slipped the Old Holborn into his back pocket, tucked the lighter in his front. ‘Farm supervisor, eh?’

‘Job’s yours, if you want it.’

It was then, as Hollis was deliberating on his offer in the shadows of the elms, that he caught sight of someone coming up the track from the direction of the road and said, ‘You know this fella?’

‘Who?’

Hollis jabbed a thumb into the distance. ‘He’s left your gate wide open.’

The figure coming up the track was heavysset and bearded. One side of his shirt was hanging free, leaving a swatch of pale flab exposed above the belt-line. There was a composure to the way he walked, with both hands tucked behind his back, but his shoulders had a forward lean that gave him a mean air, a look of shiftlessness – qualities that Arthur didn’t want around him or his farm. ‘He’s probably just asking after work. There’s been a load of people coming by of late. I’ll tell him to move on. Won’t take a minute.’

‘If he’s short of money,’ Hollis said, ‘his belly’s yet to hear of it.’

‘Well, let’s give him a chance.’ Arthur shielded his eyes and called along the track, ‘Hello there, fella. Can I help you?’

The man didn’t respond until he’d taken ten or twelve more strides towards them. There was a sweaty shine about his forehead, a blotchy dampness to his shirt around the armpits. ‘I was passing by,’ the stranger said, ‘and got to wondering about your place, that’s all.’ His accent wasn’t local and his tone was slightly hostile. ‘What is it that you do here? I can’t tell.’

‘Farming,’ Arthur told him. ‘We’re not hiring at the moment, if that’s what you’re after.’

Hollis cleared his throat.

The stranger stood there, scratching at the little continent of hair remaining at the centre of his scalp. 'Well, I suppose that's that, then,' he said. 'Pardon the intrusion.'

'It's no trouble. Close the gate on your way out, please.'

The man's face tensed with something like antipathy. 'It was open when I got here,' he said, 'but I'll shut it. You can watch me and make sure.' He slung a heavy look at them and turned on his heels.

They let him traipse away along the gravel.

'You meet all sorts in this game,' Hollis said. 'A lot of them are kind and decent, and the rest are more like him.'

The stranger reached the gate and, with a sham dispassion, pulled it closed. He was gone at last, but Arthur could still see his mammoth bootprints in the dirt. There was a chill about the air now in the shaded driveway and he was thirsting for another cup of tea. He couldn't keep from staring down the track, recalling how the stranger's shape had passed along it like a tram he'd missed. If it hadn't been for Hollis slapping a big hand upon his shoulder, saying, 'I'd better take you up on it, your offer, seeing as beggars can't be choosers,' he might've stayed there until dusk. 'First things first, I recommend we plough that field as soon as we've dug out those weeds,' the old man barrelled on, 'then sow it with a cover crop. Rye'd be the best bet. Plough that when it comes through, harrow it. Sow rapeseed next and turn that under, too. And after . . .' They began to walk back to the house again instinctively: no pledges made, no contract, just a mutual direction.

A shot to test the camera, out of focus. The shadow of a hand moves to the lens. The picture tightens. All the grey tones in the foreground deepen. And there's Florence on the doorstep, hands on hips. In overalls. A scarf tied in her hair. She's mouthing to the camera. 'No, no. Arthur. No.' A playful cut-throat gesture. 'Stop it! Stop!' She hides her face behind the crossbones of her arms. The camera lingers on her till she turns away. It pans up slowly, to the transom window. The picture lurches with a sudden zoom. Brickwork now and mossy pointing. A little downward shift. And there's the fancy plaque. Its painted letters judder in the frame and settle. LEVENTREE. Another awkward zoom out. Camera shake. A momentary sky. A flash of knee. A pair of bootcaps. Gravel. Blurry darkness. Keep it.

August 1952

The Savigears had already alighted and were waiting for her at the bright end of the platform. Their supervising officer had followed her instructions to the letter, dispatching them on the mid-morning train from Waterloo and providing a few pennies for the phone at Horsley station. Around eleven, the call had come – a deep and cheerless voice said, ‘Morning, Mrs Mayhood. It’s Joyce Savigear. I was told to ring when we arrived?’ – and this first conversation, brief and stilted as it was, had felt momentous. They weren’t just faces in a file any longer, or names she raised in speculation. It was as though, with everything she uttered on the phone that morning, she was going over pencil lines of them in ink.

She’d changed out of her overalls and climbed into the car without a word to Arthur, who was so deep in the field with Mr Hollis, spreading bucketloads of sand, that all her whistling went unheard. In any case, it was her husband who’d forewarned her not to make a special fuss of their arrival. He’d decided they should walk to Leventree or take the bus – ‘It’ll be a decent test of their initiative’ – and it was only after several days of needling him with counter-arguments that he’d relented: ‘Pick them up, if that’s what you think’s best, but go without me. Come and find me when they’re ready to start work.’

The drive from Ockham was a short one, but she hurried all the way, because she didn’t want them to mistake her lateness for indifference – no one liked to be an afterthought. She remembered getting fidgety at Horsley station as a girl, watching all the strangers disembarking and diffusing while her

mother held her hand, moaning every time a car came up the hill without her father in it. A momentary anxiety like this could turn into a lifetime of resentment if you let it and she didn't want that for the Savigears. Besides, there was a certain thrill in breaching the speed limit in the Austin, bringing it to that sweet point above forty where it seemed to hover in mid-air. The car park was quite empty so she rolled up right outside the station house.

As soon as she saw them looming on the sunny platform, she realized how much she'd misjudged them. The Savigears were not the scrawny pair she was expecting. Standing half a yard from one another in the fug of their own cigarettes, they had the restful attitude of two navvies on a lunch break. The eldest, Joyce, had shoulders broad enough for work unloading cargo at the docks, a frame so tall she could've looked a draught horse in the eyes. The youngest, Charles, was shorter by at least a foot, but he was hard-faced, compact, and he seemed to wear his shirt a size too small. He was not exactly handsome in the sense that he could grace the cover of a magazine – there was just a certain sangfroid to him, a ruminating quality about his eyes that she felt uncomfortable observing. He had the same determined look she'd noticed in her husband at that age: eighteen and ready to tear down the world.

In January, she and Arthur had received a set of photographs from the borstal records showing two glum adolescents with a spread of pimples; they'd spent hours gazing at these images, tacked them to the pinboard in the draughting room where they couldn't fail to stop and look each time they passed into the hall. It was hard to reconcile those young delinquents with the pair she saw before her now.

She assumed their supervising officer had dressed them up to look like architects. Joyce had on a long grey skirt and stockings, a white blouse with a button collar, which seemed to bother her

especially – she kept circling the inner edge of it with one hooked finger. Charles was in a dark blue poplin suit, the jacket slung over his shoulder now, the heat being so cloying; he was clean-shaven and a fair bit pink around the neck, with short hair combed and brilliantined; even his shoes were shined.

As she came along the platform, neither one took notice. Charles just peered into the distance, toeing the flank of his suitcase; he was chuntering about something that he must've viewed out of the window on the train, while his sister stood by, listening. 'Yeah, but these were more like speakers from a record player,' he was saying, 'and they were strapped on to the roof somehow with rope about this thick, going down to the front bumper. Don't know how they stayed on, mind you, but it worked. And that was just the start of it, because –'

She let him trail off, striding up to introduce herself. 'Hello there, you two. I'm Florence Mayhood. Wonderful to meet you both at last. I'm sorry to've kept you waiting.'

'Hello, Mrs Mayhood,' Joyce said, dropping her cigarette, trampling it.

'Hello, Mrs Mayhood,' Charles said, doing the same. 'Good to meet you too.'

'Please – Florence will do fine. I'm not your landlady. Well, not officially.'

'All right.' Joyce simpered at her brother, huffing smoke out of her nostrils. 'You're in charge.'

'I am for now.'

'In that case, you can call me Joy. He goes by Charlie.'

'I'll make a note of it,' she said, tapping the plate of her forehead. 'Welcome to our little patch of nowhere. You must've brought the sunshine with you – absolutely chucked it down last night.' It was only when she offered them her hand that she spotted its condition: engine oil encrusted so deep underneath the fingernails she'd have to take a scrubbing brush and Epsom

salts to them when she got back. 'Excuse the state of me. I was working on the tractor when you rang, but – well, let's just say it won't be moving for a while.'

'What's up with it?' Joyce said, gripping her hand indelicately.

'Transmission.'

'Oh. That's going to cost you.'

'Maybe so.' She smiled back at the pair of them. 'I haven't given up yet.'

Charlie straightened out his posture, shook her hand. 'They had me doing motor mechanics all last year at Huntercombe. If you want, I'll take a look at it. Tractors can't be that much different.'

'Better take him up on that,' Joyce said, amused at something. 'He's always had a knack for getting engines running, even when he's not supposed to.'

'Leave it out,' said Charlie, and for a short time afterwards, his confidence appeared to drain. He went back to kicking his suitcase, eyeing the tracks.

'Well, I'd appreciate you pitching in,' she told them. 'Mr Mayhood has a lot of talents, but he's no use in a garage.'

Joyce sniffed. 'Must be hard in his condition.'

'Oh, he's never let that set him back. It's just he's never had much interest in machines.' She gestured to their meagre luggage: two brown cases, shabby at the edges, no doubt issued to them on their discharge. 'Are these your only bags?'

They nodded.

'Good. The car's just at the front. Let's go.'

She turned and led the way. Above the iron footbridge, the sun was giving off its white and formless shimmer, permeating like a headache; she could feel one brewing. Their footsteps clomped and scraped behind her.

'What about you, miss?' Charlie's voice rang out, but she didn't stop or turn; and even though the honorific made her

feel like a schoolteacher, she let it go unchecked. It would do no good to keep instructing them to use her given name. They would need to think her worthy of that trust. Give it time and it would happen. 'Where'd you learn to fix an engine?'

'I took classes when the war was on,' she answered, pushing through the station door and holding it ajar. 'But they might've been a waste of time.'

'Ha ha.' Joyce had a chugging, low-pitched laugh that was quite endearing.

'We had a fella teaching us who'd let us take his motorbike apart, and –'

'Give it a rest, will you, mouse?' Joyce said. 'Let the lady have some peace.' And, taking the weight of the door, she added, 'Sorry about him. He's not always such a moaner.'

'I'm not moaning. I'm just making conversation.'

'He doesn't realize when he's doing it.'

'Because I'm not doing it.'

'You see? *Moaning.*'

Florence waited for the two of them to settle down. Perhaps they were a little less mature than she'd considered. 'No need to apologize,' she said. 'I don't like to talk about myself too much, that's all – and you'll find Mr Mayhood is the same. In fact, he's worse.'

They passed through the cool of the station. Behind the kiosk window, the attendant – whom she didn't know but dimly recognized – leered when she wished him a good morning. 'You too, Mrs Mayhood, you *too*,' he called back. The mill of rumours in these parts required no grist to thrive. There were too many people round here with too many small-minded preoccupations and she was long past caring about any of them. Still, she couldn't help but think it must've been the ripest gossip of his working week, to see a married woman

strolling through his station with two handsome youngsters off the London train.

When they reached the car, the Savigears were noticeably quiet and she couldn't tell if they were looking at the Austin with approval or contempt. They stowed their luggage in the back and Charlie sat beside the pile, deferring to his sister's greater size without a second thought. Once the key was turned in the ignition and the engine stirred, Joyce said, 'Lovely motor, this.'

'Well, it's reliable enough.'

'They're built to last, these,' Charlie chimed in from behind. 'Heavy, mind you, but I bet they go a fair old whack.'

She cleared her throat. 'I'm sure you're right.'

'We're not used to being driven round like royalty,' Joyce said. 'We could've walked it, easy.'

Florence jounced the gearstick into reverse. 'I'm not used to having passengers. But it's only so that you can get acquainted with the route. Next time, you can hoof it.'

'Suits us.'

On the way back home, she kept to the speed limit, while the Savigears fell into another silence, taking in the scenery. It seemed that they were quite content to orient themselves without her saying anything, so she spared them the guided tour that she normally conferred on guests – they didn't get too many visitors, apart from her old friends from architecture school in Liverpool, dear Fred Cort and his array of sweethearts, and the more capricious clients who came to check they hadn't lost their minds by setting up a practice so far from the city. She found it a refreshing change to drive without the burden of small talk and local history.

They dipped under the railway arch and skirted by the fields along the narrow Ockham Road, with sunshine flickering behind the trees and a pleasing, intermittent shade from every