

Hot Pies on the Tram Car

Sheila Newberry was born in Suffolk and spent a lot of time there both before and during the war. She wrote her first 'book' before she was ten – all sixty pages of it – in purple ink. Her family has certainly been her inspiration and she has been published most of her adult life. She spent forty years living in Kent with her husband John on a smallholding, and has nine children and twenty-two lively grandchildren. They retired back to Suffolk where Sheila still lives today.

Also by Sheila Newberry

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Sheila
Newberry

Hot Pies
on the
Tram Car

ZAFFRE



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*Dedicated to the fond memory of my constant writing
companion, a little dog called Lizzie.
1994–2005*



PART ONE

London, 1925



ONE

THE first tram car of the day came to a grinding halt at Paradise Corner. The huddle of folk under the flaring streetlamp parted ranks and climbed thankfully aboard. A young woman in a tightly belted mackintosh arrived at the last moment just as the bell clanged, shaking the raindrops from her umbrella, crying, 'Wait for me!' The conductor clipped another tuppenny ticket. It would be dark again when she journeyed home after long hours treadling a sewing machine. It was March, but not yet spring in suburbia.

A light was showing upstairs in No. 1 Paradise Buildings, a solid, red-brick Victorian terrace of small businesses with accommodation above. The pie shop at street level still had the blinds down, and the grille was bolted across the adjacent basement entrance.

Josefina gave a final rub at the condensation on the sash window, relishing the squeak her fingers made. She let the curtain fall back into place. 'Rose Marie's gone,' she reported to Florence, returning to her chair by the stove.



‘Got wet even in that brief dash across the pavement, I suppose,’ Florence observed, moving the big saucepan off the heat, before adding flour to water bubbling with melted lard. She beat the mixture into a glossy ball, then scooped it out on to the floured preparation table. The kitchen was spotless; Florence too was well scrubbed, shrouded in a white apron, her brown hair strained back off her flushed face and concealed under a mob cap. Now, she flattened nuggets of the pastry between her palms and pressed them round the bottle-shaped beech-wood moulds. These would be filled with the chopped cooked pork then topped with circles of pastry, which she crimped with finger and thumb, before the batches went in the oven. The mutton tartlets would be made next, to be baked in the shop oven as required, and sold piping hot.

Josefina wore a pinafore over her school clothes, despite the early hour. On her first morning at Florence’s, two years ago, she’d ventured into the big kitchen full of cooking aromas; seen the pestle-and-mortar bowl where herbs, grown in pots on the windowsill, were ground, and the bowl of hard-boiled eggs which later she’d learn to tap and peel, only to be despatched back to her bedroom with the stern words: ‘No sitting around in your night attire! It’s unhygienic!’

She’d wept then, because she’d been used to creeping into her mother’s side of the bed in the mornings, snuggling up when Stella whispered, ‘Go back to sleep, darling, there’s a good girl.’ Sometimes they’d stayed in a small hotel, with





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sweet-smelling linen on the beds. More often, they put up in a back-street boarding-house with other theatricals, where there were grease-spotted tablecloths and chipped plates in the dining-room and an overwhelming smell of boiled fish. But the old-style music halls were in decline since the advent of the cinema, and bookings scarce.

Josefina's mother was partnered in her act by her husband, referred to grimly by Florence, her mother's step-sister, as 'that dago'. Jose's smouldering good looks, his expertise with the Spanish guitar, confirmed his ancestry, but he'd been born in the East End of London. Josefina's thick mop of straight black hair, those lustrous dark eyes couldn't be denied: despite her reservations, Florence had insisted he marry Stella six years ago.

I should never have indulged that girl, paying for those singing lessons, Florence often sighed to herself. Stella wouldn't have run off with that wastrel if she'd been apprenticed to a trade like young Rose Marie. Still, Stella does have a lovely voice, a real talent. She might have sung in opera. Her eyes misted over. All she'd wanted was for her to be happy.

But Jose wasn't cut out to be a father. He wanted to take off for Europe with Stella, but not Josefina, then four years old. It was almost time for her to start school, Stella told her sister defensively when they turned up at Florence's unexpectedly; she needed a proper home. Florence could look after her; they promised to keep in close touch and send





money for her keep. Affectionate letters from Stella arrived spasmodically, but not a penny came Florence's way. Not that she worried about that, for Josefina had taken her mother's place as one of Florence's girls.

Now she checked the eggs were cool enough for shell-ing, advising Josefina, 'Put a couple to one side, then you can mash them with butter and make sandwiches for our breakfast. I'll slice the bread for you when I've lined the tins with pastry. The new tenant upstairs is bringing her little girl down to us at a quarter to eight: I said we'd look after her until it's time to go to school. Her mother has to work, she's a widow—'

'What's that, Auntie Florence?' Josefina rolled an egg in her palms.

'Someone whose husband has died.'

'Like you, Auntie?'

'I've never been married, but nevertheless, I've brought a family up, eh?'

'What about Manny, in the shop?' Josefina asked, a trifle too innocently.

'What about him? I'm his boss: that wouldn't do.'

'He must be lonely, living in the basement by himself.'

'He's lucky to have a roof over his head, and a job, on account of him having a gammy leg. He was invalided out of the army during the war. Anyway he's too young for me – he's not yet thirty . . . Florence paused, anticipating what the child would say next.



‘How old are you?’ She dug a knife in the softened butter to spread on the bread.

‘Never you mind, get on with your task.’ But she smiled at her niece.

‘Why are you Mummy’s *sort-of* sister?’

‘Well, my father was well over forty when he met my mother, and she was no spring chicken either – you work that one out for yourself! So I was an only child, until my father was widowed and by that time he’d got used to having a woman around, so he married Stella’s mother, whose husband had also died. I was fourteen and Stella was only five, but I was really pleased to have a sister. Then, later, Rose Marie came along. I had to care for both girls, after Stella’s mother died of pneumonia. Satisfied?’

‘Did your father die of – what was it you said? – too?’

‘He died of old age – that’s as it should be – some time after that. Then I had to run the shop as well as make all the pies. That’s when I took on Manny.’ Florence put out three plates, cut the sandwiches into quarters. ‘The upstairs child may be hungry . . .’

‘Why does it say, W. Flinders & Son, under Paradise Pies on the shop, Auntie? We’re all daughters.’

Florence poured the tea, passed a cup to her niece. ‘The son was my father, silly. His father set him up here. Before my time. Eat up. I’ve got pies to fill.’

She was brushing the fluted tops of the pies with beaten egg when there was a tentative knock on the outer door.



Josefina ran to open it. A young woman with shingled fair hair, wearing a shabby coat, stood there, gently pushing her child forward.

‘This is Yvette, and you are Josefina, I know. We are a little early—’

‘Come in,’ Florence called, rinsing her hands at the sink. ‘Have you time for a drop of tea? It’s not long brewed.’

‘Thank you, no. My first day at work – I don’t want to rush.’ She had a slight accent.

French? Florence wondered, though her surname was Bower. This was a cosmopolitan area. ‘See you about two, then,’ she said. ‘Would Yvette like something to eat?’

The child shook her head, compressed her lips mutinously.

‘Thank you, no. She had her breakfast,’ Yvette’s mother said.

‘Then take this for your lunch, my dear. I don’t suppose you had time to prepare anything, did you?’ Florence wrapped the sandwich in a square of greaseproof.

‘I—I was too nervous. . . couldn’t eat a thing then, but thank you, Miss Flinders.’ She put the package in her bag. ‘Goodbye, Yvette. Be good.’ She clattered down the uncarpeted stone steps to the front door.

‘Take Yvette to your bedroom, while I clear up here,’ Florence told Josefina.

Yvette followed her reluctantly, through to the room she shared with Rose Marie. ‘Your whole apartment smells of cooking,’ she said disagreeably. ‘Of *pies*!’





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Josefina looked at her. Yvette was small, pale and skinny, with fuzzy blonde hair which had obviously been curled overnight in rags. She wore skimpy clothes and unsuitable shoes for the time of year, cracked patent leather with thin soles.

‘You need a pie or two to fill you out,’ Josefina returned smartly, ‘or you might get washed down a drain in the rain.’

‘I’ll tell my *maman* you said that!’

‘And I’ll tell my aunty I don’t want you for a friend. I shan’t walk with you to school. Anyway, I don’t s’pose you think the Board school is good enough for you!’

Unexpectedly, Yvette began to cry. ‘You must take me; Miss Flinders promised!’

Josefina’s resentment evaporated instantly. ‘Oh, come on, sit down and I’ll show you my dolls. This one is Carmen, see, she’s dressed for flamenco dancing, because she came from Spain. I’m half-Spanish myself. She’s more an ornament really. This is my baby doll, she belonged to Rose Marie—’

‘Your sister? She’s very pretty. We’ve seen her from our window.’

‘Rose Marie is my aunty too, only she’s too young to call that.’

‘I’ve got a doll that was my *maman*’s, when she was a little girl in France, that makes *me* half French! She brought it with her when she got married. The doll is called Clarice, and she has a wax face and real hair.





You can comb it and curl it. But you have to be careful with her, like your Carmen. Maman says she is very precious.'

'She cost a lot of money, d'you mean?'

'Oh hundreds of pounds!' Yvette could see Josefina was impressed. 'Maman has a real French perfume bottle too - you can spray it on you, puff, puff.' She squeezed an imaginary soft rubber ball. 'But it doesn't smell so good any more.'

'Like the pies!' Josefina performed a somersault on the unmade bed, and ended up giggling, on the pillow. A feather floated down on to her hair.

'How did you do that? Show me!' Yvette commanded.

'Girls, time to leave for school, and for me to open the shop,' Florence called.

Rose Marie had been entrusted with a special repair today, a tear in the layered skirt of a dance dress. She enjoyed hand-sewing, which gave her legs a rest; it made a nice change to leave the busy hum of the machines behind in the main workroom for the quiet room where two middle-aged seamstresses worked.

'All this modern dancing,' one of her companions said after a while, approving her almost invisible stitching. 'Madam must have caught her heel in that. She always brings her little disasters to us. Are you almost finished? She wishes to wear the dress on stage tonight.'





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‘Miss Short’s having a fitting downstairs for a new gown,’ the other seamstress looked up over her wire-framed spectacles. ‘She’ll collect this, in about an hour.’

‘Have we some rhinestones to match these on the bodice?’ Rose Marie asked. She’d had an idea. ‘I could sew two or three on each of these panels, including one to conceal the repair. What d’you think?’ she asked diffidently. She could just picture the effect when the skirt swirled in the dance, and the lights caught the sparkling gems.

‘I think you’re right. If you go on as you are, my dear, I can see you progressing on to design in the years to come.’ She passed the little box of semi-precious stones.

‘Thank you,’ Rose Marie accepted the compliment gracefully. *How* many years to come? she thought. I want to see more of the world outside this dress shop, like Stella. I want to wear dresses like this, only I’d take care of them, and go dancing in the evenings, not back to the pie shop. ‘My sister’s on the stage, too,’ she added, ‘she sings.’

The woman who wore the spectacles removed them, rubbed at a red mark low on her nose. ‘I’m glad you haven’t had your head turned by that, my dear,’ she said.

Lilli Bower had been working industriously all morning, mostly on her knees, sweeping between the tip up seats, dusting down the red plush, picking up the litter from the floor. She thought ruefully that at least she’d learned something from her mother-in-law, how to clean a house.





She'd never picked up so much as a duster in her old home, though when the servants left during the war, she'd helped her mother with the cooking.

Every now and then she looked up at the stage, where the big screen was hidden behind the velvet curtains, imagining them swept aside and the dazzling beam from the projection room in the lofty regions above, wavering, then steadying, as the picture appeared, to the delight of the audience.

The Golden Domes cinema in Camberwell certainly lived up to its name, with wonderful gilding and plaster ornamentation. When the music started, the lights dimmed, you'd be in another world, Lilli thought. She'd love to see the new Lilian Gish picture.

She still had the ladies' room to tidy: the powder bowl to replenish, the mirrors to clean. Another cleaner saw to the foyer, and the manager's office at the front.

Lilli straightened up at last, satisfied that she had done all that was expected of her. The splendour of the Golden Domes reminded her of the château in France where she had spent her youth, before she met her soldier husband at the end of the war, and such was the euphoria after the Armistice, she'd married him, despite her mother's disapproval, and come to England, where their daughter was born. It had been a real culture shock. They shared a back-to-back house in the Midlands with her husband's family, all mill workers. After a big row with his mother one day,





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Lilli had pleaded with her husband to take her away, for them to set up on their own. When he refused, she walked out on him, taking little Yvette. Eventually, she'd ended up in London, having sold her jewellery to help them survive. She was too proud to go home to her own family. This job, menial as it was, meant she could carry on. She was very fortunate to have a kind landlady who'd help with Yvette, and another new friend in the pie shop. It was Manny who'd told her about the vacant flat and the job going at the cinema. She'd have to walk there until she got paid, but life was looking up at last.

Rose Marie was followed by others from the tram car into the pie shop that evening. Manny served her first, wrapping a hot meat and potato pie in a cloth, then she dashed outside to the waiting tram car to give it to the conductor, to keep him going until the end of his shift. Her travelling companions emerged from the shop, dispersing in various directions as the tram departed. Even those lucky enough to be in regular employment appreciated a ready meal, and not having to feed precious pennies to the gas meter.

Manny waited by the shop door as usual to exchange another word or two with Rose Marie. He was a cheerful chap, not very tall but of a stocky build. A wide smile transformed his plain features, despite displaying his uneven teeth.

‘Had a good day, Rose Marie?’





‘Yes. Did you, Manny? Lots of customers?’

He nodded. ‘Hot pies always go down a treat in weather like this.’

‘Well, I’m hoping for something different for my supper! ’Night, Manny.’

He watched as she opened the door next to the shop, then closed it behind her. He listened to the echo of her footsteps as she climbed the stairs.

Manny limped back to welcome in a new customer.

‘Heard your pies are the best,’ the man said.

‘Made in Paradise,’ Manny replied, with a wink.

Rose Marie was not best pleased to discover a newcomer in her bedroom, when she went to get changed. There were two little girls, not one, lolling on the bed, looking at some picture books.

‘Out you go,’ she told Josefina and Yvette. ‘I don’t want to be a peep show!’

‘Come on, Yvette,’ Josefina said. ‘She’s always grumpy when she gets in from work. We’d better lay the table for supper, as you and your mother are eating with us.’

Florence overheard this exchange. She sympathized with Rose Marie, for she could remember the lack of privacy when she was growing up and had to share a room with Stella. She didn’t comment though. She was tired, and still busy cooking.

When Lilli arrived, she sniffed appreciatively. ‘That smells good, Miss Flinders.’





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'Broth and dumplings; rice pudding: Josefina's favourite.'

'I'm afraid my Yvette picks at her food.'

'Well, she'll have to learn to be grateful for what she's given, won't she? 'Specially when times are hard.' Florence had a feeling that she could have two more lame ducks to care for. Still, it was good to be needed.

*

Manny shut the shop at eight o'clock. There was a solitary ham and egg pie left under the glass dome on the marble-topped counter. He speared a pickled onion the size of a billiard ball from the jar and placed it beside the pie. Oh well, a cold supper he thought, but first he must clean up. He fetched the mop and bucket from the back room and began his task. Someone tried the door. He called out, 'Sorry, sold out - we're closed!' He doused the light.

He went down the basement steps and opened his front door. The gas fire would soon warm the living-room. He'd eat the pie, then go along to the pub on the far end of the Paradise row for his usual glass of stout.

The barber's, the butcher's and the tobacconist's shops were all closed. The doctor's rooms above the latter were in darkness. There was a light still showing in the baker's front window, and he observed the bent back of the cleaner, as she moved around the shop. Poor old girl, he thought, no evening off for her. She'll be working again by six tomorrow. Like Florence. I don't suppose *she's* ever seen the inside of the Paradise Pub, had a good laugh and a singsong.





She'd be surprised to hear me render 'The Rose of Tralee', seated at the piano. Some say I bring tears to their eyes. One drink, that's all, and I come over all sentimental for the place where I was born and left as a child. Maybe I sing it for another Rose now - Rose Marie, but I know she's not for me. I could never tell *her* what I've been through; lost my best mate in the war - mustn't think of that. I wouldn't want her to know I sometimes wake in the night, crying out and sweating, the echo of gunfire ringing in my ears.

Florence hung the damp tea-cloths on the airer. Their supper guests had returned upstairs; Josefina was already in bed and hopefully asleep. Florence went into the sitting-room through the folded back double-doors. They only used this room, full of good, but old furniture, in the evenings. The kitchen was the hub of their home.

Rose Marie was curled up on the sofa absorbed in her *Woman's Weekly* magazine. Florence said silently to herself, was I ever that young and full of dreams? Did my hair gleam golden under the overhead light; was my skin that smooth? She's seventeen and I'm thirty-four . . . romance has passed me by.

She yawned. Soon be time to make the cocoa. But first she'd write a letter to Stella in Barcelona to tell her that Josefina had a new friend . . .



TWO

A Sunday morning in April; Florence turned sizzling bacon rashers in the pan and drank her second cup of tea of the day. She'd enjoyed her Sabbath soak, as she referred to it, before the girls were awake. She'd risen at six to light the copper alongside the deep bath, with mahogany surround. She had to siphon the water out, but it was a great improvement on the jug filling of years gone by. She used a knob of soda to soften the water rather than bath salts, but she did indulge herself with a tablet of Pears soap.

Now, she looked younger and more relaxed than all week, in a button-through print frock and hand-knitted cable-stitch cardigan, with her hair still damp and curling at the ends, loose round her face. She'd recently given in to Rose Marie's cajoling and had her hair bobbed, even if she'd insisted that the local barber would do.

A polite tapping on the door, then Manny came in. She'd told him bluntly when he was first working for her she knew he existed on left-over pies all week, and that on Sundays he must eat with the family. The table was ready



laid, so he sat down, so as not to get under her feet, watching as she cracked the eggs into the bacon fat and spooned a little over the yolks, the way they both preferred them. After a while, he judged she would be receptive to a little conversation.

‘Saw Burton, the butcher, last night.’

‘Oh, yes?’

‘He said to tell you, if I remembered, mutton is good at the moment.’

‘Well, you remembered, and so will I. I hope it’s cheaper than the last lot.’

‘He has to make a living too, Florence. Folk aren’t buying so much meat.’

‘So I keep him going, do I? Me and my pies. We all help each other, eh?’

Manny nodded, as she put his full plate before him. ‘Thanks, Florence.’

‘I might as well have mine with you, cook the girls’ breakfast later.’ She sat down opposite, poured two more cups of tea. We must look like an old married couple, she thought. Yet I know very little of his life before he came here. Maybe he left a family behind him. He knows me for what I am; the one who holds us all together.

Rose Marie was awake, but loth to rise. She could hear muted voices from the kitchen and guessed that Florence and Manny were tucking into their fried breakfast. The heroine in the serial story she was following in her magazine





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was accustomed to a continental breakfast of croissants and frothy coffee. She picked fuzzy-skinned apricots, warmed by the sun, for dessert, and every day seemed like Sunday.

Josefina had returned from her ablutions and was dressed apart from her socks. She'd had her bath as usual yesterday evening, so it was a perfunctory wash, but all clean clothes for her today. She'd quickly learned to be independent after she came to live here. Now, she located a neatly rolled pair of cotton socks in her underwear drawer, put them on, then slid her feet back into her slippers.

'Brushed your hair?' Rose Marie asked, without looking up from her story.

'Mmm.' Josefina gave it a guilty smooth-over with her hands.

'Leave me in peace then, eh?'

'Don't worry, I will! And I'll be out this afternoon, too. Auntie Florence said to Yvette's mum, "Why not take Yvette to Battersea Park on Sunday? Good walks and lots to see on the river." So I asked, of course, "Can I go, please, as well?"'

'Didn't she mention the gas-works? Bet you don't know Lilli invited me, as well!'

'Auntie Florence said I had to call her Mrs Bower! Are you coming?'

'I might. If I don't get any better offers . . . Oh, tell Florence I don't want my breakfast yet, please. I'd rather wait until Manny's gone, only don't say *that*, will you?'





‘What’s wrong with Manny? He’s very nice, he makes me laugh.’

‘I like him too, but . . . off you go, Josefina!’

Lilli and her daughter had few possessions, having left home with one small suitcase, but Lilli had spotted a discreet second-hand clothes shop on her route to the cinema and determined to buy a few items there after she was paid on Saturday morning.

The clothes were not exactly chic, she thought, but clean and of good quality. Lilli bought a job lot for a florin. The shop owner was shrewd but soft-hearted. As Lilli was about to leave with her neat brown paper parcel, she selected something on impulse from a shelf crowded with dreary felt hats.

‘Here, dearie, this would suit you; have it on me. It’s unlikely to sell round here.’

The white piqué hat with a flamboyant red flower fixed to the front had probably been worn just once, to a wedding, Lilli decided. She expressed her thanks.

Now, walking along the river path on a nice afternoon, she wore the hat, and heads turned. The little girls were ahead of Lilli and Rose Marie, darting to look at things which caught their eye, but keeping in view as their elders requested. When they stopped for a while to watch the pleasure boats on the lake, Lilli suggested that she and Rose Marie take advantage of a vacant seat nearby.



‘I shouldn’t have worn these heels,’ she added ruefully. ‘Not for walking.’

Rose Marie looked down at her own unsuitable footwear, with pointed toes and T-strap fastening. ‘You have to suffer to look smart! Florence, of course, doesn’t agree. She says I’ll have painful bunions when I’m old, but I say, live for the moment!’

‘She’s very kind, your Florence, isn’t she? And she works so hard.’

‘I love her dearly, but you won’t catch me joining her in the hot pie business.’

‘You are a seamstress, is that right?’

Rose Marie nodded. ‘Yes, and I must admit that can be tedious too, but it’s a skill which could lead to more interesting things. Also, we have a varied clientele.’

‘Ah, such as?’

‘Actresses and dancers. Noel Coward recommends us. He has *three* plays on, in London! One’s called *Fallen Angels*: Florence thinks that sounds—’ she hesitated.

‘*Risqué?*’ Lilli supplied.

‘Well, she didn’t put it like that, but I guess that’s what she meant.’

‘She is the guardian of your morals, is that it? Like a mother.’

‘Yes, but she’s my *sister*! Stella, though, my other sister, is not stern at all. You’re about her age, that’s why I’m glad you’ve come to live in Paradise, so I have you to talk to.’



‘Stella must miss her daughter, I know I could not leave my Yvette behind.’

‘It’s not Stella’s fault,’ Rose Marie rose instantly to her defence. ‘Her husband is the selfish one. He always wants his own way.’

Lilli dare not say she had personal experience of that. She took a little mirror from her bag, examined her makeup, then carefully applied more lipstick. There was a mere stub left in the gilt case. She was well aware that Rose Marie was not the only one watching. Two young men in smart blazers and straw boaters were giving them smiling sideways glances. She pretended to be oblivious to them.

‘You don’t paint your face yet?’ She accentuated her cupid’s bow lips.

‘Florence said I should wait until I am eighteen.’

‘Actually, my mother said the same. Yet she taught me the art when the time came! Anyway, you are pretty enough without it. Did Stella get round this rule?’

‘Of course, because she married young and then she could do what she liked in that respect!’

‘She was a rebel, your sister,’ Lilli observed.

‘Yes.’ She thought, I couldn’t hurt Florence like she did. ‘Shall we walk back now? There aren’t so many buses on a Sunday, and we’re expected back for high tea.’

Florence had seized the opportunity, while she had the place to herself, to relax on top of her bed with an Ethel M.





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Dell novel. She had taken off her frock, so as not to crease it, and unhooked her corset; slipped into a comfortable cotton kimono, Japanese in style, heavily embroidered, an impulse buy by Stella from Berwick Street market some years ago. She'd discarded it when she left, so Florence had taken to wearing it. She was sentimental like that.

As Florence dozed, with the open book resting on her stomach, Manny, in the basement flat, yawned, and tidied the newspaper he'd spread across the table.

'Might have a kip,' he said aloud, disturbing the little white cat curled in his chair. It mewed plaintively. It was a stray. He'd got round Florence, who considered that pets and pies did not go together, by promising he'd keep it out of the shop but saying that it would be useful prowling the cellar at nights. Not that he intended to shut the cat down there. It had endured enough hardship, in his opinion, and was good company.

The hammering on his front door startled him. He wondered who it could be. He didn't invite people into his private quarters, he met enough of the public all week. The pub was a different matter, he could come and go as he pleased there. He was popular because of his music, but he had no close friends or confidantes.

'You're the last one I expected to see!' he exclaimed. 'I thought you were a goner.'

'Likewise,' the big man told him. 'Still, ain't you going to ask me in?'





As Manny stood there, irresolute, the visitor pushed past him in the narrow hall and went through to the living-room, uninvited. Manny closed the door and hurried after him.

‘What are *you* doing here?’ he demanded incredulously.

The man removed the cat unceremoniously, then sat down heavily in Manny’s chair. ‘I’m famished. Exhausted. Got any grub?’

‘Bread and cheese, I don’t do much cooking for myself. Will that do?’

‘It’ll have to. I’ve been on the road for weeks. I ain’t ate some days, Manny. Is that the moniker you still go by?’

‘It’s my name, isn’t it?’ Manny said sharply, passing him a thick crust and a heel of hard cheddar. ‘What’s yours?’ The tea was stewed, but it would have to do, he thought.

‘Well, I was known as Buck in my youth, on account of my teeth, and even though I got ’em knocked out later, that does me all right nowadays. See you’re still limping.’

‘Almost lost my leg, but luckier than some.’

‘Old Pa Flinders still around?’

‘He died before my time. I came here just after the war. His daughter employs me.’

‘Ah, Florence . . .’ Buck took a gulp of tea. ‘Best you tell her I’m here.’

‘It’s her day off; I didn’t ought to disturb her . . .’

‘We’re old friends. You may find this hard to believe, but I worked for her father when I was a lad. I delivered pies to order, then. Still got the old black boneshaker?’





HOT PIES ON THE TRAM CAR

‘No. We can sell enough pies in the shop. I’m not sure—’

‘You’re not sure she’ll want to see me? Well, I reckon she will.’ He brushed the crumbs from his moustache, then belched painfully. ‘Suffer terrible with me stummick . . .’

Florence came to with a start. Had she been dreaming? Then the rapping on the door was repeated, and she heard Manny call, ‘Florence, are you there?’

She pulled the kimono round her, tied it in place. Her hair was tousled, but, after all, it was only Manny, she thought. She padded to the door. ‘Yes?’

‘Can I come in?’ he asked urgently.

‘I’m hardly decent,’ she answered doubtfully. ‘Why?’

‘I can’t tell you here; he might hear—’

‘*Who*, Manny? All right, close the door after you.’ She saw his pale face. ‘What’s wrong? You’ve had a shock, I can tell.’

‘He says he worked here years ago. He’s obviously been living rough. He says *you’ll* want to see him—’ he gabbled.

‘What’s his name?’ she interrupted.

‘Buck.’

Now the colour drained from her cheeks. ‘Buck’ she repeated. Then, ‘Yes, he worked here, but it was years before the war. He was a young man then; I don’t suppose I’d recognize him now. My father, well, he gave him the sack. At the time, I thought that was unfair, but . . . do I gather you know him, too?’





‘We were in the army together, in France, 1916. He went missing, presumed killed. I was in hospital, injured, at the time. It was like seeing a *ghost*, Florence.’

‘Look.’ She’d regained her composure. ‘Give me ten minutes to tidy myself, and then bring him up here. I’ll sort this out, don’t worry.’

‘He might ask you for money.’

‘If I consider he’s in need, I’ll help him. I owe him that. Off you go, then.’

‘You’ll have to give me an ’and with me boots,’ Buck told Manny. ‘I had to struggle to get the bleeders off.’ He twitched his toes in the felted, holey socks. ‘I need a bath. Reckon Florence’ll let me use her tub?’

‘How do I know?’ Manny wrestled with the first muddy boot.

‘I lived down here in the basement, that time. Just you, is it? No lodger in the spare room? You can put me up tonight, can’t you?’

‘Well, you can’t stay upstairs, the rest of the house is all women. I told Florence I knew you in the army, but believed you’d been lost in action. I’ll keep quiet about the rest of it, and I expect the same of you, regarding myself.’

Florence appeared quite composed. She held out her hand to Buck. ‘It’s been a long time, Buck. I’m sorry to see you’ve obviously hit hard times.’





HOT PIES ON THE TRAM CAR

‘You ain’t changed much, I’m glad to see, Florence. No hard feelings, eh?’

‘I don’t bear grudges. Well, you’ll have to get cleaned up before the girls come back and then you and Manny can have your supper with us.’

‘Girls? Young Stella still with you?’

‘Stella’s grown up, married and gone away. I look after her little daughter as well as a younger sister; we lost my stepmother not long after she was born.’

‘You never married?’ Buck queried.

‘No, did you?’

‘Not exactly,’ he answered evasively.

‘Well, I’ll get the copper going again. Some of Dad’s clothes are still in the hall cupboard. Help yourself; you’re welcome to keep them. Have a cup of tea while you’re waiting on your bath. Has Manny offered you a bed for the night?’

‘Yes,’ Manny affirmed reluctantly. ‘I’ll go, if you don’t *mind*,’ he emphasized, ‘to make the room ready. I’ll be back shortly.’

‘I don’t mind,’ she asserted.

Rose Marie and Josefina parted company with Lilli and Yvette at their door. They were surprised to discover that Florence had a visitor, a burly fellow looking ill at ease in an old-fashioned suit, with a whiff of camphor balls. He and Manny were seated either side of the kitchen stove. Florence was putting the finishing touches to the supper table. She turned to introduce them. ‘My sister and niece,





Rose Marie and Josefina; this is Buck, who once worked here. He and Manny are old comrades, too, they were in the army together.'

'Pleased to meet you,' Buck said. With his moustache and shaggy eyebrows trimmed and his hair oiled back he looked better, despite the deep lines which seamed his face.

'And you,' Rose Marie responded, smiling. 'We must go and tidy up, Josefina.'

'Bombay toast,' Florence said, a little later. 'My grandfather was out in India, in the army during the troubles, and he brought the recipe back. I thought it would make a change for high tea. It's really just scrambled eggs with capers and anchovies, and a good shake of cayenne pepper. So watch out, it's rather hot.' She put a generous spoonful on each round of well-buttered toast, two for the men, one each for the girls and herself.

When the table was cleared, it was time for the adults to move into the sitting-room for a while and for Josefina to go to bed.

Florence hesitated, then indicated it was time for the men to retire downstairs. 'Early to bed for us too. Busy day tomorrow. Goodnight.'

'Like old times,' Buck told her. 'Goodnight, Florence.'

'I'll see you before you leave,' she said. She hoped he would take the hint. She was wary of any disruption to her ordered life.

